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Between the Goddess and the World: Religion and Ethics among

Thirunangai **transwomen in Chennai, India**

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Between the Goddess and the World:

Religion and Ethics among *Thirunangai* Transwomen in Chennai,

India

by

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For Sankari

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Between the Goddess and the World:

Religion and Ethics among *Thirunangai* Transwomen in Chennai, India

Aniruddhan Vasudevan, PhD
The University of Texas at Austin, 2020

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This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the place of goddess Angalamman in the Thirunangai transfeminine lifeworld in the city of Chennai in southern India. It offers a detailed account of two interrelated aspects of the Thirunangai-Goddess attachment: the role Angalamman plays in anchoring transfeminine identity and the ethical entailments this intimate connection to a deity has for thirunangais. The intertwined poetics of identity and ethical relationality is the focus of this dissertation. It argues that thirunangais' attachment to goddess Angalamman goes far beyond offering "sacred legitimization" to transfeminine identity; their connection to the goddess is a significant locus of ethical life for thirunangais. My research focuses on the lives of those thirunangais who express an intense connection to goddess Angalamman, and it demonstrates that this connection comes to have a bearing on ethical questions: how to show up for others, how to care, what are desirable ways to act, how to respond to injustice, and more.

Through an analysis of thirunangai accounts of their first encounters with the goddess, I show how this connection to Angalamman is not a matter of private spirituality for thirunangais, but one firmly grounded in the recognition, validation, and wellbeing of the immediate world around them. Thirunangais claim a specialness to their connection to Angalamman; they do so both by reading thirunangai identity as shaped by the goddess and by reading the goddess as a

transgender deity. They also address questions of sex, sex work, and sexual morality in reltation to a life devoted to the goddess. In addition to offering detailed accounts of such complex articulations of selfhood and morality, this dissertation also presents an ethnographic account of anger as an embodied ethical emotion in thirunangai life. Thirunangais do not highlight the sacred-spiritual aspects of their lives in their activism for rights. They have articulated thirunangai identity as a broadly secular social and political identity. But in the context of everyday lives for many thirunangais, devotional practices are important sites of collective ethical life, purpose, and belonging. By taking the Thirunangai-Angalamman attachment as its focus, this dissertation brings into view considerations other than identity, community, and juridicality that also matter to thirunangais-- relationships other than the ones premised on identity; forms of sociality that overflow the bounds of identity-based community; and ideas of morality that derive not only from transgender identity but also from other conceptions of self.

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Introduction
Worlding the Goddess

"I have three mothers," Vasanthi[1] said, holding up three fingers for emphasis. Then she said, "These two mothers are my eyes," pointing to her biological mother and her thirunangai mother, both of whom were present in the room. And then, directing my attention to the bronze idol of the goddess on the poojai shelf, the alcove of deities set along a wall, which was clearly the heart and hearth of that small, 300-square-foot apartment, she said, "Angalamma is my life-breath."

Vasanthi then pulled out two photo albums from underneath the cot in the living room and showed me photos from the festivals she had organized for Angalamman in the recent past. Vasanthi had her own temple for the goddess in Korukkupet in north Chennai. As I remarked, genuinely, at how impressive the festivities appeared to be, she said, "Yes. How do you think I raise that amount? By printing donation receipts and flyers and asking people for contributions? I do that for sure. But I'd get something like 10,000 rupees from that. Where does the rest of it come from? It is the money I earn from sex work. It is wrong, yes. But Angalamma has no problems with that. She accepts that money, because I earn it honestly. I don't steal from anyone, I don't lie, I don't cheat people. I earn it honestly and offer it to my Amma."

When I asked her about her temple for Angalamman in Korukkupet, she said, "Come! I will tell you how to get there. Come any Tuesday or Friday evening. I will be there till late at night. I then asked her if she was there every Tuesday and Friday, and she replied, "Yes, definitely. I am there on other days too. But on Tuesdays and Fridays you will definitely find me at the temple. That's when people come to see me with their problems. So I have to be there. Otherwise they will be disappointed."

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the place of goddess Angalamman in the *Thirunangai* transfeminine lifeworld in the city of Chennai in southern India. It offers a detailed account of two interrelated aspects of the Thirunangai-Goddess attachment: the role Angalamman plays in anchoring transfeminine selfhood and the ethical entailments of this intimate connection to the deity. The intertwined poetics of identity and ethical relationality is the focus of this dissertation. By *identity*, I refer to the cluster of ideas, practices, and modes of self-understanding

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[1] I have used pseudonyms for all my thirunangai interlocutors.

that animate thirunangai life: the sense of who one is as a thirunangai. In this broader sense, *identity* includes but goes beyond the juridical register. And by *ethical relationality*, I refer to that aspect of our social lives where we evince – through our actions, choices, and reflections – our desires to be particular kinds of people, our valuing of certain kinds of conduct that we deem to be desirable over others, and our attunement to the fundamental relationality of our being. My research focuses on the lives of those thirunangais who express an intense connection to goddess Angalamman, and it demonstrates that this connection comes to have a bearing on ethical questions: how to be with others in the world, how to express care, what are desirable ways to act, how to respond to injustice, and more.

My Interlocutors: Thirunangais devoted to Goddess Angalamman

Thirunangai is, currently, the identity label for transgender women in Tamil Nadu in southern India. Over the past two decades or so, thirunangais have engaged the State Government of Tamil Nadu with their activism and advocacy for rights. The transgender rights movement found its initial impetus in the HIV/AIDS public health and human rights discourses in the late 1990s.[2] In the 2000s, the identity label *Aravani* came into wider circulation. It linked Tamil transwomen to the deity Aravan/Koothandavar at Koovagam in Villupuram district, anchoring transfeminine identity in a regionally situated cultural world. But the term *Aravani* was soon replaced by *Thirunangai.* The latter label was proposed by Narthaki Nataraj, a classical dancer and a transgender woman, and was soon popularized by Dr. M. Karunanidhi, then Chief Minister of the State (Nataraj 2019, Tom & Menon, *forthcoming*). The identity label *Thirunangai*, which combines the honorary prefix *thiru* with the word *nangai* referring to womanhood, has been embraced enthusiastically by transfeminine groups across the state as a suitable marker of collective self-identification and political representation. Thirunangais have directed their activism towards official recognition of transgender identity in state documents, access to safe housing, affirmative action in education and employment, access to quality health care, training and resources for self-employment and entrepreneurial efforts, protection from discrimination and violence, and more. And they have secured some gains: housing under the tsunami rehabilitation

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[2] See Govindan & Vasudevan (2011) for a brief history of activism for transwomen's rights in Tamil Nadu. The identity label *Aravani* was in vogue in the first decade of the century, when a number of policies and welfare measures were instituted by the state and district-level executive branches of the Government of Tamil Nadu.

scheme, free sex reassignment surgeries in select government hospitals, and reservation of seats in government-run higher education institutions.

My thirunangai interlocutors are a section of the larger thirunangai community in Chennai. I have conducted my research with those thirunangais who express a significant attachment to Goddess Angalamman, one of the many Amman goddesses animating the landscape of Tamil popular devotion. Amman goddesses, variously conceived as Mother goddesses, fertility goddesses, pox goddesses, and goddesses who dispel possession by evil spirits, have long been significant to local and regional caste groups as tutelary and clan deities. But they also have the status of independent deities worshipped by everyone beyond caste, clan, and place affiliations.[3] Locally salient deities like Ammans have had a complex history of interactions with Brahmanical Hinduism and its canonical deities. Therefore, their sacred narratives and worship traditions often interweave the local with the Sanskritic. Even though Amman goddesses are now seen as part of the landscape of devotional Hinduism, it would be problematic to characterize them singularly as "Hindu." For, in this devotional realm, indigenous forms of worship, ideas of the sacred, and notions of fertility, illness, grace, protection, etc. are now inextricably interlinked with Sanskritic or "high" Hindu narratives, theological orientations, and representations.[4]

Literature on hijras has highlighted the importance of goddess Bahuchara Mata or Bedhraj Mata (Nanda 1986 & 1999, Reddy 2005, Craddock 2012, Ung Loh 2014). This goddess, whose main temple is in Gujarat in western India, holds a place also in the thirunangai lifeworld in Tamil Nadu. She is worshipped especially in the context of the *nirvan* operation/castration procedure/sex reassignment surgery. However, while I could find framed, printed images of Bahuchara Mata in the homes of many of my thirunangai interlocutors, very few of them had been to her temple in Gujarat. They mostly associated Mata with their own past nirvan experiences or their desires for bodily transformation in the future. When it came to collective ritual practice and worship with others in the Tamil world, Angalamman and other local deities seemed to animate their piety more. In this aspect, my observations aligned with those of Elaine Craddock (2012), who has commented that despite drawing on pan-Indian hijra traditions such as the worship of Bahuchara Mata, "Tamil

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[3] For an account of the multifarious conceptions and representations of Amman goddesses in southern India, see Sree Padma (2013).

[4] See Mahalakshmi (2011) for an account of how the Tamil goddess Kotravai merges with the pan-Hindu conception of the divine feminine as Durga. Mahalakshmi discusses the complex imbrications of local and Sanskritic traditions within histories of patronage by kingdoms, monastic traditions, and warrior clans.

tirunangais, especially those who are diviners and healers, cultivate relationships with local goddesses" (119).

Most of my thirunangai interlocutors, including Vasanthi with whose remarks I opened this introduction, are *maruladis* – they dance (*aadi*) the goddess in states of trance (*marul*). They are also called *saamiyaadis* – those who dance (*aadi*) the deity (*saami*). By channeling the goddess, they perform rituals for healing, benediction, counter-sorcery, exorcism, and more. Others function as ritual experts and volunteers in Angalamman worship. Thirunangai devotion to Angalamman, thus, primarily takes a deeply embodied form. Even though thirunangai-maruladis work closely with *poosaris* (priests) who sing sacred narratives of the goddess and other related deities, and even though my thirunangai interlocutors foreground a few important myths associated with the goddess, devotion to Angalamman in the thirunangai world primarily takes an intensely embodied form, not a textual one. Not only trance and other ecstatic modes of piety, but also intensive ritual labor, performance of related tasks (such as cooking, garlanding, cleaning ritual paraphernalia, etc.), and visits to goddess shrines are vital aspects of this devotional form.

Not all thirunangais in Chennai are linked to Angalamman worship. There are many ways to be a thirunangai in Chennai today. One's significant sense of belonging and identity as thirunangai could come from diverse attachments: from thirunangai kinship, through the *parivar* (family) in which one is embedded; one's work as an activist which might involve a fundamentally secular orientation; from one's connection to a community-based organization; or (in a smaller number of cases) not significantly from any of the above. But these are not mutually exclusive possibilities. In the course of my work, I found that even thirunangais who do not take part in Angalamman worship on an everyday basis still take particular care to be part of important rituals, festivals, temple visits, and pilgrimages.

Angalamman is not central to the articulation of *thirunangai* as a collective social and juridical identity in Tamil Nadu today. Thirunangai engagements with the state and the wider Tamil public sphere foreground transgender identity as the main locus of rights and remedies, without linking it to religion or caste. Thirunangai identity draws on the anti-caste and rationalist politics of Dravidian ethos and public culture, and it highlights transgender status as a stand-alone

locus of social advancement and political claims (Nataraj 2019, Tom & Menon forthcoming).[5] In other words, religious attachments are not part of the public articulation of a collective thirunangai identity. However, the thirunangai-maruladis among whom I conducted my research consider Angalamman to be at the center of their ethical lives as thirunangais.

Goddess in the Field

I began this introduction with thirunangai Vasanthi's remarks, because they show a wide ethical field over which her relationship with goddess Angalamman has pertinence and value. Angalamman is linked to Vasanthi's relationship with her natal mother as well as her thirunangai mother. The goddess is the "life-breath" that animates Vasanthi's being and her perspective of the world, a perspective that holds together natal kinship and thirunangai kinship as of commensurate value. This complicates prevalent understanding of transfeminine identities in South Asia, where the movement towards a hijra or thirunangai identity is seen as entailing breaking of ties with natal families and homes. Vasanthi's commitments to the goddess are also bound up with her sexual life, especially a stigmatized expression of sexuality: sex work. Vasanthi celebrates the goddess with pomp and splendor, sparing no expense, which suggests that giving to the goddess – making offerings and prestations – is vital to this form of piety. And, lastly, Angalamman mediates Vasanthi's relationship with herself and others. As an Angalamman *maruladi*, one who dances and embodies the goddess in a state of trance, she is committed to helping those who need the goddess' intervention in their lives. Upholding that commitment and not disappointing those who seek her help are part of Vasanthi's ethical relationship with herself.

Before I proceed further, it will be useful to return to the very beginning, as it were. By "beginning" here, I refer to the very first day I encountered goddess Angalamman in the field. It was a serendipitous encounter that reoriented my research in significant ways. Allow me to take you through the events of that first day. For, as I soon realized during my fieldwork, that particular

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[5] Writing about the identity term *thirunangai,* Nataraj (2019) says: "The emphasis laid by thirunangai activists upon the "pure Tamil roots" of the term, its distinction from Hindi-speaking hijra culture, and its connection to the progressive secular ideologies of the DMK, draw upon ideological currents within the Dravidian movement. By making the claim that the thirunangai is a type of woman, and a Tamil-speaking woman in particular, the thirunangai movement involves efforts to resignify the way Tamil usage is imagined in relation to gender." (p.60)

day contained within itself several intimations of the variegated nature of Angalamman's influence in thirunangai world-making in Chennai. Vasanthi's remarks above, which weave the goddess through a complex world of devotion, filial piety, sexual morality, and a kind of pastoral care, were presented to me on that day when I had barely begun to register the fact that Angalamman was important to thirunangais.

It was a bustling morning hour when Nisha and I arrived near the Tsunami Rehabilitation Quarters in Tondaiyarpet in north Chennai. It was late summer, the Tamil month of Aadi (mid-July to mid-August), known to be the windiest time of the year. I would not call it a breeze, but there was some welcome vibrancy in the air, some life, a little movement, unlike the oppressive stillness of the earlier months of summer. So there was some respite from the stickiness of months of heat and humidity, when our clothes had clung to our bodies and everyone had been edgy and irritable.

Nisha deftly navigated the chaotic stream of people walking right in the middle of the road – kids on their way to school in small batches, wearing uniforms and burdened with heavy backpacks; people carrying little metal containers with handles, headed to the local tea shops; bicyclists clinking their bells non-stop to find a way through pedestrian traffic. The walkers had a quiet confidence about their right to the road. Whenever they were met with a motor vehicle, they parted nonchalantly to make way for it, clearing just enough space for it to pass through slowly. We tailed a car, easing our way in its wake. Once we turned into the many lanes of the Tsunami Quarters and its blocks of urban housing projects, we steered carefully past groups of people gathered around roadside vendors hawking fish, fruits, vegetables, and hot breakfasts – steaming hot idlis and dosais. Stray dogs hung around strategically, waiting for the discards from the plates of consumers.

We had come to Tondaiyarpet that day to meet and interview Meena Amma, a thirunangai elder. Named after a nineteenth-century Sufi mystic and poet who was buried nearby, Tondaiyarpet is a neighborhood in north Chennai or old Madras, the settlements of service castes and urban working class that grew to the north of the British Colonial centers. A number of my thirunangai interlocutors live in Tondaiyarpet and nearby areas, some of them in tsunami rehabilitation housing. Responding to the robust activism of the thirunangai community over the past decade, the State Government of Tamil Nadu has operationalized schemes to provide highly subsidized

housing for thirunangais. In and around Chennai, such housing has been provided for thirunangais under the tsunami rehabilitation scheme, which was originally meant to relocate communities directly affected by the tsunami of December 2004, and others who lived dangerously close to the sea. The state government has included thirunangais under the category of people considered for housing under this scheme, and the officials relied on local thirunangai organizations to identify and prepare lists of thirunangais to be allotted housing.

In those early weeks of my fieldwork, I was meeting with many elders in the thirunangai community, interviewing them about the various thirunangai *parivars* (families) in the city and the relations among them. Nisha had come up with that idea to keep me from spiraling into a depression after my earlier topic of research became untenable. Always a true and caring friend, she said, "We should still go and interview *periyavanga* (elders). You were anyway planning to understand relationships across LGBT community. It is with LGB that your plans have changed. Let us continue our work with thirunangais." So we started meeting with elders, interviewing them about their lives as thirunangais, how they found community, and what it was to become a *chela* (disciple), a *guru* (teacher), a *guru-bhai* (peer), an *amma* (mother), a *nani* (mother's mother or guru's guru), a *maalak* (head of a thirunangai household), and more. What did it mean to enter these relationships, what did they entail, how much of it was obligation, how much of it was love and affection, how did they manage the demands of either, what was the status of relationships that were not mediated by such *reet* (ritual initiation)? etc. As I hope to show in this dissertation, such questions continued to be of interest to me, but they came to organize themselves around a new element about which I had been ignorant until then. And they acquired a new kind of vitality and focus.

We parked the scooter outside an apartment building and were about to walk into the building when a young thirunangai looked over from a second-floor balcony and greeted Nisha appropriately: "Paampaduthi, ma," she called out, the hijra and thirunangai salutation to anyone higher up in the hierarchy, "I touch your feet."[6] An important speech act. It seldom involves the actual gesture of touching a person's feet. It is just spoken. And when it is said with appropriate humility, a slight bowing of the head, and sincerity, it is accepted by the other thirunangai with a "jiyo" – literally, "live!" but more in the sense of *live well, flourish.* But when the speech act is seen as perfunctory or insincere, it is noted, offense is taken.

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[6] *Paanv padti hoon* – in Hindi.

The young thirunangai then asked if we had come to meet Meena Amma. When we said yes, she said, "She has gone to her *chela* Vasanthi's place.[7] She asked me to tell you that you should meet her there. Just a few streets away." So we set out again on the scooter, this time passing by a shrine on the roadside. A large termite hill, worshipped as the goddess, stood majestically under an asbestos canopy. It was covered in turmeric and decorated with red vermilion marks all over, and had a trident or two affixed to the ground in front of it – the goddess' weapons.

We soon spotted Meena Amma and her chela Vasanthi. They were sitting on the raised concrete platform that bordered their apartment building, eating idlis from plastic plates. Next to them was a make-shift idli stall where a middle-aged woman was busy pouring idli batter into metal plate molds and stacking them up inside a steaming pot. The breakfast stall was partly covered on two sides by tin sheets. As soon as they saw us, Meena Amma and Vasanthi waved to us and asked us to join them for breakfast. When we told them we had already had our breakfast before setting out from Porur, they asked us to go up to the apartment and make ourselves comfortable while they finished their breakfast.

Nisha and I walked up one floor. As we removed our shoes outside the apartment that had its door wide open, an elderly woman who was lying on a cot at the other end of the living room, sat up with some difficulty, smiled at us, welcomed us in, and adjusted her sari and her hair. "Vasanthi's mother," Nisha whispered to me. I nodded. The resemblance was unmistakable. The woman was Vasanthi's biological mother. As Nisha and I walked into the apartment, we felt compelled to turn our gaze towards the wall to the right. The entire wall was devoted to a brilliantly decorated poojai shelf filled with icons and images of deities. We had barely taken two steps into the apartment, and we stood transfixed at the sight of this beautifully maintained shrine taking up two perpendicular walls. All the images had flowers and vermilion dots on them. Flames from two differently sized bronze oil lamps cast a sheen on the well-polished brass and copper ritual paraphernalia: a bell, more lamps, a copper cup with a spoon it, containing water for sanctification. The entire alcove was fitted with strings of tiny electric bulbs, which were turned on, setting apart the entire shrine in a sparkling splendor that held us enthralled for several minutes. We remarked to each other about how well-kept and attractive the shrine was. Most arresting was the bronze idol of the goddess. I couldn't tell which goddess it was, but Nisha said, "Angalamman."

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[7] *Chela* – disciple/daughter in hijra-thirunangai kinship.

While Vasanthi's mother sat on the cot, Nisha and I sat cross-legged on the floor, taking in the atmosphere. A small, wall-mounted TV was on in high volume. It was set on Jaya TV channel, and an old Tamil movie song sequence was on. Jayalalitha and MGR, both famous film stars of yesteryears and both past Chief Ministers of the state of Tamil Nadu, were dancing around fake pyramids and sphinxes. It was a popular song, quite stunningly composed by the great music director MS Viswanathan and expertly sung by P Susheela and TM Soundararajan. Since both Nisha and I were quite keen followers of old Tamil film music, we enjoyed the song, although Nisha asked Vasanthi's mother if she could turn the volume down a little. The song from the TV was not the only soundscape. From the street came 90s Tamil film music on loudspeakers, a delightful Ilayaraja song sung by S Janaki, but almost rendered unpleasant by the high volume.

Vasanthi and Meena Amma walked in, visibly embarrassed that we had sat ourselves on the floor, without even laying a mat underneath. There was a flurry of activity, as Nisha and I were forced to get up so that they could spread a mat for all of us to sit on. Vasanthi muted the TV and said, referring to the music from outside, "There is some function going on in the next building."

It was a very small apartment, the kind that might be called an "efficiency" in the U.S. Around 300 sq. ft. A living room, a kitchen, and a bathroom. The living room was also the bedroom and the prayer room. The little, well-kept dwelling was at once a home and a shrine. It was a tight little space that packed in diverse functions. The bed on which Vasanthi's mother sat surrounded by clothes neatly folded after drying, newspapers, and magazines. The wall-mounted TV. The boxes and baskets stored under the bed. The alcove of deities… Depending on which way you were turned, depending on which object had your attention, the same space could orient you very differently. You would be perpetually flanked by the mundane and the sacred, and you would not be able to tell where one ended and the other began. But what glowed in that space, what shone with the benefit of great care and attention were the two perpendicular walls taken over by deities. Nisha too was as entranced by it as I was. Later that day, when we were back at her place, she attended to her own wall-mounted, wooden poojai shelf, clearing away dried flowers and incense stick ash. And she kept remarking about how well-kept the alcove at Vasanthi's was.

Everyone sat down on the mat, and I got ready to interview Meena Amma. Nisha started introducing me to her formally, but Meena Amma cut her introduction short, saying she had seen me on many occasions, meetings, and events. I began by simply asking her to tell me about herself, and she started with a note of gratitude to Angalamman:

The fact that I am a thirunangai today, that I live comfortably, that I have earned the respect of people, the fact that I have chelas who take care of me, that people respect me and invite me to events, that people like you come to me to learn about thirunangais, that people think well of me — Angalamma is the one who is responsible for all of this. I am nothing without this Amma.

Listening to her, I thought that the goddess was perhaps a local cultural feature, a deity who helped thirunangais world themselves into the Tamil religious imaginary. After all, extant literature on transfeminine lifeworlds in South Asia attests to the fact that hijras, thirunangais, khwajasaras, jogappas, and other transfeminine communities draw powerfully on religious traditions in shaping identities that have cultural legibility and recognition in their regional worlds.[8] Nevertheless, at that moment, I expected Angalamman to be peripheral to my project. Later that day, as I listened to the interview, I realized that Meena Amma's note of gratitude to Angalamman was deceptive in its simplicity. For one, while recording her interview, I had not paid attention to the fact that she had said, "The fact I am a thirunangai today…" That is, one of the aspects of her life that Meena Amma was attributing to Angalamman's grace was the very fact of her being a thirunangai. This hinted to me that there might be narratives that accorded the goddess a causal role in thirunangai identity itself. So I had to learn more about Angalamman.

What I had planned to be an interview with Meena Amma became a four-way conversation between her, Vasanthi, Nisha, and me. When I asked Meena Amma to tell me more about the goddess, she gestured towards Nisha and said to me, "You should ask Nisha. She knows everything there is to know about Angalamman. She has spent so many years assisting her elders with all the Angalamman rituals. Even now people call her to help with rituals." Then she addressed Nisha, "Tell the Angalamma story." Nisha then narrated the Angalamman myth, several versions of which I would hear in the months to follow:

In those day, both Bramman (the creator god) and Sivan (the destroyer) had five heads.[9]
One day, Bramman tried to seduce Sivan's wife Parvati by tricking her into believing that
he was Sivan. But, as she washed his feet, Parvati saw in the reflection in the water that it
was not her husband Sivan but Bramman who had come to her. Sivan happened to return

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[8] See Reddy (2005), Ramberg (2014), Pamment (2019), Khan (2017), Hossain (2012, 2018)
[9] Throughout the dissertation, I have retained deity names and other non-English words as close as possible to my interlocutors' pronunciation of them.

at that moment, and Parvati told him what had happened. In great anger, Siva plucked off Bramman's fifth head, but the severed head stuck to Sivan's hand and refused to let go. It also started taking away all his vitality, drawing all strength from his body, and sucking away whatever nutrition he offered his body. Because of this, Sivan became gaunt and emaciated and he also lost his mind. He started wandering the cremation grounds of the world, eating half-burnt corpses, sucking at bones, drinking blood out of skulls. Terrified at Sivan's withered state, the gods approached Vishnu, the protector god. Vishnu asked Angalamman to intervene. He told her that Sivan, in his wanderings, would soon arrive at the cremation grounds close to her in Melmalayanur. Vishnu then told Angalamman that she had to prepare massive quantities of food and scatter them all over the place. The greedy skull stuck to Sivan's hand would climb down to devour everything. Seizing that moment, she had to stomp on the skull, the bramma kapalam, with her foot and redeem Sivan from its clutches. But the moment Angalamman stomped on the skull, she took on the brammahathi dosham (the consequences of having beheaded Bramman) from Sivan. Now she became mad, tore her clothes, and wandered the cremation grounds, feeding on corpses and chewing on bones. Vishnu then offered the same solution as before. In order to free Amman from the clutches of the skull and to restore her to equilibrium, offerings had to be made in vast quantities. This is what we do every year during the Mayana Kollai ("the pillage in the cremation grounds") every year.

It was an incredible story of deception, impulsive anger, loss of vitality, capacity for giving and receiving, vulnerability to the influence of others, and the role others play both in one's misery as well as redemption. Later on in the dissertation, I take up for discussion the ethical forces at play in this narrative. But on that day, as Nisha narrated the story, I was struck by the fact that in my eight years of friendship and work with her, I had not known at all that she was one of the most sought after ritual assistants in the thirunangai-maruladi lifeworld. Our friendship and work life were forged in LGBTQ spaces. We had collaborated on peer-counselling training projects and queer pride organizing. We had also worked together on crisis intervention and research teams. As I sat in Vasanthi's apartment, listening to Nisha expertly narrating the story of Angalamman, I was fascinated by the fact that our spiritual lives had not at all been part of the spaces in which she and I had primarily interacted. Later, when I mentioned this to Nisha, she remarked, "Yes. I had no idea that you were interested in *saami vishayangal,*" referring to matters of religion and

spirituality. As I began to explore and understand the world of Angalamman and thirunangais with Nisha's guidance, it felt like we were getting to know each other for the first time. In Chapter 2, I describe Nisha's experience of disaffection and distance from the goddess during a particularly painful time in her life. Her involvement in my dissertation research ended up being her way back into a life with the goddess at its center.

Once the conversation took a definite turn towards Angalamman, Vasanthi joined in enthusiastically. She shared that she was a maruladi, too. She, too, like her guru Meena Amma, embodied the goddess in states of trance and functioned as a healer and oracle. "As far as thirunangais are concerned, Angalamman is everything," she said. She followed that up with those stunning remarks with which I began this introduction. Angalamma was her life-breath. It was Vasanthi's sex work that paid for the festivals she organized for the goddess twice a year. Angalamma had no problems with sex work. Vasanthi spent considerable time at her temple in Korukkupet, where she met with people who came to her with various kinds of trouble: health, marriage, pregnancy, evil spirits, and more.

By the time Nisha and I took our leave, we were quite exhausted. But since we were already in north Chennai, Nisha thought we could stop by the vegetable market in Old Washermanpet and check on Lakshmi Nani, a thirunangai elder. Nisha decided to park a few streets away from the market to avoid riding through heavy traffic. When she pulled up in front of an Angalamman temple, I exclaimed in surprise. She had not planned it. She too was surprised at the serendipity. And she said, "It looks like you have found your research topic."

The Goddess' Way

Angalamman has a way of being intense and stubborn. And, as you will see, she also has a way with surprises. I had not planned to conduct my research on the Thirunangai-Angalamman relationship. But as I tried to learn more about Angalamman, a whole new world opened up and drew me in. None of my thirunangai interlocutors believed I chose my project. I do not flatter myself into thinking they believed I was chosen by the goddess. They simply believed the goddess had decided to let this project unfold. As Mala put it, "She has decided to get this done through you (*un moolama*)." The idea was unsettling from every angle. In light of such an understanding, it was hard to hold on to any semblance of social-scientific agency as a researcher with any consistency. Apparently, I did not even pick my project. Then there was the responsibility that the

task entailed. What does it mean to have a goddess get her work done through you? As I learned, and as I hope to show in this dissertation, it did not mean a displacement of responsibility. On the contrary, it meant a heightened responsibility. For the thirunangais you will meet in this dissertation, being connected to Angalamman – even being seen as people connected to Angalamman – brought with it the responsibility to be particular kinds of people, to be oriented towards the world in particular ways, to prefer certain courses of action over others. But that does not mean all of this ethicality took the form of theological reasoning or conscious deliberation. It was rarely the former and sometimes the latter. But usually it involved simply being with others, doing relationships, making mistakes, enduring judgments – one's own and others, making course corrections, etc. In other words, the domain of this ethical relationality was the stuff of life itself.

I am tempted to call the temporality of ethics that I am attending to here, *everyday*. But I do not wish to suggest that the *everyday* is necessarily the same as the *ordinary*. Something that thirunangai elder Azhagamma said helps get at this sliding scale of life better. Talking about a potential conflict with someone, she remarked, "naalaikku avan mugathula dhaana muzhikkanum?" [I] *have to look him in the face tomorrow, don't I?* In many ways, this is a very pedestrian remark. But I think it encapsulates what I am trying to say about the temporal scale of ethical relationality here. The "tomorrow" here is not the tomorrow of the calendar day or the day as a unit of labor time. It gestures to what Jarrett Zigon calls *fidelity* and *attunement to relationality* (2014). It refers to the fact that we are fundamentally relational beings and some of our relationships are enduring, not in the sense that they withstand the test of time, but in the sense that they are not one-off encounters. We have to face these people again, work on these relationships over and over, be accountable to each other. They are part of our everyday, but that does not mean *everyday* signifies a givenness, a stable ground of action – whether of social reproduction, or resistance, or simply making the best of, or just drifting along. Rather, as Veena Das (2007) puts it, the everyday often takes effort to be achieved. Moreover, "to look someone in the face," as Azhagamma puts it, is not only about one's own courage and integrity; it is also about the fact that what we see in that face has the capacity to affect us.

What does any of this have to do with a goddess? In the everyday lives of my thirunangai interlocutors I was able to observe and take part in, their connection to Angalamman came to have a bearing on this question of how they were to conduct themselves vis-à-vis others. Sometimes Angalamman's relevance to matters at hand was clear and knowable as such. But at other times it

was subtle and even snuck up on and surprised my thirunangai friends mid-encounter. There were also times when the pertinence of this sacred attachment to an ethical question could only be discerned retrospectively. In this dissertation, I hope to show that Angalamman's place in the thirunangai lifeworld involves a kind of *immanence* – her presence is dispersed and dissolved in self-understandings of who one is as a thirunangai; a kind of *transcendence* – the goddess also does stand outside, coming over the people she prefers, commanding attention and worship; and a kind of *imminence* – she can be proximate, incited into presence, invoked when needed, or she can make herself relevant when least expected.[10]

Angalamman certainly serves to offer what Gayatri Reddy (2005) calls "sacred legitimization" of Tamil transfeminine identity. But in addition to that, as a deity not exclusive to the thirunangai community, but one whom they share with various other communities and caste groups, Angalamman also becomes a node linking thirunangais with other (predominantly) non-brahmin, artisanal, and working-class communities. Thus, she certainly helps thirunangais be part of a shared world of piety. However, as I have come to understand, such identity work and cultural emplacement mediated by sacred attachments are not mere instrumental concerns about social acceptance and cultural legibility. They have implications for how one does life with others. Even when we are within frameworks of cultural legibility that offer a modicum of social acceptance and livability, how we inhabit those worlds depends on our everyday work of being with others in that world. This concern with the *how* of doing life with others, and the desires, values, actions, and evaluations that it involves, is what I understand to be the realm of the *ethical.*

South Asia, Transgender Lifeworlds, and Religion

In their Introduction to the Trans*/Religion issue (August 2019) of the Transgender Studies Quarterly, Max Strassfeld and Robyn Henderson-Espinoza argue that "trans studies has been reluctant to engage with the field of religious studies," a reluctance they attribute to the transmisogyny that has marked Christian theological approaches, including those within feminism. They further argue that "trans studies' failure to address religion unwittingly participates in discursively marking transgender as secular" (2019: 284). In their view, marking trans* as always already a secular project can hide from view the logics of "secular neoliberal constructions of

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[10] For a discussion of the ethical as immanent, transcendent, and imminent to everyday life, see Sidnell et al. (2019). I take up the various scales of ethical experience for discussion in Chapters 3, 4, and 6.

gender" that need to be critiqued (2019: 287). They suggest that religion might have a role "in fostering both trans precarity and trans resilience," which needs to be studied and understood (2019: 289).

In many ways, this critique does not apply to scholarship on transgender lifeworlds in South Asia, which has given considerable attention to the role of religion in shaping transgender formations. For instance, Gayatri Reddy's ethnographic study of hijras in the south Indian city of Hyderabad, is premised on the key argument that "the axis of sexual difference through which hijras have traditionally been understood is intersected by a variety of other axes of identity, including religion, gender, kinship, and class" (Reddy 2005: 17). Through such an intersectional approach, Reddy challenges the tendency in then prevailing scholarship to box hijras and other transfeminine identities within what she terms a "'third-sex' analysis" (31). Reddy contention is that, isolating hijra identity only in terms of gender and sexuality is a distortion of its situatedness within a complex matrix of ideas and practices. In her rich ethnographic account, we see that religious practice and self-fashioning play crucial roles not only in making legible the contours of hijra identity in Hyderabad, but they also anchor the community's moral hierarchies and internal differentiations around the value of *izzat* or respect. The hijras in Reddy's study draw on a range of Hindu mythologies and idioms to fashion and account for their "corporeal practices," thus securing what Reddy terms "sacred legitimization" to their ways of life. Goddess Bahuchara Mata or Bedhraj Mata, worshipped by hijra, kothi, as well as thirunangai communities, is of great importance to Reddy's hijra interlocutors in Hyderabad. They also draw on mythologies of other deities in articulating various aspects of their identity, not only gender but also the emphasis on asceticism and asexuality that is an important aspect of their moral lives. At the same time, they also take on a Muslim identity that is informed by everyday practices of piety that broadly follow South Asian Shi'ite traditions but is nevertheless unorthodox in the way it blurs gender boundaries salient to the practice of Islam.

In his study of the rituals and oral narratives pertaining to the Tamil regional deity Koothandavar/Aravan in Koovagam in South Arcot district (now Villupuram district), anthropologist Alf Hiltebeitel ([1995]2010) underscores an important fact: from the 1980s onward, the annual festival at Koovagam, which marks the ritual sacrifice of Aravan in the Mahabharata war, came to incorporate thirunangai trans women as a constituency of devotees in some significant ways. What was earlier predominantly a ritual of importance to local caste groups,

especially Vanniyars[11] but also other castes, became a festival increasingly associated with thirunangais. Hiltebeitel carefully documents the various stages of the ritual where the sacrifice of Aravan in the war is enacted. Men from Vanniyar and other castes have historically made a specific mode of annual offering to Aravan: they vow to be married to the deity on the night before the sacrifice and go through the widowhood ritual the next day after the enactment of Aravan's sacrifice. Hiltebeitel does not dispute the possibility that transfeminine persons have perhaps always been part of this ritual. However, he draws attention to a period of transformation in ritual practice, when thirunangais (then marked by the term *ali*) as a constituency have staked a claim to legitimate participation in the ritual. They have done so by creatively reinterpreting the Aravan narrative to locate themselves in it as the transgender form that the Hindu God Krishna takes in order to wed Aravan (Rajic 2016).

Mythologizing Transgender Identity – Some Critiques

In the Indian context, discussing transgender formations in terms of religion and mythology has been critiqued on various grounds. Here, I will consider two such critiques. The first one is about the dangers of drawing on religious worldviews and practices in a political context characterized by the rise of fundamentalist religious ideologies. For instance, activists and scholars in India have been concerned that drawing on Hindu mythology to underscore Indic cultural difference and tolerance could have the effect of Hinduizing transfeminine identities. Such an approach, they legitimately fear, could articulate with Hindutva, the ideology of Hindu fundamentalism that undergirds political power in India today, ignoring Hinduism's fundamental oppression that is the caste system. For instance, remarking on the Tamil identity label 'Aravani,' which was widely used to refer to trans women, trans activist and scholar Gee Semmalar (2016) observes:

> … there is a particular way in which some trans activists rely on Hindu epics to prove that gender variance has always existed—to counter criticisms of homosexuality and gender variance being 'western imports.'

> Some of the local terms like 'aravani', in fact, are derived from Hindu myths. While this is a result of an unfair burden of proof imposed on vulnerable communities, relying on Hindu myths to affirm our identities gives rise to another danger—of a regressive kind of trans

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[11] An agricultural community which is a dominant caste in some of the northern districts of the state of Tamil Nadu. Vanniyars have also linked themselves to historical warrior clans and have, since the time of the 1871 census, claimed to be recognized as a *kshatriya* caste. See Rudolph (1984).

identity politics that does not take into account the brutality of the caste system that finds its origin and sanction in the same Hindu religion.[12]

This concern about relying on Hindu conceptions and idioms of gender variance is an important one, considering the alarming ascendance of Hindutva as the governing political ideology of the Indian state at present. Reliance on Hindu narratives also vexes the possibility of making trans and queer movements rigorously anti-caste in their political commitments. But how do we understand the relevance and affective force such loci of piety and self-narrativization -- such as the Aravan/Koothandavar one -- continue to have for transfeminine communities? For instance, thirunangais as well as hijras, and other transfeminine groups continue to throng to the village of Koovagam in April to take part in the annual ritual of wedding to the deity, Koothandavar/Aravan, and the enactment of widowhood the next day once Aravan's sacrifice is complete. Do we see this merely as cultural commodification of a practice and thirunangais' engagement with the practice as mere consumption of an alienated commodity form? Or do we take thirunangais' affective investment in such practices seriously and seek to understand why they find them meaningful?

We might see thirunangais' annual visit to the Koovagam festival as kind of a commodified Hindu cultural practice (with television crews, cameras, and global documentary filmmakers in attendance). But that does not account for why thirunangais would committedly gather in small groups a month from the festival in their own hometowns, away from the media gaze, to participate in a ritual where they have an elder tie the *thali* (sacred thread, signifying wedded status) around their necks again. This second, smaller-scale ritual is supposed to mark the fact that Aravan is not, in fact, dead, but has become immortal. And, by extension, it serves to signify the fact that those thirunangais who cut away their thalis a month before at the festival are not permanently widowed. Such meanings are not elaborately discussed, or discussed at all, during the ritual, but a commitment to the ritual is shown by seeing it to its completion. The ritual also involves a feast and all the labor that goes into it. My point is that activist and scholarly discomfort with the scaling up of such locally rooted cultural practices into narratives of political legitimization and collective identity is a valid and urgent one. But that entails not a turning away from such practices but a better understanding of them, if only to see what compelling modes of self-fashioning, forms of belonging, and webs of relationality they sustain.

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[12] See Semmalar (2016): "Why Trans Movements in India Must be Anti-Caste": https://www.trans.cafe/posts?category=Family (accessed on February 13, 2020)

There is another, historical sense in which attending to an ostensibly Hindu cultural practice such as Aravan's wedding and sacrifice might be productive in understanding thirunangai cultural life. Hiltebeitel's (2010) analysis of the rituals at Koovagam shows that it was not a practice historically associated with transfeminine communities. While it is likely that there has always been some transfeminine presence at the ritual, it is only since the 1980s that thirunangais have started taking part in the rituals in a clearly marked sense. In other words, the transformation of the Koovagam festival, in media accounts and public consciousness, into a predominantly thirunangai festival, has occurred in the same decades in which transgender rights activism and collective self-identification have also unfolded. Proliferation of religious forms of life alongside processes of political secularization is not a surprising social phenomenon in and of itself. But it nevertheless needs examination to understand whether such processes are illustrations of the modernist logic, whereby non-secular, non-rational attachments are relegated to a sphere of limited influence over public life, or if they call forth their own domains of public and shape ethical orientations and actions that are effective and meaningful in those worlds. As I will show in Chapter 1, it appears that an intensification and proliferation of thirunangai presence around Goddess Angalamman, too, has occurred in the past few decades. Paying attention to the affordances of such attachments can help us acquire a deeper understanding of what matters to people, how they go about organizing their lives in such a way that they are oriented towards the things that matter to them, and how they evaluate themselves and others with reference to such pursuits. In other words, we can begin to grasp the ethical life of the people we are committed to understanding.[13]

Scholarly focus on religio-cultural aspects of transfeminine lifeworlds have also been critiqued, both directly and indirectly, for their "fetishization of the transgender figure" and for

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[13] Here, it is worthwhile pointing out again that the Tamil identity label *Aravani*, which links thirunangais to the deity Koothandavar/Aravan and to the Koovagam festival, has been replaced by *Thirunangai*, a secular identity label that emphasizes that transfeminine persons are owed respect and regard in Tamil social life.[13] While we may not know the exact reasons why *Aravani* was successfully superseded by the term *Thirunangai*, some features of the latter term are worth noting. The label was proposed by a transgender artist and performer, Narthaki Nataraj, and was soon made prominent by the fact that the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Dr. M. Karunanidhi, endorsed it by his usage. The word *thirunangai's* uptake as a label of collective self-identification and political representation by Tamil transfeminine communities indexes the compelling nature of certain aspects of Dravidian ideology in Tamil public culture: its emphasis on atheistic rationality in the sphere of politics and public reason; the anti-caste politics of self-respect that undergirded the founding ideology of the Dravidian movement, which was known as the *suyamariyaadhai iyakkam* or the Self-Respect Movement; and a sense of regional and linguistic pride.

being "emblematic of a larger problem of cultural difference that haunts much work on transgender communities in Indian communities" (Chatterjee 2018: 315). In Shraddha Chatterjee's view, the culturalist focus of this literature has positioned transfeminine communities as "a third gender, organized in kinship structures based on religious roles, as phenotypic men who take on feminine performative gestures and traditionally female clothing" (315). Chatterjee argues that there is a disjuncture between such understandings of local transfeminine lifeworlds and the globalizing world of "transgender," which needs to be "understood as linked to the entry of transnational funding that determines anew how to reconfigure the gender-nonconforming subject as transgender, bringing with it a politics that is irrevocably tied to human rights, demands for equal citizenship, and a desire to be protected by law and the Indian state" (317). The trouble with this critique is that it creates a separation between "premodern conceptualizations of gender and sexuality that reside as cultural memory in the subject" and "the increasingly widening signifier *transgender* in the contemporary" and identifies a gap in the middle that needs to be explored (317). In this psychoanalytically informed model, conceptualizations of gender and sexuality that are not born of contemporary neoliberal encounters and globalizing discourses of rights and citizenship are driven to the realm of the psyche; they "reside as cultural memory in the subject." The "transgender subject [is] caught between a fading voice of precolonial and colonial history on the one hand, and the strong pull of globalization on the other" (317). What is unclear is whether, for Chatterjee, religion, culture, and kinship are all part of the "fading voice" of "cultural memory," or if transfeminine practices and forms of life that do not directly speak to the exigencies of global capital, human rights, and citizenship can continue to have vibrancy and ongoing relevance in any way. In other words, what if it is not the transgender subject who is "caught" between the local and the global, the religious and the secular, the historical and the contemporaneous, and the cultural and the political-economic, but we, as scholars, who have trouble seeing the imbrications between these realms and the way people move through them?

Religion and Transgender Lifeworlds – Productive Readings

Allow me here to illustrate the productive possibilities of engaging not only with religion in the context of transgender lives, but also with the problematics of boundaries between scales of spatiality (local, regional, national, global, etc.), practices (Hindu/Muslim, religious/secular, ethical/political, etc.), and temporalities (past/present, continuities/ ruptures, etc.). I draw upon a

limited set of readings on sexuality and queer-trans formations in South Asia in order to situate my own work in relation to emergent scholarship that attends to the place of religion in shaping transfeminine lifeworlds in the region. These studies show that devotional attachments and spiritual commitments need not translate automatically into religious identities or political affiliations. Nor is religious practice merely in the service of instantiating culturally legible transgender identities. Instead, embodied attachments to sacred traditions can play the subtler role of shaping ethical lives by offering compelling collective visions of valuable and desirable ways to live.

As Adnan Hossain (2018) has argued, articulations of transgender identities and politics negotiate not only the local and the global but also regional histories, politics, and borders. Critiquing the way Indian conceptions of the hijra overshadow the other ways in which hijra lifeworlds have unfolded in different parts of South Asia (Bangladesh, in Hossain's case), Hossain has called for "an intraregionally inflected explicatory framework that draws adequate attention not only to the intraregional inequities but also to the reification of cultural particularism and national frame of reference in the production of knowledge" (Hossain 2018: 328). He draws attention to the "incessant comings and goings" (326) of transgender bodies, ideas, concepts, and practices across the India-Bangladesh border and shows how limiting "national optics" could be when it comes to understanding lifeworlds that have shared "supranational" histories and relationships. Hossain has also critiqued the "the automatic conflation of the global with cosmopolitanism and movement" and "the tendency to view the local as the site of tradition, fixity, and parochialism" as "reductive" (326). In its stead, he calls for a "critical regionality" that has a more complex understanding of scales of spatiality and their interrelationships.

In that "critical regional" vein, Hossain (2012) has examined how hijra conceptions and practices of Islam in Bangladesh differ from those that scholars have documented in India. Hossain's research among hijra communities in Bangladesh complicates the links between castration/emasculation and Muslim identity foregrounded by earlier scholarship focused on India. Drawing on Reddy's work on hijras in Hyderabad (India) and her arguments about the religious syncretism of hijra lifeworlds, Hossain shows that hijra practices in Bangladesh too demonstrate a combination of "Muslim and Hindu-marked religious practice" (Hossain 2012: 510). However, his analysis unsettles Reddy's and others' overvaluation of castration/emasculation as the key trope and practice linking hijras to Islam. Questioning "the centrality of emasculation in the

production of hijrahood" (510), Hossain has argued for a "processual" understanding of the production and enactment of hijrahood. Coming to be a hijra in Bangladesh involves not only bodily comportment of gender but more importantly the taking up of particular kinds of occupations, practices, and rituals, and it is these embodied commitments that shape hijra selfhood. Hijra religiosity (whether in terms of Islam or Hinduism) emerges from and is part of such "processual production of hijrahood" and not out of any consciously held religious identity or syncretic religious ideology. As I hope to show in the chapters to follow, the Thirunangai-Angalamman relationship and the particular forms it takes among my thirunangai interlocutors in Chennai need to be understood as influenced by specific regional histories that cannot be scaled up and generalized even as Tamil let alone as Indian.[14] In addition to that, much like Hossain's hijra interlocutors in Bangladesh, my thirunangai friends, despite their deep and embodied devotion to goddess Angalamman, do not invoke Hinduism as a religious identity, or religion per se as a category relevant to the "crafting of their selfhood," to borrow Hossain's phrase (2012: 510).

In her study of the cult of Goddess Yellamma in Karnataka, Lucinda Ramberg (2014) offers a stunning ethnography of the lives of both jogatis and jogappas, cis-women and transwomen respectively, who are devoted to the worship of Yellamma and her sister goddess Mathangi. Ramberg shows us how, in this regional, religious lifeworld, gender and sexuality are inextricably bound up with devadasi practices of dedication that forge complex ties between the goddess and her human "gifts." Such a transaction of persons between familial and sacred domains reorganizes social relationships in staggering ways. For instance, the jogatis dedicated by their families to goddess Yellamma at Saundati come to occupy the structural role of sons to their families; they are the main sources of their families' material wellbeing. Jogappas, on the other hand, attribute their transgender status as causally linked to the grace and desires of the goddess. In doing so, they renegotiate the entailments of their initial gender assignment as boys and take on, instead, a feminine mode of being that is linked to serving the goddess and denigrating worldly attachments.

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[14] For instance, the history of Angalamman as a prominent deity involves the political ascendance of agrarian communities and warrior clans in northern Tamil Nadu from the 14th century onward. Historians of religion have argued that Angalamman and several other non-Sanskritic and indigenous deities came into prominence as supralocal divinities in the period following the decline of the Chola dynasty (9th – 13th centuries CE). This period of great transformations in political alliances, patronage, delegation of powers, and religious sectarianism occurred under the rule of the Nayaks, a dynasty of non-Tamil rulers from the Telugu-speaking parts of northern peninsular India.

Ramberg carefully lays out the moral complexities involved in the lives of Yellamma devadasis and the ways in which such materialization of human-divine relationships confounds the logics of both (post)colonial modernity as well as rationalist projects of caste emancipation. The postcolonial Indian state and its reformist projects find the jogatis' mode of being religious subjects abhorrent for the way it unsettles the boundaries between god and human agency, and religion and sexuality. The state's moral anxieties are piqued particularly by the fact that jogatis are women, and controlling the forms women's sexuality can take has been part and parcel of the afterlife of colonial moralities in the postcolonial Indian state. On the other hand, most jogatis are Dalits; they come from castes that were formerly considered "untouchables." Many of the jogatis' adult children are now schooled in Ambedkarite politics that offers the most rigorous critique of Hinduism's foundational oppressions in the name of caste. As Ramberg deftly shows us, jogatis' ethical commitment to serving goddess Yellamma is at odds with the emancipatory politics of the younger generation, leading to tensions within the community. The Jogati-Yellamma relationship poses challenges not only to the state and its moral-biopolitical projects but also to the emancipatory teleology of anti-caste movements.

The thirunangai-maruladis we will meet in this dissertation have not been subject to the reformist violence of the state in any concerted and programmatic way as the jogatis have been. The devadasis of the Tamil country, women dedicated to temple work, have borne the weight of that reformism.[15] But, as we will see, they do navigate prevalent moral tensions between religious life and sexuality, especially sex work. And much like the jogatis and jogappas we meet in Ramberg's ethnography, my thirunangai interlocutors also experience their attachment to the goddess as something over which they had no choice. But unlike the case with Yellamma devotees, the mode of piety among Angalamman maruladis does not take the form of an oral textual tradition of singing about the goddess and playing musical instruments. While Angalamman worship does involve the singing of sacred narratives and the playing of musical instruments during rituals, it is not the thirunangais who perform that role. Nevertheless, there are several points of similarity between my thirunangai interlocutors and the jogappas in Ramberg's ethnography. For example, like some jogappas, some of my thirunangai friends also move back and forth between highlighting

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[15] See Kersenboom (1987), Srinivasan (1985), Soneji (2012) for historical accounts of devadasi women and their art and the role played by caste, colonialism, and postcolonial transformations in marginalizing them and turning them into objects of reform and rehabilitation.

their sacred status and suppressing it in favor of a broader and more secular identification in everyday social life in the city. I hope to be able to show that this movement between an explicitly spiritual association and an orientation that only foregrounds their transgender status (and not their spiritual one) has ethical implications for my thirunangai interlocutors. The two orientations encompass different possibilities for how to be and what actions and comportments are desirable.

In a recent article, Claire Pamment (2019) has countered scholarly claims that the khwaja siras of Pakistan had turned away from the rubrics of legitimacy that Sufi Islam had once offered them and had instead embraced the secular liberal language of human rights and citizenship. Through a discussion of enactments of protest, pilgrimage, and sacred personhood that draw on Sufi and Shi'a traditions, Pamment argues that:

> … such sacred Islamic gestures are deeply imbricated in khwaja   sira community values and belief systems, and they constitute affective performatives for accessing the dominant public and political sphere amid continuing systemic exclusions, even in the context of official state recognition and protections. (Pamment 2019: 298)

Pamment does not valorize the religious aspects of contemporary khwaja sira identity and politics in Pakistan unquestioningly. She takes heed of the now familiar caution that affirmations of religious or spiritual aspects of identity can be limiting and also end up articulating with hegemonic ideologies of religion. However, Pamment points out that "this is surely true for any identity politics, be it rooted in the scripts of dominant religion or the secular liberal classism of human rights" (2019: 310). Pamment's discussion of the incorporation of sacred Islamic gestures (such as the rhythmic *matam* of Shi'a Muharram rituals) in khwaja sira public protests is particularly revelatory for its demonstration of the mutual imbrication of forms of piety and politics. In Chapter 5, I discuss a thirunangai protest which some of my interlocutors analyzed in retrospect in terms of ritual gestures and ethical persuasions. Pamment's analysis bolsters my reading of the irruptions of the sacred into putatively profane realms of social and political life.

Elaine Craddock's work (2012 & forthcoming) on the link between Goddess Angalamman and thirunangais is of immediate relevance to my project. In this dissertation, I build parts of my analysis on Craddock's attention to the ways in which thirunangais in Melmalayanur and nearby temples draw on Angalamman mythology and rituals to instantiate a particular kind of sacred transfeminine identity. When I suddenly encountered the powerful presence of Angalamman in the thirunangai lifeworld in Chennai, I was struck by the extent to which the goddess seemed to anchor a regionally grounded cultural identity. It was Craddock's work that convinced me that I

was not mistaken in thinking that Angalamman worship played an important role in the cultural poetics of Tamil transfeminine identity. Through an account of thirunangais' devotion to Angalamman and their commitment to conducting her rituals, Craddock shows us that "in Tamil Nadu, Ankalamman serves as an indigenous goddess whose worship and service connects the tirunangai community spatially and temporally, bestows social and cultural power, and allows tirunangais to more fully embody and enact their identity" (2012: 133). While Craddock offers an empirically rich account of thirunangais' ritual engagements and their articulations of their roles as the goddess' "servants," she does not focus on the ethical entailments of taking up such a role. Her analysis centers on Angalamman's role in anchoring articulations of thirunangai identity that have sacred legitimacy in the Tamil world. In this dissertation, I hope to build on Craddock's work to show that Angalamman's place in the thirunangai lifeworld is also to do with ethical relationality.

Theoretical Orientations – The Anthropology of Ethics

In this dissertation, I argue that thirunangais' attachment to Goddess Angalamman goes beyond questions of identity and cultural emplacement. It serves as a locus of ethical life, by which I refer to "the care with which people attend to life and the fact that all actions are subject to judgment both from others and by those who author them" (Sidnell et al., 2019: 2). I consider the domain of the ethical not as a narrow one concerned with right and wrong, but a broader field of evaluative disposition towards ourselves and the world, concerned with the question of *how to be*. *Ethical* is also not a descriptor for specific types of events. Instead, it refers to a quality of action, where we can discern some concern, on the part of the actors, with what matters. Their intimacy with Angalamman orients my thirunangai interlocutors towards certain valued ways of being in the world with others. They come to value and expect certain things from themselves, and they also recognize that others might have certain expectations of them – expectations about comportment, behavior, ritual efficacy, speech, etc. These preferred and desired ways of being are not set in stone or formulated as a codified and objective form of morality. Other loci of thirunangai ethical life, such as the kinship order built on guru-chela or mother-daughter relationships, have more explicit moral dimensions: obligations, relational conduct, and expressions of care are often more clearly discerned here through the things that are said and agreed during ritual initiations, at community councils (called *jamaats*) that gather to resolve disputes and plan collective courses of

action, and through one's relative place in the *parivar* (family) hierarchies. On the contrary, from what I was able to observe and elicit from thirunangais who are devoted to Angalamman, I understand that most aspects of the ethical entailments of their connection to the goddess are not explicitly moralized and pedagogized for them by others. They watch and learn some things: how to prepare for rituals, how to conduct them, etc. But other aspects of what it means to be a thirunangai who has an intimate connection to the goddess unfold in the course of their interactions with the world around them.

For example, in Chapter 2, you will meet Mala, a thirunangai-maruladi in her mid-fifties. She had been going through a period of exhaustion and depression, which made her minimize social interactions. So when I contacted her, she was not very keen on meeting with me, even though she did not say so explicitly. As I detail in the chapter, when I finally did get to meet her and explain to her that my research had taken a turn towards Angalamman, her entire orientation shifted. Not only did she take a keen interest in my work, she took my very arrival at her doorstep to be a sign that the goddess was reaching out to her. Taking that sign seriously, Mala then went on to confess to me the ways in which she had failed Angalamman in the recent past, on account of which she had been experiencing a kind of distance from the goddess. These failings that Mala confessed to were not to do with lapses in ritual performances or offerings. Instead, Mala attributed what she sensed as the goddess' disaffection with her to her lack of integrity in her dealings with others. And the way in which Mala came to feel the force of Angalamman's disenchantment with her was not primarily through an inner, private spiritual sense, but by the fact that the ritual work she had done for some people who sought her ritual intervention with the goddess had not been efficacious. So, for Mala, her capacity to access the goddess, her personal integrity, and her ability to help others through her ritual powers were all bound up together. Here, the Thirunangai-Angalamman connection goes far beyond instantiating thirunangai identity and offering that identity a culturally valued place. Those two aspects – identity and belonging – have ethical entailments. Attached to them are questions of *how to be*, which can be answered only in the everyday unfolding of life through action, reflection, judgement, and course correction.

Ethical Self-Cultivation, Freedom, and Agency

In order to fully understand the domain of the ethical, I have turned to the growing body of literature in the anthropology of ethics. Inaugurated in some ways by James Laidlaw in 2002 as

a call for a particular orientation towards ethics as an aspect of self-cultivation and freedom, as opposed to the Durkheimian paradigm where the social always already exerts a moral force on actors, the anthropology of ethics has grown into a vibrant body of theoretical and ethnographic work. Various methodological, programmatic, theoretical, and ethnographic aspects of such an anthropological focus on ethical life have been, and continue to be, forwarded, debated, and contested. For instance, the Neo-Aristotelian and Foucauldian approaches to ethical life espoused by James Laidlaw, James Faubion, Saba Mahmood, Charles Hirschkind, and others[16] have laid emphasis on practices of ethical self-cultivation and freedom. In these approaches, the focus is on how actors relate to certain normative models of ethical being that are available to them and engage in practices through which they cultivate dispositions vis-à-vis such moralities. Such a focus on technologies of self-fashioning has often taken a stance against what is seen as the Durkheimian model whereby morality is the top-down force of the social, commanding conformity from individual actors. Didier Fassin, Joel Robbins, and others have critiqued such a stance for its reductive reading of Durkheim.[17] They have pointed out that Durkheim, in fact, pushed back against the Kantian model of deontological ethics and its focus on rule-following as the ground of morality. In his essay "The Determination of Moral Facts," Durkheim has argued that rules and sanctions are only one aspect of morality and that in order for people to take up a moral ideal and work towards it, it has to present itself as "desirable" in some ways.[18] One important and subtle argument that Durkheim forwards in this work is that even when a social-moral order has successfully impressed upon an individual that it is "desirable" to conform to its norms, it still takes effort on the part of the individual to work towards those norms and to realize them in some ways. Such a reading of the scope and place of human endeavor even in living by normative forms of social morality (let alone resisting them) is not really at odds with the emphasis on self-cultivation that the Foucauldian approaches have advanced.

Both these approaches, in their attention to human striving to be particular kinds of people to realize particular social and moral goods, are helpful for my own project in this dissertation. For one, as Saba Mahmood (2005) and others have shown, this approach complicates neat associations of agency with resistance. In addition to that, giving our attention to how and why people commit

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[16] See Laidlaw (2002, 2014), Faubion (2011), Mahmood (2005), Hirschkind (2006), Asad (1993).
[17] See Fassin (2013, 2014), Robbins (2007)
[18] See Durkheim ([1953] 2010)

themselves to certain enduring ethical visions (no matter how appealing or problematic we might deem those visions) can help us see what desires are at play in these life projects. In making such choices, people might be motivated by the desire to secure a livable life through some degree of conformity. Or people might throw themselves with gusto into realizing an ethical ideal, powered by its promises of transcendence and self-overcoming. Let me offer a brief example. The guru-chela relationship and the kinship network into which that relationship incorporates a thirunangai present certain ethical ideals for her. These involve showing particular kinds of respect, regard and care, and showing up in certain valued ways for the relationships in question. In many ways, for my thirunangai interlocutors, their belonging in a parivar (family) and their identity as so-and-so's chela, are core aspects of thirunangai communal life. They say they cannot exist in isolation without these relationships. However, while ritual initiation secures nominal belonging in a parivar, it takes work to keep the relationships at a threshold of balance and wellbeing. My thirunangai interlocutors alternate between taking up that work (of relationship maintenance with kin) with élan and performing just enough to keep the relationships going. These structures of obligation offer leeway to exercise some reflective freedom regarding the courses of action available. Cultivated dispositions, as habitus in the Bourdieuian sense, don't simply predetermine modes of action. They also open up spaces for reflective inhabitation.

Ethical Immanence, Imminence, and Transcendence:

A different approach to the anthropology of ethics has highlighted the fact that ethical aspects of life may not always be readily available as objectifiable practice. Veena Das, Michael Lambek, and others who pay close attention to the "ordinariness" of ethics have sought to theorize how ethical stances might suffuse everyday life without being explicitly demarcated as such.[19] Das's work, for instance, attends to how histories of communal violence can fold themselves into people's very mode of inhabiting the everyday. She shows how the "everyday" in such settings cannot be a taken-for-granted site of routine actions and social reproduction of life. On the contrary, the everyday becomes something to be achieved through labor.[20] And such achievement

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[19] See Lambek (2010). The edited volume *Ordinary Ethics*, with contributions by Michael Lambek, Veena Das, Webb Keane, Naisargi and others exemplifies this approach to the anthropology of ethics.
[20] Das (2007) says: "I am suggesting that self-creation on the register of the everyday is a careful putting together of life—a concrete engagement with the tasks of remaking that is mindful of both terms of the compound expression: everyday and life. It points to the eventfulness of the everyday and the attempt to forge oneself into an ethical subject within this scene of the ordinary." (218)

of the everyday is accomplished not through projects of transcendence but what Das poetically terms a "descent into the ordinary" (2007: 7). What might appear from outside as routine acts of everyday life could in fact be people's striving to achieve an ordinariness that embedded memories of violence make it difficult to take for granted.

Das's notion of the "adjacent self" (2010: 377) is poetic and subtle. In her discussion of how Hindu-Muslim marriages work in a context of communal enmity and violence, Das details how a family goes about organizing itself around an interreligious couple in their midst. It calls for effort on the part of everyone to fold the newness into their everyday modes of being. In doing so, in figuring out how to be, Das observes, people are not so much reaching towards a distant moral ideal but towards one that is "adjacent." They can apprehend their own adjacent selves, as it were, as potentialities of being they can realize with some degree of effort. Such an attention to the "adjacency" of ethical selves is useful to think with. As I will show in this dissertation, in the course of everyday social interactions with strangers, thirunangais have to figure out how they are to be towards others. Whether they should anticipate mutual regard, or hostility, or indifference, or an encounter where they need to foreground their spiritual identity involves some quick reading of social cues and context. The ethical stances that thirunangais marshal in this context are ones we might call adjacent: they hover around as possibilities, but it nevertheless takes effort to realize them.

What is unclear in Das' and Lambek's emphasis on the "immanence" of the ethical in the ordinary is their simultaneous focus on ethical striving. If ethical immanence refers to the tacitness of the ethical domain in the ordinary, then how do we understand striving, effort, reflection, and judgment? For the latter aspects of ethics index some recognition on the part of actors that something else is desirable in a given moment, something other than what there is, even if that something were only an "adjacent self" and not a distant moral ideal. Two critiques of this emphasis on ethical immanence are useful. Robbins (2016) has attributed this stress on immanence to a discomfort with the idea of transcendence because of its strong religious connotations. He theorizes transcendence to be of various kinds and levels and offers a way to see that everyday ethical acts can involve "little transcendencies" (2016: 772).[21] Unfortunately, in his attempt to

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[21] Here, Robbins is following Alfred Schutz's discussion of categories of transcendence in *On Phenomenology and Social Relations* (1970).

affirm transcendence as pervasive to everyday life, Robbins seems to categorize religion as part of "great transcendencies" (773). As I hope to show, for thirunangais devoted to Angalamman, both the goddess and the ethical affordances she carries can be transcendent at "little" to "great" levels. In a context where thirunangais are marked for their potentiality to embody the goddess through trance, the realm of the transcendent is not a distant one but a proximate possibility. Another way to put it is that the ethical could also be "imminent"[22]:

> Imminence suggests that how we will act in a given situation is never fully known in advance; likewise, the consequences of our action could always be more or other than what we meant or anticipated—we are always about to find out. Response and re-description are about to happen, acknowledgement or disavowal is always possible. (Sidnell et al. 2019: 7)

The goddess herself is always close at hand for my thirunangai interlocutors, whether as a deity who can be embodied or as a deity with whom they are associated culturally by others. So the ethical orientations that pertain to such connections to the deity can also be not-distant possibilities; they can emerge in the here and now as imminent possibilities. Ethical imminence is also a useful formulation with which to understand how thirunangais come to see that they cannot always have a grasp of the "definition of the situation" they are entering, to borrow Erving Goffman's phrase (Goffman 1956). What stances, gestures, and actions are called for in a given encounter is intersubjectively established and achieved. Here, Michael Lempert's critique (2013, 2015) of "ethical immanence" is valuable. Drawing on insights from pragmatics, interactional linguistics, and conversation analysis, Lempert argues that the ethical is often made intersubjectively relevant through interactional work. In other words, for the ethical to be graspable as such, it needs to take some semiotic form that the actors involved can recognize as meaningful. I draw on this formulation in Chapter 5 when I discuss how a delicate ethical dilemma was resolved by the goddess's utterances through a thirunangai trance medium. The ethical gesture worked successfully because channeling the goddess as a semiotic form of efficacious speech was deeply meaningful to all the actors involved.

Leela Prasad's (2004, 2007) work draws attention to narrativization as a genre of performative speech that is driven by ethical stances and judgments. Comparing two narrative accounts of the same event from the past, offered by two different persons, Prasad shows how

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[22] See Sidnell et al. (2019) and Dave (2010).

ethical stances obtain in the temporal sequencing, omissions, and choices made by narrators. Such an approach to everyday ethical life has a way of bridging the gaps between the abstractions of immanence, transcendence, imminence, and the like. In Prasad's examples and analysis, we can see that what we are trying to conceive of as a distinct realm of the ethical might, in fact, be hiding in the mechanics of the speech genres we draw upon in our interactions with the world: in the way we say things, in the features we foreground, or simply in the things we notice or fail to see. But it is through the semiotic forms of human interaction that we grasp them in terms of something we might call ethical.

Ethical Affordances

One key concept that threads through the various theoretical preoccupations I have summarized above (and others I will invoke as I go) is *ethical affordance* proposed by Webb Keane (2016, 2018). Drawing on the work of psychologist James J. Gibson, Keane shows the usefulness of the concept of affordance. Affordance shifts exclusive attention from the property of an object (say, language) or the capacity of an actor in the abstract (agency). Instead, it refers to the possibilities that emerge when actors apprehend a useful property of something available in their environment: gestures, language, material objects, interactional stances, etc. Blurring subject-object binaries, the notion of affordance directs our attention not to actors and their worlds but actors-in-the-world: the inextricable bound-upness of us and our worlds. This resonates with Jarrett Zigon's (2014) emphasis on our fundamental "attunement to relationality," our being-in-the-world, as the ground of ethical life. We care about how to live, because we are attuned to our not-aloneness, we are aware of the fundamental relationality of our being. For instance, in Chapter 3, I show that the Tamil word *pottai*, which lacks identitarian specificity, nevertheless offers my thirunangai interlocutors rich ethical affordances for their everyday relational work among themselves and others. They take up the possibilities afforded by the word *pottai* to both signal and bring into being an incredible range of intimacies.

Chapters

In Chapter 1, "Angalamman and Thirunangais: Intensities, Histories, and Archives," I discuss the historical trajectories that bring together goddess Angalamman, thirunangais, and my ethnographic context, the city of Chennai. I pay particular attention to how my thirunangai

interlocutors respond to the absence of references to transfeminine devotees in the Angalamman archive (missionary, colonial, and anthropological archives).

In Chapter 2, "Things that Matter: How to be with the Goddess," I show that if we take the Thirunangai-Angalamman attachment as our focus, considerations other than identity, community, and juridicality come into view -- relationships other than the ones premised on identity; forms of sociality that overflow the bounds of identity-based community; and moral commitments that derive not only from transgender identity but also from other conceptions of self. My objective is not to underestimate the importance of thirunangai identity and rights-based activism, but to contribute to a fuller understanding of transfeminine lives by paying attention to what else matters to them.

Chapter 3, "Making a World with a Word: Language, Intimacy, and Ethical Relationality," takes up the rich ethical and indexical valences of the category *pottai* for ethnographic delineation. The Tamil word *pottai* has a complex semantic field. It can be misogynist, transphobic, and femmephobic. But my thirunangai interlocutors use the word to signal a range of intimacies. I show that as a term without identitarian closures and juridical specificity, *pottai* carries a wide range of affordances for thirunangais to engage in the work of ethical relationality.

Chapter 4, "Given by the Goddess, Given to the Goddess: Contours of Attachment," is devoted to understanding how thirunangai-maruladis articulate their attachment to goddess Angalamman. Through an analysis of their accounts of their first encounters with the goddess, I show how thirunangai-maruladis anchor their relationship with Angalamman not as a private spiritual connection but as one grounded in the recognition, validation, and wellbeing of the immediate world around them. I also show how my thirunangai interlocutors claim a specialness to their connection to Angalamman both by reading thirunangai identity as shaped by the goddess and by reading the goddess as a transgender deity. They also address the question of sex, sex work, and sexual morality in the context of a life devoted to the goddess.

Chapter 5, "Anger and Frenzy: The Ethicality of Embodied Emotions," is devoted to the discussion of the ethical force of a sacred narrative/myth of Angalamman. I focus in particular on the ethicality of anger and frenzy as embodied ethical states in response to crises in the world. I chart the correspondences between the ethical movements in the cosmic scene of action in the myth and the ethical gestures that animate thirunangai action in the scenes of worldly/social crisis to which they are called to respond. I also take up the fraught nature of everyday ethical life for

thirunangais in Chennai city. In their encounters with diverse kinds of people, thirunangais cannot always predict what kinds of people might come their way. Whether they encounter friendliness, hostility, violence, or indifference is not entirely up to them. And how these encounters go, what ethical stances obtain, what surprises come up, and how intersubjectivity is established – all depend on deft ethical work on their part. Angalamman may or may not play a key role in these transactions.

I conclude the dissertation with an ethnographic account that shows how Angalamman comes to resolve a moment of ethical difficulty and stress for some of my thirunangai interlocutors. The goddess comes through not as a distant deity who is merely worshipped and propitiated in rituals, but as an ever-accessible and vibrant point of orientation towards the world.

A Note on Spelling

In presenting Tamil words in Roman script, I have adopted the most commonly used spellings and ones that approximate most closely to Tamil speech, especially the way my interlocutors pronounced them. Therefore, for instance, I have chosen to present the name of the goddess, written in diacritics as 'Aṅkāḷammaṉ,' simply as 'Angalamman.' Other important words, such as *Thirunangai, Aravani, and Maruladi,* are also presented without diacritics.

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Chapter 1

Angalamman and Thirunangais

Intensities, Histories, Archives

1.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses two questions: *What place do thirunangais occupy in Angalamman worship today? And how can we understand the Thirunangai-Angalamman connection historically?* In the first part of the chapter, I offer ethnographic vignettes that show the kind of presence thirunangais have in Angalamman worship today. I describe an evening at a small temple to Angalamman, where Vasanthi, a young thirunangai-maruladi, attends to devotees who come seeking her mediation with the goddess. My objective is to emphasize the undeniably visible and recognized place thirunangais hold today in Angalamman worship. Then I move on to a discussion of available historical and anthropological archives of Angalamman worship and possible ways to understand the relative absence of transgender persons as a category of devotees in this archive. How might we contrast today's vitality and intensity of thirunangai presence around the goddess with the archival silence on transfeminine identity in the context of Angalamman worship? The ways in which my thirunangai interlocutors respond to my archival question are illuminating; they show how thirunangais engage with questions of history, temporality, and change. I argue that it is useful to consider the Thirunangai-Angalamman attachment not as a vestigial expression of some premodern mode of piety, but as a cultural form with layered temporality – the contours of its current expressions have as much to do with the present and the recent past as they might have to do with distant pasts.

1.2 Intensities of the Present

It is a Friday evening in December 2016 in Korukkupet in north Chennai. Three or four families have assembled outside a small temple to goddess Angalamman. The temple is a small concrete structure built in the generic style of modern Hindu shrines, and it stands at the intersection of three streets. The modest, ornamental, towering structure on top of the sanctum stands like a flower bud poised to blossom any minute. Four small steps lead up to a sanctum, inside which is a stone image of Angalamman. There is space only for two or three people to stand inside. The floor is wet, for Vasanthi has just given the idol a wash and is now decorating the

goddess. I stand slightly behind her, looking over her shoulder as she begins to outline the goddess's eyes with sandal paste. She has already draped a pink silk garment over the image, and it looks stunning set against the black stone. Vasanthi says something to me, but I cannot hear her clearly over the sound of L. R. Easwari's piercing voice on the loudspeaker, singing a Tamil song in praise of Angalamman. The voice of this singer would soon become a staple soundscape on festive occasions all through my fieldwork. It was not an unfamiliar voice or devotional soundscape to me. Growing up in Tamil Nadu, taking an interest in old film music and in popular forms of devotion, I got used to the fact that the same L. R. Easwari who gave us some of the most camp and sensuous songs in Tamil films of the 1960s and 1970s was also a preferred voice of popular Hinduism: high-pitched, confident, and exuberant.

I don't need to ask Vasanthi to repeat herself, because I can see from her actions that she has remembered she needs to do something else before attending to the goddess' eyes. She puts the sandal paste and eyeliner stick down and picks up some pieces of jewelry carefully wrapped in soft tissue paper. She then affixes two sparkling, white imitation stone studded earrings on the idol's ears. Then come the sun and crescent moon, which go on the goddess's hair. Angalamma's hair is the sky itself, the firmament that holds the sun and the moon and all things celestial. These are followed by two sparkling nose rings, one for each nostril. As I glance over the decoration, I see that Vasanthi has already placed sandal and vermilion marks on different spots on the idol: on each of the five hoods of the serpent that arches over the goddess like a protective awning, on the weapons the goddess holds in her four arms, and on her forehead. Vasanthi then goes back to drawing out the eyes carefully with some sandal paste. She finishes drawing the eyebrows in two swift arches, tracing the curve on the idol, and then places two tiny sandal dots in the corners of each eye. Suddenly, the goddess is gazing upon the world with utmost benevolence.

Outside, four or five families are waiting. Some are seated on the ground in front of the temple, while others stand leaning on a wall nearby. Once Vasanthi is done with decorating the goddess, she lights the camphor lamp and rings the bell, and everyone mills around near the entrance to the shrine to get a good glimpse – *darisanam/darshan* – of the goddess. To see her and to be seen by her. Vasanthi then offers holy ash, vermilion, and lemons to everyone. Then she lowers the volume of the loudspeaker and comes to sit down among the devotees gathered. One elderly woman nudges her daughter-in-law, who places her infant on Vasanthi's lap. The baby has been ill for some days now; won't sleep, won't eat. The young mother looks distressed and tired.

Clearly, she hasn't slept either. Vasanthi has a little silver bowl of milk in front of her, which has already been offered to the goddess. She offers a few droplets of the milk to the baby who continues to sleep through all of this. She then tells the family not to worry and asks the mother to hold the infant. Standing up, she picks up a lemon and makes circular motions around the baby and the mother, and then crushes the lemon under her feet, taking away the effect of any evil eye that may have been cast on the child. The family thanks Vasanthi, and the baby's father places a couple of hundred rupee notes on the brass plate in front of the deity.

Vasanthi then attends to the other families that are waiting. One of them, a middle-aged couple, believes that the house they have moved into is haunted. Vasanthi tells them about the *sangiyam*, the ritual that can be performed. She tells them what it will involve, how much it will cost, and by when it needs to be done ideally. The couple then moves aside to discuss their options with the relatives they have brought with them. The next family has one of its members possessed by some demonic entity. The young woman they are referring to sits nearby, her gaze fixed on some distant point in space and with a smile that appears and fades repeatedly, as if some secret keeps coming within her reach but keeps eluding her mind's grasp each time. Vasanthi approaches her, but the woman suddenly jerks awake, pulls herself back with a start, and screams. Two women and a man restrain her. I cannot hear any of them clearly over the woman's screams, but from their nods I can surmise that Vasanthi has told them that it is indeed a demonic entity that has possessed the young woman. The woman's family then discuss ritual options with Vasanthi. For this ritual, she tells them, they will have to go to Melmalayanur, Angalamman's main temple about 100 km south of Chennai. "Don't worry," she tells them. "The moment we set foot inside the village boundaries of Melmalayanur, whatever spirit has possessed your daughter will begin to realize it will soon be driven to submission."

As the woman's elderly mother huddles close to Vasanthi to ask some questions, the father leans towards me and asks me if I am waiting to see Vasanthi about some problem. I nod yes. He says, "You will definitely see results. There is no need to doubt it." Then gesturing towards Vasanthi, he says to me, "ivangala pola ullavanga moolama Angalamma nadathi kuduppaa." *Though people like her, Angalamma will fulfill things for you.* By then, his wife moves away from Vasanthi and joins us where we are standing. She affirms his remark. "No matter what it is, don't worry. You have come to her, haven't you? Everything will be alright."

"Ivunga kitta vandhuttenga illa?" *You have come to her, haven't you?* She could have meant either Vasanthi or Angalamman.

Later that night, after attending an event in a different part of the city, I hail an autorickshaw to head home – to Nisha's place in Porur where I stay. Once I sit in the auto, I notice that the driver has affixed some photographic images of deities on his windshield, facing inward. One of the deities looks like Angalamman. Curious to know for sure, I say to him, "Is that Angalamman?" He slows down the vehicle and quickly looks over his shoulder at me, and says, "Yes. Why do you ask?" I tell him that I was just curious to know. "Sakthi vaayndha deivam," he says. *Very powerful deity.* Then I tell him that Angalamman is, in fact, the subject of my study. This time he just pulls over, stops the vehicle, and properly turns around to talk to me. "A few years ago, suddenly, I couldn't walk. Someone had had some black magic performed, targeting me. It is this Amma who cured me. As soon as I stepped inside Melmalayanur, I could walk. I speak the truth. If you want to know about Angalamma, talk to thirunangais. They know. Thirunangainganaa yaarunnu nenaicheenga? Avunga Angalammavoda manusha vadivam dhaan." *Who do you think thirunangais are? They are the very human forms of Angalamma.*

That was not the only time I heard such a remark about thirunangais and Angalamman. At the various goddess temples to which I went with my thirunangai friends, I met people who believed that thirunangais were powerful beings. In many temples, devotees walked up to my thirunangai friends, touched their feet, and took their blessings. When they assumed that I was hanging out with thirunangais because I was seeking a solution to some life problem of mine, or when they came to know I was a researcher, some people volunteered their thoughts on the subject. "Saami arul ullavanga," some said, referring to thirunangais. *They have the goddess's grace.* Or they said, "It is because we have stopped respecting them and treating them properly that they have to make their living doing sex work and begging." Even though my thirunangai friends were out of earshot when people said such things to me, they knew that such a moralizing discourse about them existed. Many of my thirunangai interlocutors who are Angalamman maruladis are also involved in sex work and in *kadai-kettal* – literally, *to ask in the shops* – which is taken by many as a euphemism for begging. Vasanthi's remarks with which I opened this dissertation are representative of how my thirunangai friends felt about the subject. Sex work and begging did not morally compromise their sense of self, whether or not they were also maruladis. But they rarely openly contested this moral decline narrative in which people often placed them. In their view, it

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was simply a part of the stockpile of moralities they navigated on an everyday basis. Besides, they saw some value in such ideas. As Nisha once remarked when I brought up the subject, "If people think thirunangais are experiencing hardships because society has stopped respecting us and treating us properly, that is good, isn't it? True, they should treat us well whether or not they thought of us as blessed by the deities. That's what we demand as our right, don't we?"

Nisha was not suggesting that thirunangais' sacred personhood was merely a notion that had a certain instrumental value in securing respect and regard from the pious. As I show in the chapters to follow, my thirunangai interlocutors take seriously their capacity and potentiality for mediating between the mundane and the sacred, even though they seem to be in agreement that their religious function should not be grounds for political claims. In this, they differ markedly from hijra activists like Lakshminarayan Tripathi in Mumbai, who have taken an explicit stance in support of Hindutva ideology.[23] As if they were taking cue from the broadly secular Dravidian ideology that characterizes Tamil political discourse and public sphere, thirunangais, in their activism and in their foregrounding *thirunangai* as a juridical identity, have premised their politics on gender identity as a standalone locus of recognition and rights.[24] Nevertheless, at some other level that does not get scaled up to the juridical in any simple and straightforward way, spiritual life matters a great deal to the thirunangais with whom I worked. They take their connection to Angalamman to be a significant one. Moreover – and this is important for my purposes here – the thirunangai connection to the goddess is also taken seriously by others. Within the world of non-Brahmanical, popular forms of devotion to gods and goddesses, thirunangais have an undeniable presence. It is certainly the case with Angalamman worship.

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[23] Well-known hijra leader and activist Lakshminarayan Tripathi has spoken out in support of the Hindu right wing's agenda to build a temple to Hindu God Ram at the site of the destruction of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Queer-trans-feminist groups have condemned this stance. See: http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9509%3Atrans-gender – accessed on February 20th, 2020.

[24] For a discussion of Dravidian influences in thirunangai public life and the construction of the figure of the thirunangai, see Nataraj (2019). The Dravidian ideology grew out of the anti-caste, anti-religion movements of early 20th century in Tamil Nadu, which took the form of the Self-Respect Movement. As a rationalist movement, it challenged Brahmin hegemony, religion and superstition, subjugation of women, and more. Since 1967, the political parties that have been governing the state of Tamil Nadu are the ones that came out of the Dravidian movement. Even though as political parties with electoral considerations they have paid only lip-service to the more radical aspects of the movement that gave birth to them, they have fostered a political consciousness that pushes back against making religion a legitimate aspect of political identity and claims.

1.3 Thirunangais in Angalamman Worship - Histories and Traces

1.3.1 Sites of Attachment

What is the history of the Thirunangai-Angalamman attachment? How far back does it go? Angalamman as a deity came into prominence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Historians of religion attribute this to the growing political clout of local agrarian, artisanal, and warrior castes during a period of political transformation in the Tamil region.[25] As the Nayaks gained control of the region after the decline of the Chola empire (ninth – thirteenth centuries), they reorganized political alliances and delegation of powers in such a way that Tamil and Telugu agrarian, artisanal, and mercantile caste groups -- such as the Vanniya Kula Kshatriyas (or Vanniyars as they are known today), Nayakkars, Naidu, Chetty, Reddy, and others – achieved local prominence in the networks of political patronage and power. Deities such as Angalamman, who were tutelary and clan deities with regionally situated importance to these groups, emerged as important deities with impressive public shrines and sacred narratives that linked them to pan-Hindu narratives and places. Historians have documented the proliferation of independent goddess shrines during the medieval period and the networks of patronage and endowments from which they benefited.[26]

Based on the oral accounts I have gathered from thirunangai elders, it appears that one key site of community formation for thirunangais has been the goddess temples of North Madras: the Angalamman temples in Royapuram and Choolai, the Pachaiyamman-Mannarswami temple in Royapuram, Periyapalayathamman temple in Old Washermanpet, Seniyamman temple in Tondaiyarpet, and others. However, not only elders like Vimala Aaya, Lakshmi Nani, and Thangam Amma, but younger thirunangais like Nisha, Radhika, and Vasanthi too have found their earliest sense of belonging among the thirunangai-maruladis (then called *saami pottais*) of North Madras. It was in the Amman temples of North Madras that they gathered in the evenings and on festive occasions, forming new intimacies, becoming mothers and daughters, and later gurus and chelas. These were the spaces in which the Thirunangai-Angalamman connection as we see today has taken shape.

In Fall 2017, after my return to Austin from Chennai, I chanced upon a photograph from an early twentieth century ethnological text at the university library. It was a photo of a temple

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[25] See Mahalakshmi (2011), Sree Padma (2016)

[26] See Stein (1977) and Appadurai (1977) for accounts of shifts in the Tamil religious landscape in the medieval period under the Nayaks.

from north Chennai that I had visited just months ago. A black-and-white photographic plate showed large stone statues of deities in the outer precincts of the Mannarswami-Pachaiyamman Temple in north Chennai. During my fieldwork Nisha had taken me to that temple. And now here I was, sitting cross-legged on the floor between book shelves in the Perry Castaneda Library on the UT Austin campus, looking at a photographic image of the same temple in Edgar Thurston's ethnographic work on castes and tribes in southern India.[27] The giant statues of Muneeswarar[28] and other deities in the outer precincts of the temple looked, in the photo reproduced in this colonial text, just as I remembered them from my visit.

I immediately shared a scan of the page with Nisha by WhatsApp, and she replied right away that she was moved to tears seeing her favorite temple in a book published over a hundred years ago. She said she was wonderstruck that a place that had a deep personal meaning for her also seemed to have a larger significance: it found mention in a book which then fell into my hands in a university library in the United States. It anchored her personal narrative in a different kind of register, which moved her immensely. Referring to the caption for the photo in the book, she said, "It says 'Mannarswami Temple' here. That's true. But we always called it Pachaiyamman Temple. When I was a kid, if someone had stopped me on the road and asked me where Mannarswami Temple was, I wouldn't have known. But if they asked me where Pachaiyamman Temple was, I'd have told them right away."

Nearly all of the thirunangais Nisha first met and got acquainted with were *saami-pottais* -- they were all devoted to the goddess, and they all spent time together every day in the goddess temples of north Madras. Pachaiyamman temple was only one such. In the decades before transgender rights activism began, before the world of HIV/AIDS interventions and infrastructures allowed for organizing around alternate gender and sexuality practices and identities, before even labels such as 'Aravani,' 'Kothi,' and 'Thirunangai' came about, there were terms such as 'Ali' and 'Uss,' which were deemed derogatory. And there was also the word *pottai,* which, with all its enmeshment in derogatory meanings, was still used by thirunangais to refer to each other and to refer to men whom they considered to be feminine.[29] Moreover, most pottais then were saami

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[27] Thurston, Edgar (1909). *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*. Vol. 6. Madras: Government Press, p. 12

[28] A male deity in non-brahmanical Hindu worship in southern India, often linked to Shiva, either as his very form or as a deity created by Shiva. A thirunangai-maruladi described Muneeswaran to me as Shiva himself in his ascetic form: "muni" – sage, and "Iswara" –Shiva.

[29] See Chapter 3 for a close ethnographic delineation of this category *pottai.* It continues to be in use among thirunangais, allowing them to perform an incredible range of relational work beyond the bounds of identity.

pottais, linked to goddess worship and seen by others around them as spiritually powerful. The first thirunangais Nisha met were saami pottais, too. The first model of transfeminine embodiment, sociality, and intimacy Nisha witnessed was the gathering of thirunangai-maruladis in the temples of north Madras.

While a few of the thirunangais I worked with have moved to Chennai in the recent past, most of my thirunangai interlocutors come from families belonging to middle and lower castes that migrated to north Madras (Chennai) several generations ago. What is now known as North Chennai or *Vada Chennai* was initially a collection of native settlements that grew to the north of British colonial administrative centers from the seventeenth century onward. With the establishment of Fort St. George and the army barracks to secure British trading interests in the region with Madras as the headquarters of the Madras Presidency, native settlements of artisanal, trading, and service castes were encouraged in order to make available a range of services. Local and migrant groups of washermen, fishermen, vegetable vendors, gardeners, weavers, leather workers, and others settled in the congested neighborhoods to the north of Georgetown, the part of the city that later acquired the ignominious name of Black Town in contrast to White Town, the areas of colonial settlements. Historians of colonial economy have pointed to the various factors involved in the migration and settlement of populations in the new colonial city. Frequent and devastating famines in peninsular India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the formidable increase in the price of food grains played an important role in uprooting families of poor, small landholding, and landless peasants from their rural dwellings and sending them in search of livelihood in the new city. Susan Lewandowski (1975) has drawn attention to the fact that unlike in the other colonial cities of Bombay and Calcutta, which saw massive in-migration of men from rural hinterlands in search of work, migration to colonial Madras involved entire family units moving to the city to make life anew. Well into the late 19th century, it was primarily service economy and not industry that drove Madras' growth as a city. Families of migrants belonging primarily to Tamil and Telugu agrarian, trading, and artisanal castes made North Madras their home and transformed its cultural landscape. Religion and temples played key roles in the cultural negotiations of power in the emerging city.[30]

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[30] See Lewandowski (1985) for a discussion of temple building and patronage as a key aspect of negotiations of political power among Indian trading communities in colonial Madras.

I cannot draw a direct line from the ethnographic present of my thirunangai interlocutors to the past of colonial North Madras. In order to understand better the place of North Madras/Chennai in anchoring thirunangai lifeworlds and religious practices among a broader world of Tamil and Telugu non-brahmin communities, I will need to conduct research along, at least, three lines of inquiry that have been beyond the scope of my current material: histories of migration and settlement into North Madras of various communities; understanding North Madras' religious landscape by tracking various temple histories and archives of key figures such as Ramalinga Adigalar, mystic-poet and head of a reformed Hindu order, and Kunankudi Masthan Sahib, Sufi mystic and poet, both of whom had connections to this part of the city in the nineteenth century; and delving into representations of North Madras in literature and cinema to understand its importance as a destination for migrants – thirunangais and others – in the past few decades.

Nevertheless, it is possible to surmise that the neighborhoods of North Chennai, operating as village-like settlements of disparate caste and occupational groups[31], have continued to serve as preferred destinations for later migrants with familial and kinship links to earlier ones. Those thirunangais who have migrated to Chennai in their lifetime have done so either because they had family connections through which they hoped to make a living in the city or because they wanted to live as thirunangais, finding kinship, community, and support among other thirunangais. Many of the thirunangai kin groups then were organized around elders who had lived in North Madras for several decades. Thirunangais who arrived from other parts of Tamil Nadu and the rest of south India cohered around such exiting networks, making their homes, at least initially, in the neighborhoods of North Madras. For instance, when Lakshmi Nani arrived in Madras from Mannarkudi in the 1960s, even though she first stayed with her relatives, she soon made friends with another thirunangai and moved closer to her in Washermanpet, and she has lived there since. As I will describe in Chapter 2, Nani's new friend Gopal was not only a thirunangai but also an Angalamman maruladi. It was through her association with Gopal and her participation in the rituals and festivals conducted by Gopal that Nani came to be socialized into Angalamman worship. When Angalamman assumed centrality in her life, Nani gravitated towards others who were also devoted to the goddess. Some of these people who have been important in Nani's life are not other thirunangais but cis-women and heterosexual families in her neighborhood with whom she shares her devotion and commitment to Angalamman. Similarly, Thangam Amma's

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[31] See Lewandowski (1975)

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family moved from Kerala to Vyasarpadi in North Madras, where her father set up a tea shop. But once she became a maruladi and also recognized herself as a thirunangai, Thangam Amma found company among other saami-pottais in North Madras. Later, she moved to Royapuram and took on ritual duties at a small temple maintained by a fellow thirunangai-maruladi.

Tamil folklorist V. Ramakrishnan (2016) considers thirunangai cultural life as an integral part of North Madras' diverse and syncretic cultural world. In his analysis, thirunangai devotion to the goddess is linked to the importance that Tamil deities (as opposed to Sanskritic, Brahmanical ones) find among non-brahmin castes. And the particular density of thirunangai lifeworlds we find in North Madras is to be attributed to the accommodation they find among the predominantly non-brahmin, working class character of this part of the old city. In the next chapter, I pay close attention to the life trajectories that brought my thirunangai interlocutors to Angalamman and the facilitating role that life in the old city played in that process. Here, I am interested in understanding how we might approach available scholarly work and archive on goddess worship to chart a past for the Thirunangai-Angalamman relationship.

1.3.2 Archival Absence and "Radical Abundance"

Writing in 2012 in what appears to be the first scholarly article on thirunangais in Angalamman worship, Elaine Craddock characterizes the relationship thus:

> One of the most popular goddesses among tirunangais is Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari, or Aṅkāḷammaṉ; tirunangais commonly claim that Aṅkāḷammaṉ wants only people who are half male, half female to perform her worship, and although she may possess women, it is only these half male, half female people that she will speak through (aruḷ vākku). Some of the ritual diviners develop a substantial clientele, working at temples ranging from small, private ones to large, famous temples. The temple at Mēl Malaiyaṉūr is considered the most important temple to Aṅkāḷammaṉ… This temple area provides tirunangais with the physical and cultural space in which to perform multiple roles that are integral aspects of tirunangai identity. (Craddock 2012: 119)

It is important to note that while Craddock cites Eveline Meyer's important work on the Angalamman cult in Tamil Nadu in support of Melmalayanur temple's status as "the most important temple to Ankalamman," Meyer's work does not mention thirunangais or, considering that the name did not exist at the time Meyer conducted her research, any transgender, third-gender, gender-nonconforming persons playing a role in Angalamman worship. I will take up this point later on in this section. For the moment, however, Craddock's observation and her important

documentation of rituals and mythical narratives that thirunangais in Melmalayanur draw upon, serve to highlight the fact that thirunangais today have an important and highly visible place in Angalamman worship and they have also staked a special claim to their uniqueness to channel the goddess.

While cis-gendered persons do animate the world of Angalamman worship powerfully, functioning as maruladis, priests, and *pambai-udukkaikkarar* (those who play the pambai and udukkai drums for rituals), it became evident to me during my research that thirunangai involvement in this world of piety has a special appeal and attraction to all Angalamman devotees. This was especially so during religious festivals and pilgrimages. People thronged to thirunangais to be blessed, to have *kazhippu* rituals performed to ward off evil eye, etc. In Melmalayanur, too, around the temple that is considered the Ur-shrine for Angalamman (or the goddess' "head office," as one of my thirunangai interlocutors put it), thirunangais visually dominate the scene. Dressed in finery, faces awash with the golden glow of turmeric, with strings of flowers on their hair, some wearing their hair in dreadlocks, they stand near the entrances to the temple, offering to assist thronging devotees with their various prayers and offerings.

My thirunangai friends, in whose company I undertook trips to Melmalayanur, constantly remarked at the extent to which thirunangais seemed to have claimed their place in this field of devotional practice. In the chapters to come, I devote considerable space to understand and explicate the nature and force of the special attachment that thirunangai-maruladis say exists between themselves and goddess Angalamman. Indeed, the core concern of this dissertation is to detail the ethical entailments of that attachment – the concern with how to live, a question that follows forth from that human-divine attachment and the way it must enact itself socially. But here, I wish to give a brief account of what some historical and anthropological archives have to say about the world of Angalamman worship, and I will attempt to engage today's thriving thirunangai presence in that world in conversation with these archival illuminations.

1.3.3 Colonial Encounters

Bartholomaus Ziegenbalg, a German Lutheran missionary who worked in southern India in the early eighteenth century, made "the first clear attempt to study village goddess religion in south India" (Sree Padma 2013: 10). It took a little over a century for his work, "The Genealogy of the South-Indian Gods," to be taken seriously by colonial Indologists who had, until then,

focused mainly on texts and practices of Hinduism that they considered as deriving from "an Aryan or Indo-European heritage and hence deemed superior to the popular religious culture of south India" (18-19). Ziegenbalg's work did not particularly redeem popular devotion in the eyes of colonial missionaries and scholars, but it provided an account of contemporaneous beliefs and practices that animated the lives of a vast majority of Hindus. In his work, Ziegenbalg includes a section on Angalamman and associated deities, where he draws upon written accounts from his native interlocutors for descriptions of deities and practices. Here is a note he cites from "a south Indian" informant:

> Ankalamman is a Sakti who keeps away the devils of the forests, the fields and the houses so that they might not possess the people nor do any harm to them. If a person is possessed, that person is taken to the temple of Ankalamman. That person brings offerings to her, worships her, is placed before her, sings some songs of praise to her and perform certain ceremonies. Then the devil will depart from the possessed person. Those who have witnessed the help of Ankalamman with their own eyes become her male and female slaves [i.e., Tamil way of saying devotees, followers], saying that she should be the goddess to their whole generation whom they want to serve and worship. In this way many of them become male and female slaves of one or the other goddess in one or another temple. They serve this goddess till their death and call her their Kuladevata. They recommend her to her children and their offspring as a special goddess. (Jeyaraj 2004: 127)

Neither this note from his informant nor the rest of Ziegenbalg's own entries on south Indian goddesses includes any reference to persons who do not conform to male and female gender norms. It is interesting that Ziegenbalg's interlocutor spells out that those who take upon themselves the duty to serve Angalamma become her "male and female slaves." It is possible that the clear and emphatic mention of both genders is meant to highlight the fact that those who become devoted to Angalamman belong to both genders; that it is not a field restricted to either sex. Nevertheless, without an anachronistic expectation that ethnographers and their informants of an earlier historical period should be able to register the presence of what is essentially a new and emergent category of persons, namely *thirunangai*, it might still be permissible to note the absence of hijras, khojas, or other gender-nonconforming persons in such descriptions. Considering the long and complex histories of transgender/third-gender formations in the region; colonial anxieties around the lives and livelihoods of those characterized as "eunuchs" which resulted in their inclusion in the Criminal Tribes Act; and the claims to timelessness that thirunangais make for their connection to Angalamman, it is worthwhile noting such absences in the archive.

Edgar Thurston, the colonial ethnologist who served as the Superintendent of the Madras Government Museum, includes a discussion of Angalamman worship in his multivolume compendium, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, published in 1909 after years of research. His discussion of Angalamman and the famous Mayana Kollai ritual features under his entry for the Sembadava, a caste of freshwater fisherfolk who are particularly concentrated near Senji (Gingee) in coastal Villupuram district (formerly South Arcot). In this entry, Thurston recognizes Angalamman as the *kuladeivam* or clan deity of the Sembadavas and mentions the community's belief that Angalamman was a Sembadava woman "of whom Siva became enamoured" (Vol. 6: 351). In his fairly elaborate details about Angalamman rituals, however, there is no mention of any gender-variant/gender-nonconforming persons playing any significant roles. Nor does Thurston mention any ritual performance that involved gender-bending or crossdressing. But he describes devotees dressed as the male deity, Siva:

> [Devotees] disguise themselves as Siva, for which purpose they smear their faces with ashes, put on a cap decorated with feathers of crow, egret, and peacock, and carry in one hand a brass vessel called Brahma Kapalam. Round their waist they tie a number of strings, to which are attached rags and feathers. Instead of the cap, Paraiyans and Valluvans wear a crown. (Vol. 6: 357).

Later in the entry, describing the culminating moments of the ritual, Thurston documents:

> The pujari (fisherman), who wears a special dress for the occasion, walks in front of the idol, carrying in one hand a brass cup representing the skull which Siva carried in his hand, and in the other a piece of human skull bone, which he bites and chews as the procession moves inward. (Vol. 6: 358).

From Volume 3 of *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, we gather that Thurston was very much aware of the existence of hijras, khojas, and other people who did not belong in normative male and female categories. He devotes a separate entry to khojas, and it is here that we encounter his now infamous classification of "natural eunuchs" and "artificial eunuchs" in terms that articulate with colonial anxieties that are reflected in the Criminal Tribes Act. In Part II of this Act, hijras are characterized as a group of vagrant and itinerant people with inherent criminal tendencies, whose movements need to be curbed and whose existence registered and surveilled. Thurston refers to hijras and khojas' appearances, anatomical differences, castration procedures, their sexuality, lifestyles, and social and performance practices (Vol. 3: 291). However, in Thurston's discussion of Angalamman worship and the Koovagam festival for the male deity Koothandavar, both of which are devotional sites in which thirunangais now have significant and authoritative

presence, we find no mention of the participation of "eunuchs" or hijras and khojas, whose existence in the region he acknowledges and documents elsewhere.

1.3.4 Early Scholarship on Goddess Worship

Archaeologist H. Krishna Sastri's *South Indian Images of Gods and Goddesses* (1916) is a detailed account of regionally diverse practices of popular worship in southern India. He considers the south Indian Amman deities to be Tantric goddesses, whose prominence as stand-alone female deities (as opposed to consorts of male deities) is attributable to the spread of Tantric Shaktism. Tantrism privileged the feminine as a vital, superior, and felicitous force in spiritual advancement. In a description of a goddess ritual in a village, which bears a striking resemblance to the Mayana Kollai ritual for Angalamman today, Sastri mentions ritual crossdressing:

> … when infectious diseases among men and cattle prevail, special worship is arranged for, to appease the deities by sacrificing animals, offering heaps of cooked rice mixed with blood, or by carrying the *karagam*. The last is celebrated by dressing the selected person who has taken a vow to perform the ceremony, in the yellow cloths of a woman, putting on him the ornaments of women and making him carry on his head a pot or pots profusely decorated with flowers and margosa leaves and supposed to contain in them the spirit of the particular goddess for whose propitiation the ceremony is gone through. (Sastri 1916: 227)

In addition to the mention of crossdressing, Sastri's use of the expression "the ceremony is gone through" is striking. Better than a word like "performance," it draws attention to the "passage" nature of a ritual, its role in effecting status, psychological, and spiritual transformations in the persons who "go through" the ritual.

In *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism: A study of the local and village deities of Southern India* (1915), W. T. Elmore discusses goddess worship in the Telugu-speaking Andhra region (to the north of my field site) of southern India. He mentions ritual crossdressing in the context of goddess worship more than once while discussing rituals performed for Kati Ankamma and Ankamma: "… the Madiga story-teller disguises himself by dressing as a woman, for he has no desire to be recognized later by any of the other deities as the one who did to the Sakti" (Elmore 1915: 42). The above interpretation of the rationale for "dressing as a woman" aligns with Elmore's general characterization of village deities as territorial, easily angered, and exerting competing loyalties on their worshippers. My own observations in the field do not lend credence to such a representation of the deities or their devotees' motives for worship. In his description of an

Angalamman ritual in the Andhra region, Elmore says: "On the fourth day… a man disguised as a woman carries a paper balloon in procession on the end of a long pole. Above the balloon is a pot and above that a drinking cup, while the royal staff and snake hood are carried behind accompanied by drumming and shouting." (1915: 24) And, "Then the story-teller drinks the blood of a sheep, sometimes severing the jugular vein with his teeth, and disguised as a woman mounts to the top of the cart." (1915: 26)

In an interesting footnote, Elmore concedes that he could not be sure of the rationale he offers for the ritual crossdressing that occurs in ceremonies for Angalamman. He offers another possible, radically opposite, interpretation:

> In such worship as that of Ankamma… I have tried to connect the dressing as a woman and riding in the midst of impaled animals with such a ceremony as carrying the vitals in the mouth for the purpose of frightening away other spirits. I have not been able to establish that point, however. The entire testimony is to the effect that the *pujari* dressed as a woman represents the goddess, that he is for the time the incarnation of the goddess, and so she is getting the benefit of the blood which he drinks, and the impaled animals are sacrificed for her. (1915: 143, Footnote)

Elmore's interpretation aligns with Eveline Meyer's (1986) and my own thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors' interpretations of the role of ritual crossdressing: to signify divine embodiment. But just as in the case of earlier missionary and colonial representations, Sastri's and Elmore's works too do not mention a category of gender-variant persons (or "eunuchs" or "hijras" or "khojas," the terms that were in vogue then) taking part in Angalamman worship. However, they provide ethnographic evidence to the importance of ritually significant crossdressing in the propitiation ceremonies performed for the deity.

1.3.5 Scholarship since the 1980s

Eveline Meyer's (1986) magisterial work on the Angalamman cult in Tamil Nadu makes no mention of thirunangais (we might expect the use of the label 'ali' in that period). However, she makes a few references to men and boys being dressed as the goddess during specific rituals, which brings into the descriptive field some practices of ritual cross-gender performance.

In her account of the ritual enactment of goddess Angalamman's killing of the demon king Vallalarajan, Meyer notes: "One man dresses up as Ankalamma; he has intestines in his mouth, carries a winnowing fan, in which there is a small doll made from the paste of rice flour" (1986: 132). Here, Meyer is describing a moment in the long "pillage" (Mayana Kollai) ritual in a

particular temple where the goddess's destruction of a demon was enacted. In the "pillage" rituals I observed in Chennai, this myth was not enacted, but all devotees dressed as the goddess in her ravenous, mad, and angry form (strikingly similar to Meyer's description above), walked the streets before arriving at a key Anglamman shrine. Some of them, I was told, visited a local cremation grounds at the start of the ritual.

Discussing the final rituals of Mayana Kollai ("pillage") in a temple in North Arcot district, Meyer notes:

> On the day of the kollai the goddess is taken around the streets on the lion vehicle. With her go those who have dressed themselves as Kali, Katteri, etc.; they are garlanded with intestines or bite a liver. A boy will be dressed in a colored skirt (pavatai) and decorated with feathers. He carries the kapalam (i.e., the brasspot with the faces), a cane. He represents Ankalamman. (134)

In detailing yet another ritual, this time in Coimbatore district, Meyer describes "a man dressed in a sari" representing Pecci, considered to be a female helper to the goddess. Dressed in this manner, and with goat intestines in his mouth, this person goes around the streets collecting offerings from devotees outside their homes. During my fieldwork in north Chennai, I was able to observe this practice, but the devotees did not have goat intestines in their mouths. Many had nothing in their mouths, while some held between their teeth live, sedated chickens that were soon sacrificed.

Turning to Angalamman festivals in Madras city (now Chennai, my research site), Meyer documents more instances of ritual crossdressing:

> The mayanakkollai takes place on the second day (amavacai) and is an enactment of the goddess' removal of the child Siva from Vallalarajan's womb. Devotees dress up as Kali. Each wears a metal hat decorated with rudraksa beads and the saiva symbols of the half-moon and tiriculam and a vest for jacket embroidered with a linga-yoni. (These devotees have to fast for three days). (144)

Thus, in Meyer's account, drawn from field research in the late 1970s and early 1980s, we see female impersonation by men and boys forming a significant aspect of rituals for Angalamman in various sites in Tamil Nadu. Between Thurston and Meyer, we see a shift from interpreting the ritual divine impersonation as Siva to a clear account of devotees and priests impersonating the goddess in her fiery form. But no category of transgender/third-gender persons figures in Meyer's account, which otherwise provides an empirically rich documentation of the various castes and groups that worship the goddess, the caste composition of Angalamman priesthood in various

districts, the castes that consider Angalamman as their clan deity, and the narratives they provide accounting for their attachment to the goddess.

Isabelle Nabokov's (2000) ethnography of exorcism and counter-sorcery rituals performed in and around the famous Angalamman temple in Melmalayanur is a fascinating analysis of how these rituals, in seeking to restore possessed women to states of wellness, in fact work to return them to an oppressive, normative gender order. In her analysis, women's dissatisfaction with the highly restrictive normative gendered worlds they inhabit, and their unsublimated desires to militate against this social order, manifest as various kinds of spirit possessions, wherein elements of feminine discontents are externalized as various demonic entities.

For the purposes of the current discussion, we need not delve further into her analysis of how rituals of exorcism articulate with the normative social order. What is important is to note that, in her ethnographic work with a range of ritual specialists who perform counter-sorcery and exorcism rituals by drawing on their connection to Angalamman, we find no mention of transfeminine persons, or "alis" or "eunuchs." Nabokov categorizes her informants straightforwardly as men and women. However, she describes one of her informants, a healer, as "a tall, lean man with fluid gestures and high-pitched voice" (Nabokov 2000: 22), which can be read as an attempt at a description of gender difference that does not explicitly name an identity but draws attention to gender performance, corporeality and comportment.

Pausing on this pithy description by Nabokov of one of her male interlocutors ("a tall, lean man with fluid gestures and high-pitched voice") can be quite instructive. All of Nabokov's other interlocutors describe their own first encounter with goddess Angalamman in ways that share a common trope: the goddess' appearance in a dream or a private vision. The narrative offered by this particular, ostensibly androgynous, informant alone differs from them; in this narrative, the first encounter with goddess Angalamman occurs in a public, ritual moment in the presence of others as witnesses. In this aspect, it shares a striking similarity with the accounts that my thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors provided when I elicited narratives of first encounter with Angalamman (see Chapter 4). Other than this one moment, however, Nabokov does not characterize any of her other interlocutors in such androgynous terms, nor does she document thirunangai presence in Angalamman worship. This is in striking contrast both to my own observation during several trips to Melmalayanur in 2016, 2017, and 2018, and the strong thirunangai presence noted by Elaine Craddock (2012) in Melmalayanur and nearby areas.

Presented with thirunangai-maruladi accounts of attachment to Angalamman that expressed the relationship in a language of mythopoetic timelessness (Chapter 4), and observing for myself the powerful presence thirunangais have in the world of Angalamman worship, I turned to a limited set of archives to see how the place of transfeminine identity and embodiment have been documented in records of Angalamman worship. What I encountered was not transfemininity as personhood and transfeminine persons as a distinct category of persons playing significant roles in the worship of the goddess. Instead, I found a fascinating archive of ritually localized cross-dressing occupying an important place in the rituals for the goddess. I understand that each of these scholars have their own angle of approach to their study of Angalamman worship. Ziegenbalg made the first known comprehensive attempt at understanding the importance of popular deities and devotion in southern India with the desire to find affective entry points into people's minds and hearts. His gaze is animated by missionary objectives. Edgar Thurston's gaze is rooted in a different kind of colonial epistemology – of classification, documentation, and compilation of knowledge in the service of colonial governmentality. Eveline Meyer's objective is to provide a comprehensive account of Angalamman myths and rituals across Tamil Nadu, and Isabelle Nabokov has sought to understand the role exorcism rituals that invoke Angalamman play in the lives of rural Tamil women and their families. At first, I thought I could attribute the absence of transfeminine persons in their accounts to various kinds of ideological bias on their part. But, as I will show you later on in this chapter, my thirunangai elders offered me a different way to look at it.

1.3.6 Archival Seductions and Anxieties

When thirunangais' thriving place in Angalamman worship is evident to me from my own fieldwork and is supported by Craddock's (2012) work with thirunangai-maruladis in Melmalayanur, why did I engage in the exercise of drawing attention to archival absences and ambivalences? Today, a visit to the most famous temple in Melmalayanur or any other key Angalamman shrine during a festival day or even on the new moon day of any month, will make it evident that thirunangais are an important, undeniable presence around the goddess. It also becomes clear to the observers that thirunangais flock to the goddess not merely as devotees seeking her darshan and blessings, but in a different, authoritative capacity: as ritually potent figures who can mediate between the goddess and the world in some significant ways. Then what

is my rationale for delving into even the limited set of archives I have placed above, pointing out the alleged discrepancy between today's abundant and visible presence of thirunangais in Angalamman worship and the records of the past that rarely mention them (even taking into account the different names and labels that have been used and rejected over time)? Is it an archival anxiety on my part to substantiate thirunangai claims to antiquity for their attachment to Angalamman? Is this an illustration of what Anjali Arondekar calls "a melancholic historicism" whereby "sexuality … endures as an object of historical recovery, it seems, through 'a poetics of melancholia'"? (2015: 99).

Arondekar (2005, 2015) has drawn attention to a tendency among scholarship on the history of sexuality in South Asia to valorize the archive, especially the colonial archive, as a site for retrieval of sexuality's past from its silences and elisions and to make the archive speak to the needs of sexuality's present: "The missing amphora of sexuality, particularly in South Asia, is recovered from the archival detritus of hegemonic histories of colonialism and nationalism and showcased within more liberatory narratives of reform and rights" (2015: 98). She acknowledges the seduction of the archive as at once "an arbitrary arsenal of loss" and a place of promise that would break its silence and speak in ways that allow us to recover a history of sexuality that is productive for the struggles of the present. She characterizes this mode of historical scholarship as "melancholic historicism" (2015: 98). Arondekar notices this tendency particularly in queer studies' approach to the past: "The process of 'queering' pasts has been realized through corrective reformulations of 'suppressed' or misread colonial materials" (2005: 11).

While Arondekar recognizes the value of locating gaps and elisions in the archive and drawing attention to the artifactual nature of the archive, she cautions against fetishizing it as a site of hidden presences and recovery. One reason she offers for her caution is that framing sexuality's past in the subcontinent in terms of such absences might keep us away from paying attention to sexuality's emergences and futurity:

> What happens if we abandon the historical language of search and rescue and focus instead on sexuality as a site of radical abundance – even futurity? What would it mean to let go of our attachments to loss, to unmoor ourselves, as it were from the stakes of reliable ghosts? (2015: 99)

Framing the history of sexuality in South Asia, especially the histories of despised and marginalized lifeworlds, with "the language of loss as the structuring mode of its narration" would be, in Arondekar's view, at the cost of attending to sexuality's "radical abundance" (2015: 116).

By "radical abundance," Arondekar underscores the fact that the story of sexuality's repression, elisions, and erasures in the past is only part of the story; sexuality's forms of life have also taken other shapes, abounded and proliferated into various modes of living, enduring, and possibly thriving. Arondekar argues that historiography of sexuality should also pay attention to these "abundances" in order to write a fuller history of sexuality. It is important to note that by "abundance," Arondekar does not only mean the proliferation of sexuality's life forms, or their thriving (they may very well have not), but primarily an archival abundance that can come to our view if only we would cast a wider look at archives that are "incommensurable and quotidian, imaginative and ordinary" (2015: 110).

Another crucial argument that Arondekar offers against the seduction of the archive is the danger of trapping ourselves as scholars in what is essentially a colonial, positivist modality of doing history. Such an approach ends up valorizing certain kinds of textual sources as more definitive and authoritative over other kinds of archives, thus reenacting colonial epistemological power relations and hierarchies. Arondekar draws on important critiques by Indrani Chatterjee, Gayatri Spivak, and others to argue that such overvaluing of colonial textual archives can cost us both methodologically and epistemologically: it can keep us from thoroughly decolonizing our practice of historiography, and it can also keep us looking for knowledge of the past along disciplinary boundaries drawn by colonial epistemologies (2005: 13-18).

Let me now return to the question with which I began this section: my motives for scrutinizing some of the available archives for evidences of thirunangai presence in Angalamman worship. My interest in looking into the Angalamman archive for what it could tell me about thirunangai involvement has not been motivated by the kind of politics of recovery that is shot through with the language of loss and melancholy, to which Arondekar draws our attention. For one, in the kind of scholarship Arondekar critiques for their "archive fever" (invoking Derrida; 2005:10), the present of the sexuality in South Asia figures as a place of struggle, disenfranchisement, and suppression, in redressing which its life-forms and their disruptions in the past are brought to the fore to make a claim on the politics of the present. Queering the past becomes a way to claim a place in history, legitimizing a place of belonging for forms of gender and sexuality that need validation and political legitimacy today. Arondekar does not minimize the importance of today's liberatory politics of sexuality. Her contention is that our idea of what constitutes an archive and what an archive can do need to be reconsidered.

The field of Angalamman worship today that I was able to observe and participate in, however, is a not a site of loss or melancholy for thirunangais. It is a world in which they currently hold a visible and intense place. Others around them, devotees of the goddess who belong to various castes, have not contested thirunangais' powerful claim to belonging in this world of piety. If anything, people of various castes seek out thirunangai-maruladis to redress their existential problems: physical and mental health, marriage and children, counter-sorcery and exorcism, effects of evil eye or envy, etc. But what if we take the archive's reticence about thirunangais in the Angalamman world seriously and put it in conversation with today's reality of undeniable thirunangai presence in that world? What productive framings can emerge if we look at the archive not as a silent source of elisions and interstitial revelations, but instead set it against the current reality of authoritative thirunangai presence in the shared and pluralistic field of Angalamman worship?

1.4 Plenitudes of the Present

In this section, I shift attention to the ways in which my thirunangai interlocutors respond to the archival silences I have laid out above. In the limited archive I presented, we find copious references to ritually circumscribed crossdressing, but transfeminine persons per se are nowhere to be found, even though categories of gender variance (albeit different from the ones in vogue today) did exist in the past. To reiterate, my goal in delving into the alleged archival absence and in discussing it with my interlocutors is not to challenge thirunangais' claim to importance in Angalamman worship. Nor is it to call out some ideological or moral failing on the part of earlier scholars in allegedly erasing transfeminine presence from sites of goddess worship. As I hope to show here, the ostensible mismatch between the archive's forms of recognition and what I find to be thirunangais' incredibly visible presence in Angalamman worship today makes for a great conversation about the past and the present. It gives us a sense of how thirunangais narrate the shifts in their lifeworlds in the recent past.

1.4.1 Hermeneutics of Confidence and Good Faith

As I perused the material in the above archive, I brought it up for discussion with some of my most articulate thirunangai interlocutors in the field: Vimala Aaya, Lakshmi Nani, and my

friend and constant companion in this research, Nisha. Vimala Aaya is among the oldest thirunangai elders in Chennai today. She happened to be Lakshmi Nani's guru and since Lakshmi Nani and I became close fairly early on in my research, we all had lots of opportunities to hang out and travel together. As a young "pottai" in the late 1950s, Vimala Aaya first met other thirunangais (then called 'pottai,' the term still vogue in the community; see Chapter 3 and 4) in the goddess temples of north Chennai. She frequently offered me perspectives drawn from the benefit of having witnessed changes in the thirunangai lifeworld over several decades. When I brought to her attention the absence of any unequivocal mention of thirunangais in the Angalamman archive of the past, she asked me to translate and describe to her some of the contents of this material. She then proceeded to offer her interpretation and analysis:

> *You say that in the book they talk about people dressing up for Mayana Kollai, don't you?[32]* *Isn't that what it says in the book? How would they know if that was actually a pottai or not? It could have been a pottai. Pottais did not look like this then, no? The name 'thirunangai' did not exist at all then. Pottais did not look like **we** do now. Even when I was younger, pottais did not wear sari and all that. **They** all dressed like this (pointing to her own attire). They wore veshti or lungi (wraparound), like I am wearing now. Some pottais wore frilled petticoats under the lungi. They liked to show the frills at the bottom, around their ankles. It looked feminine. On top, they wore shirt or jibba. Over that, over the chest, **we** draped a towel like this, as if we were covering our dhaaman (breasts) like women do. Hormones and all that were not available. Very few people underwent nirvanam (castration procedure). Very few people. Now so many people undergo the surgery. Not in those days. Pottais had short hair. They shaved. Before my nirvanam, that's what I did. I shaved… So these could have been pottais (pointing to my laptop screen where I had Thurston's book open). These people who wrote these books could have thought they were men.*

Here, Vimala Aaya offers us a range of highly nuanced stances to take vis-à-vis the question of why the Angalamman archive does not appear to say much about transfeminine persons of an earlier time. First, she draws attention to the fact that transfeminine corporeality and bodily self-presentation have shifted and transformed over the years to what it is now: a predominant preference to approximate to conventionally womanly appearance and attire. Aaya's argument is

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[32] Here, Vimala Aaya was referring to colonial ethnologist Edgar Thurston's notes on the subject.

that in earlier times, thirunangais largely presented themselves in ways that may not have signaled to observers that they needed to be marked with the grammatical feminine gender in these descriptions. As one of the oldest people in the community today, Aaya draws on her decades of experience and observation to argue that the way thirunangai corporeality registers in the ocular field today – conventionally feminine attire, hormone intake, bodily transformations, etc. – has a short history. So if the ethnographers did not mark thirunangai presence in language in their work, it is not automatically a sign of thirunangai absence but a question of shifting registers of corporeality and rubrics of recognition.

Secondly, it is striking to see how Aaya tacks back and forth in her descriptions of the past and the present, paralleling that movement with an oscillation between "they" and "we," thus weaving a web of relationality between different historical times and people. By drawing attention to her own androgynous self-presentation, which has retained a lot of the features of an earlier dominant mode of being a transfeminine person, Aaya performs an incredible act of presenting herself as evidence, as someone who has archived aspects of the thirunangai past in her own body and mode of being in the world. To recall Arondekar's idea of "radical abundance," Vimala Aaya subtly offers to us an alternative archive -- not only the benefit of her memory and observations of the past, but her own way of being a thirunangai, which has carried with it into the present some significant aspect of the thirunangai past. Later on in the conversation, she even pointed to Lakshmi Nani, who wears conventionally male attire and is frequently identified as male by both strangers and familiar others. Aaya said, "Take Lakshmi, for instance. You call her Nani, but a lot of people call her samiyaar, avaru, ivaru, don't they?"

The third aspect of Vimala Aaya's response is the quality of its orientation towards the archive I was presenting her with. My immediate response to the absence of any clear references to thirunangais (in earlier iterations) in the Angalamman archive was to see them as observer's failure, perhaps ideologically motivated, to recognize gender non-conforming persons in significant roles. The only other possible interpretation according to me was to read the Thirunangai-Angalamman relationship as a relatively new phenomenon. But Vimala Aaya offers a perspective that weakens my hold on either of the above two interpretations. In her view, my inability to unequivocally locate transfeminine persons in the Angalamman archive need not lead to the conclusion that the ethnographers' gender normative ideologies occluded their view, or that thirunangais did not have a historically significant place in Angalamman worship. She pluralizes

the interpretive field by offering the perspective that thirunangai corporeality and cultural rubrics of self-presentation and gender recognition have transformed considerably over time. And towards this, she presents herself as evidence, archive, and a vocal and vibrant interlocutor.

She thus asks us to consider the possibility that thirunangais were very much present in Angalamman worship of the past, but under a different sign, as it were. Read differently, less unambiguously. Importantly, she draws attention to the fact that all of my archival examples talk about devotees and priests dressing up for the rituals to impersonate deities. Vimala Aaya asks us to consider the possibility that such moments of ritual crossdressing were sites where personhood and performance got blurred. *How would they know if it was actually a pottai or not?* – she asks, suggesting that impersonation of deities could have been a site of performative enactment where such distinctions became difficult to sustain. Even today, as I observed during the Mayana Kollai ("pillage") ritual in north Chennai, hundreds of devotees walk through the various streets leading up to the Royapuram and Choolai Angalamman temples, dressed as the hungry and fiery form of Angalamman. In that visually stunning and energetically intense field of bodies impersonating the deity, everyone swaying and dancing to the sounds of *pambai* and *udukkai* drums, it becomes incredibly difficult to tell thirunangais from others.

1.4.2 Conjunctures New and Old – Activism, Popular Media, and Thirunangai Kinship

When I asked her whether it was possible that the numbers of thirunangais taking to Angalamman worship had increased in the past several decades, Vimala Aaya said:

> *That's what I told you, didn't I? Thirty, forty years ago, there weren't these many saami pottais. There were some saami pottais. I knew them. I met them first in Washermanpet and Royapuram. They would gather in the temples in the evening. We all also went to (Mel)Malayanur and met other pottais there. They came from other places. But not so many as there are today. The numbers have definitely increased in the last thirty years or so. Everything has changed…. Why? Because pottais became famous. They all started organizations. They came on TV. Government started giving benefits. So pottais came out more courageously. Many of them came to Chennai.*

During our visits to the Melmalayanur Angalamman temple and the Koovagam festival, Aaya remarked several times about how much things had changed, how there were so many more thirunangais to be seen in these places. It is important to note that Vimala Aaya attributes the

increase in the numbers of thirunangais in Angalamman worship not directly to changes in the field of popular religion or devotion, but to the transformations that have occurred in the ostensibly secular realm of thirunangai public life. By her reference to thirunangais starting their organizations, Aaya explained later, she meant thirunangai leaders like Noori, Asha Bharathi, and Priyababu, who established their own organizations in the late 1990s and early 2000s to work for transgender welfare. These community-run organizations grew out of the infrastructures and resources made available by HIV/AIDS targeted interventions that identified transgender women as a "high-risk" and "vulnerable" population. While some of these transgender community organizations did not directly work on sexual health, they relied quite heavily on public health mobilizations for their energy, membership, and resources.

Aaya's remark on thirunangais becoming "famous" (she used the English word) refers primarily to Rose, a thirunangai celebrity who hosted her own talk show on Vijay TV in the mid-2000s[33], and Kalki Subramaniam, a thirunangai artist, poet, and activist, who started a matrimonial website for thirunangais and went on to pursue a successful career as an artist. Aaya's pithy statement, "Government started giving benefits," packs into itself a long and impressive history of thirunangai activism with the State Government of Tamil Nadu, a key moment of success in which was the establishment of the Transgender Welfare Board (then called the Aravani Welfare Board) in 2008. Responding to thirunangais' advocacy for rights and protections, the state government instituted a number of projects: issuing transgender identity cards, alternate livelihood training, counseling for thirunangais considering Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS), free SRS at select state-run hospitals, etc.

It is to these two-decade long changes in the Tamil public sphere that Aaya attributes the increase in the number of thirunangais in Angalamman worship. That is, for her, there is no separation between the widening of spaces for thirunangai life and expression in the secular public sphere of rights, health, and social advancement on the one hand and the proliferation and intensification of thirunangai presence in the domain of goddess worship on the other. Her observation aligns with what we now know from scholarship on secularization of public life, where we have come to see it not as a process that makes religion an irrelevant or less relevant sphere of

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[33] For a reading of such mediatized articulation of thirunangai identity and the way its incorporates elite liberal, cosmopolitan, and nationalist logics into a single narrative, see Raghavan (2017).

life but invests it with different kinds of relevance, attraction, and normative value (Asad 2003, Mahmood 2005, Taylor 2009).

Lakshmi Nani, who was present during my conversation with Vimala Aaya, helped me understand better the connection between thirunangai visibility in the context of public health and human rights projects and the heightened thirunangai participation in Angalamman worship:

> *When you join the pottais, if your guru is an Angalamman saamiyadi, or some other thirunangai close to you is, you might start getting involved in saami kaariyam (religious activity). That is how it goes… Now, when new pottais come to Chennai or go to some other town, meet other pottais, and become someone's daughter or chela, there would be someone in that crowd (koottam) who is a saamiyaadi. Then you start helping them out with rituals (saangiyam), mayanakkollai, and so on.*

Nani's analysis of the situation is that the activism and visibility that found impetus in the HIV/AIDS and human rights infrastructures have given younger thirunangais new contexts for social legitimacy and new forms of collectivity. However, while public health and transgender rights organizations served as the primary nodes of this new mode of coming to inhabit social and political space, thirunangais and kothis (effeminate males) who made use of those spaces still turned to ritually formalized kinship networks as a key structure of belonging that would anchor them in certain stable sets of relationships, obligations, and safety nets. All of my thirunangai activist friends who came of age, so to speak, in the era of HIV/AIDS, rights activism, and NGO-ization and have played key roles in these domains, have also maintained reet-based (ritually formalized) relationships in various thirunangai parivars (families/kin-groups). Nani's argument is that thirunangais who thus joined various existing parivars were bound to encounter Angalamman worship one way or another: they might have the goddess 'come over' them or they might take to helping with the various tasks involved in Angalamman worship (Nisha, as we will see in Chapter 2, found her entry into Angalamman worship in this manner).

Thus, in the view of these two thirunangai elders, the proliferation of thirunangai presence around Angalamman and the growth of thirunangai organizing for citizenship rights and social legitimacy are parallel phenomena. They are connected by a strong cultural feature of thirunangai lifeworld: the importance of forming tightly-knit bonds with other thirunangais through membership in thirunangai parivars. As Nisha put it once, "You cannot be alone. You need a structure to support, protect, and guide you. We leave our homes, our parents, our siblings.

Community is all we have. When I meet someone, I get to say, 'I am so-and-so's chela.' That gives me an identity. That helps people understand what relationships I am part of."

1.4.3 Traces of the Past - Gender-and-Sexuality's Messy Histories

Vimala Aaya is in her late seventies. As the elder-most thirunangai in Chennai today, she commands much respect from all the thirunangai kin groups in and around the city. Everyone affectionately calls her, "Aaya." Grandmother. But in thirunangai kin terms, Vimala Aaya used to be my friend Nisha's great-great-grandmother. "Used to be," because since Nisha has joined a different parivar over the past five years or so, they are not strictly related any longer, but they continue to relate and function as if they are. And Lakshmi Nani is Nisha's great-grandmother. So Vimala Aaya and Lakshmi Nani are guru and chela respectively. They use the terms guru/chela and mother/daughter interchangeably to refer to each other, showing how the terminology of spiritual apprenticeship and a fictive matrilineal order are entangled in how thirunangai kinship operates.

In some ways, the guru/chela model hearkens to a past when monastic lineage-based lifeworlds thrived in various parts of South Asia, forging relationships of spiritual education and apprenticeship, and enjoying locally negotiated privileges (such as land titles) and patronage (from the local elite and politically powerful). As Indrani Chatterjee's work shows us, such models cut across Sufi Islamic, Shaiva, Vaishnava, Shakta, Buddhist, Jain, and other religious traditions, constituting relationships and households (gharanas and parivars) that were outside the realm of heterosexual conjugality and family but nevertheless enjoying prestige and patronage in the precolonial past.[34] These arrangements, which Chatterjee terms "monastic governmentality," combined forms of asceticism and worldliness, spiritual practice and erotic poetics, and spiritual education as well as relationships of care. And they did so in ways that confounded colonial era logics that idealized heterosexual, monogamous conjugality as the only legally valid form not only of affective ties but also property, inheritance, and moral governance. The available colonial

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[34] See Chatterjee (2015) for an account of political communities in eastern India, anchored in monastic and lay households, which were significantly reordered and rendered ineffectual by colonial-era legislations. These changes were not only governed by colonial moral ideologies but also, even primarily, by colonial desires to drain these "monastic estates" of their control over land and other resources.

archive shows us that the logics of colonial capital and governance rendered many such ties illegitimate and stripped them of their privileges, entitlements, and inheritance claims.[35]

Even though the guru/chela relationship seems to gesture towards such a monastic past, charting such a past to these relationships is no straightforward exercise. For, as Chatterjee says:

> … ethnographers in the 1900s found traces of life in some of those lineages swept off coveted lands from long ago; some have copied the leftover monastic governmental pattern of the past, complete with gurus and ritual initiations. But they subsist on the margins of urban Muslim and Hindu lineages as third-gender beings. They are the *hijras* and *kothis*. They live in the ethnographic present. But nobody can quite explain the century-long process of their arrival at that marginal present. (Chatterjee 2012: 952)

The only way Vimala Aaya accounts for the guru/chela nomenclature among thirunangais is by drawing attention to the fact that in the 1960s, when she first found others like her in north Madras, and even well into the late 1980s, things were different:

> *In those days, pottais only called each other amma-ponnu. We didn't have guru-chela and all that. All that came later. Only after pottais started going to Bombay and Delhi. There, it was all guru-chela. I too went to Bombay, Poona, Delhi… They also say maa, beti… but guru-chela is more important. When pottais from here went to Bombay, Poona, Delhi and all those places, they became chelas in the hijra households there. And they brought those same ways here. When I was young, it was only amma-ponnu (mother-daughter).*

Many other thirunangai elders, too, recollect that when they were younger, they only used the mother-daughter relationship terminology in Chennai. "When I found an elder I liked, I asked her to make me her daughter. So she adopted me as her daughter. I became her daughter. That was how it worked," said Meena Amma. So, perhaps, the "leftover monastic governmental pattern of the past" that Chatterjee refers to circulates in traces that are adaptable and copiable, available for thirunangais to take up during their migrations out of Tamil Nadu particularly to Bombay, Poona, and Delhi, as several of the thirunangai elders say. Or, it is possible that thirunangais are linked to more regionally proximate (Tamil-Telugu) monastic forms that have made the complex model of kinship and spiritual apprenticeship centered on a household economy readily meaningful and adaptable to them in the present. As Chatterjee suggests, one cannot make strong historical claims yet about this "ethnographic present." But the present of what we now extract as "gender and

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[35] See Preston (1987) for an account of how the British invalidated hijras' rightful revenue claims that the Maratha state had granted them prior to the 1850s.

sexuality" cannot be understood, for the South Asian region, without seeing it as part of forms of life that combined religion, erotics, poetics, and politics into models of governance – of the self, of the household, and of a social order.

One of Chatterjee's points here is that exigencies of gender and sexuality scholarship and activism in South Asia in the present – identity, rights, juridicality – cannot afford to ignore the afterlife of colonial rubrics of personhood and legitimate relationships in postcolonial, neoliberal matrices of identity and rights. This problematic is not reducible to some simple formulation of difference, such as, say, arguing that while in the past conceptions of gender variant personhoods were grounded in religious ontologies, contemporary identity formations have secularized queer and trans personhood. Chatterjee's argument is that the life-forms we now extricate as gender-and-sexuality were once embedded in specific religio-political economies and ecologies, and those pasts have left their traces on today's lifeworlds in ways that resist narrow identitarian formulations.

We now know that hijras, khojas, and other gender-variant communities in South Asia became targets of colonial notions of legitimate gender identities and roles, norms of public performance and decency, boundaries of proper religion and sexuality, ideas about morality and corruption, and models of population surveillance (Preston 1987, Reddy 2005, Hinchy 2017, Nataraj 2017). They came to be classified under the Criminal Tribes Act, the colonial law that identified specific communities as threats to the social order on account of their allegedly inherent tendency for criminality. "Eunuchs," as they were characterized in colonial discourse, was a bizarrely capacious category that delegitimized in one stroke transgender and gender-variant communities; intersex persons; people perceived to be effeminate, effete, or impotent; those who underwent castration on account of spiritual or some other commitment; and people who took to dancing and singing in public. In other words, the category "Eunuch" held together several of the colonial order's anxieties vis-à-vis social control. One of them, as Chatterjee reminds us, is colonial law's discomfort with the fact that many of the communities of "third-gender" persons in South Asia were contiguous with, if not themselves were, monastic orders that had had their recognized place in local networks of political patronage, revenue, and prestige. The Transgender

Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2019 continues this suspicion of any form of community that is not based on biological family units or other models of family that are legally recognized.[36]

1.5 Conclusion – Knotted Temporalities of Thirunangai Social Life

Again, I cannot draw simple lines of historicity and causality between formations of the past and the ethnographic present I was privileged to document. However, in keeping with my approach in this chapter, I can place in front of you ethnographic moments that appear to contain knotted temporalities, a tangle of various pasts and presents. Let me offer you an example.

My thirunangai friends Karuna, Keerthi, and Shoba went every evening for *kadai kettal* – literally, "to ask in the shops." They would go to various shops, stores, local bars, and other kinds of commercial enterprises and ask for money. How much they get and how they are treated depends on the kinds of people they encounter. I take up the ethical aspects of such encounters for discussion in Chapter 6. Here, I would like to focus on a different aspect. The thirunangai practice of *kadai-kettal* gets reduced to "begging" within reformist discourses. In his ethnographic work among hijras in Orissa, Vaibhav Saria has drawn attention to the elision of hijras' alms-seeking (*challa*) practices and their rightful claim to presence in public places and certain forms of monetary transactions (*haq*) as "begging" in colonial, postcolonial nationalist, as well as neoliberal LGBTQ framings (Saria 2019). Saria argues that failing to grasp the variegated nature of such practices and transactions, and seeking to abolish them under the rubric of respectability, can have real effects on the lives and livelihoods of hijras who do engage in them. For instance, the policing of *challa* (alms-seeking) has driven many of Saria's hijra interlocutors away from urban locations, seeking less expensive living arrangements in rural areas. Saria critiques the draft of the Transgender Persons' (Protection of Rights) Bill 2016 for the way it seeks to curtail many

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[36] See "A Critique of Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2019" – by Rachana Mudraboyina, Sameera Jahagirdar, and Philip C. Philip.
"Several definitions that the Transgender Persons Bill prescribes are rather redundant with regard to the issues of the community. In particular the definition of "family". Where the present act borrows its definition blindly from earlier laws in place, without any application of mind with regard to the position or the nuances associated with the transgender community. Such a banal definition of 'family' is after multiple clarifications made by members of the community with regard to the need to expand the meaning of 'family'. With most transpersons not living with their biological family because of the discrimination and violence they face from their biological family and their immediate community. Therefore, a need to include chosen family within the ambit and definition of 'family'. Since it is through the chosen family that most transpersons get support and are able to find their kith and kin." URL: https://feminisminindia.com/2019/08/05/critique-transgender-persons-protection-of-rights-bill-2019/, Accessed on 15 February 2019.

of the traditional practices and vocations of gender variant communities such as the hijras, including "begging." Economic historian Dharma Kumar (1987) has included beggars in his discussion of castes and groups engaged in the service sector in the Madras Presidency in the nineteenth century. Challenging colonial conception of mendicancy as "unproductive" work, Kumar highlights the fact that alms-seeking and alms-giving are part of a longer history of ideas about earning merit: "…one could well argue that beggars should not be classed as unproductive, since they provide service to donors by helping them 'to make merit'" (1987: 387).

My claim is not that my thirunangai friends approach kadai-kettal distinctly as alms-seeking and that it is mistakenly construed as begging and unproductive labor by reformist logics. Instead, what I wish to suggest is that such separation of categories is hard to maintain, and that is one reason why my thirunangai friends have to constantly navigate the slipperiness between categories of social interactions. For instance, one day, Karuna took me to a local bar, where she and my other thirunangai friends regularly spent some time in the evenings, asking and collecting money from the customers. While Karuna did not want me tagging along with them in the evenings, for fear that my presence would disrupt their work and affect their earnings adversely (which was very likely), she decided to take me along with her one afternoon when she went to exchange a bag of small coins for paper currency notes at a local bar. She did not expect to do any "asking" on that trip, so she did not bother to dress up as she would in the evenings. Instead, she draped a shawl over her nightie, pulled up her disheveled hair into a knot, and set off on her scooter, with me behind her. At the bar, as we waited for the cashier to count the coins and bring us currency notes in exchange, a slightly tipsy man (a customer) approached Karuna with a 20 rupee note in his hand. He gave her the money and bowed his head, clearly wanting her to bless him by placing her hand on his head. Once she did that, he walked away. Karuna remarked to me, "Usually, it is hard to make men part with their money here. But sometimes it happens this way, too. I didn't even wash my face! I am all sweaty and disgusting right now!"

I suggest we see such moments as showing the disjuncture between genres of action like kadai-kettal ("asking in the shops"), alms-seeking, and begging. While Karuna and others take great care in the evenings to dress up and look attractive to the men from whom they hope to get a bit of money in exchange for their sheer entertaining presence, here, in that afternoon at the bar, she encountered a man who sought her out for her blessings. It was a moment of transaction of alms-giving and blessing between a stranger and a thirunangai in a state-subsidized bar – the same

bar where, in the evenings, she approaches her work not really as alms-seeking but as a kind of entertainment. "You smile at the men, tease them, joke with them. You have to do all that quickly and keep moving. Some of them will ask you to sit down with them and have a drink. You can't do that. You just make them happy for a few minutes with some banter, get some money and keep moving," Karuna said about the evenings of kadai-kettal. But here she was, not expecting to be perceived as a spiritual entity with the power to bless, especially not at the bar in the afternoon, looking so casual and unkempt. However, that socio-spiritual aspect of her identity was called forth, made relevant, and performatively enacted. *Sila nerathula ippadiyum nadakkum.* "Sometimes, it happens this way, too."

I offered the ethnographic discussion above to suggest some of the ways in which aspects of both pastness and presentness could inhere in an unfolding moment. The differences between beggary, alms-seeking, "unproductive labor," and kadai-kettal are differences of ideologies that cut across premodern ideas about transactions of merit, colonial notions of productivity and public decency, postcolonial projects of reform and rehabilitation, and the enmeshment of neoliberal LGBTQ politics in notions of respectability. As it happened with Karuna, the spiritual aspect of their personhood need not be something that thirunangais consciously foreground. It can be summoned forth from the outside by others who bring with them the force of their own beliefs about the potency of thirunangai blessings. Here, the present itself is made up of different temporalities: the routine of kadai-kettal as its own genre of action, the surprise and singularity of someone approaching Karuna for her blessings in a bar, and the moment of shift between being a thirunangai getting chores done on a hot day and becoming a thirunangai who needs to stop to place her hand on a man's head and bless him, with no words exchanged.

What we see here is an entanglement of histories of place, people, migrations, and deity. The thirunangai attachment to goddess Angalamman is not separable either from the histories of place-making in the distance past, the more recent past, or the place-making practices in the present. While it appears distinct from thirunangai kinship arrangements that have hybridized local forms of relationality with those drawn from hijra lifeworlds elsewhere, the parivar structure's affordances of intimacy, cohabitation, and cultivation of shared practices has, in fact, helped in securing and furthering the Thirunangai-Angalamman connection in the past several decades. Thirunangai presence around Angalamman has also proliferated and intensified alongside a range of larger shifts: HIV/AIDS public health interventions, thirunangai activism for rights and

protections, consolidation of thirunangai community into a visible and vocal constituency, and increased migration of thirunangais to Chennai from other parts of Tamil Nadu. Thirunangais find no contradiction in accepting the transformation and intensification of Angalamman's relevance to their world while also narrating that attachment as an eternal and essential one, as we will see in the chapters to follow.

Chapter 2

Things That Matter

How to be with the goddess

2.1 Introduction

Available scholarly literature on transfeminine lifeworlds focuses primarily on identity, community, and governmentality. Even in literature that provides a complex account of transfeminine lives as not merely to do with gender-sexuality identity, but as one grounded in complex matrices of religion, kinship, and morality, identity is still the major optic (Nanda 1999, Reddy 2005). Furthermore, the core relationships that matter in transfeminine lives are taken to be those premised on shared identity, forged on the basis of kinship (Nanda 1999, Reddy 2005) and community organization facilitated by public health and human rights infrastructures. And both identity and community are discussed in terms of various forms of governmentality -- ancient monastic orders, medieval court systems, colonial law, public-health/HIV frameworks, and nation-state-centered rights and legality models. Scholarship on hijras and other transfeminine identities also analytically isolate them from the wider social world around them, including natal family. Insofar as we see (in the literature) hijras' engagement with the world around, it is as distinct sexual subjects negotiating across boundaries of what we may call sociosexual difference. For example, in Kira Hall's (2013) work on hijras doing *badhai* or blessings, we see them as a distinct group of gendered and sexualized beings interacting with the outside world in ways that highlight and dramatize that gendered-sexual otherness. In Gayatri Reddy's work (2005), we see that her hijra interlocutors valorize the severing of ties with natal family as a mark of the social stakes one has taken on as a hijra. In the vast and vital body of scholarly work focused on transgender communities' engagement with global human rights, public health, and state logics, we see shifting negotiations of identity.[37] But those negotiations are still premised on the various foreclosures and newer possibilities enacted in the demarcation of who counts as transgender, hijra, kothi, or thirunangai and what is the content of these identity formations. I question neither the political

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[37] Nataraj (2019) offers a sophisticated account of how various kinds of trans "imaginaries" come to constitute Tamil transfeminine identities as a plural terrain of negotiations between progressive politics, assertion of Tamil identity and language, ideas of in/authenticity and exposure, wordplay and humor, etc. This work offers an insightful analysis of how sex or gender do not figure as places of origin or arrival or sources of truth accounts, but as things that come to matter in particular ways through language, embodied enactment, and practices of representation and contestation.

importance nor the empirical validity of this scholarship. My own earlier work has focused on thirunangai (then called *Aravani*) activism for rights premised on recognition of identity (Govindan & Vasudevan 2011). My move here is a modest one. What I try to show in this chapter is that if we take the Thirunangai-Angalamman attachment seriously for a moment, we can see that there are other things that matter to thirunangais, too -- relationships beyond the ones premised on identity; forms of sociality that overflow the bounds of identity-based community; and conceptions of morality that derive not only from identity but also from other commitments.

To that end, I provisionally shift focus away from identity, community, and juridicality. My objective is not to underestimate the importance of thirunangai identity and rights-based activism, but to contribute to a fuller understanding of transfeminine lives by paying attention to what else matters to them. Angalamman certainly matters to my thirunangai interlocutors. But, as I show in this chapter, Angalamman is not merely a deity to be worshipped. In mattering to thirunangais, Angalamman operates by making certain other things matter to them: certain relationships over others, particular ideas of how to be a moral person, certain convictions about what are desirable ways to live, etc. – the domain of *ethical relationality*. Throughout this dissertation, I use *ethical* in this capacious sense of the domain of *what matters* and *how* people go about living out that recognition of what matters. What is important here is that, contrary to the sense we get in extant literature on transfeminine lifeworlds in India, it is not only the articulation of transgender identity and the consolidation of transgender community that matter to thirunangais, especially those who evince an attachment to the goddess. They have other ways of being in the world, too. Other things matter. *Mattering*, here, is not simply a question of something being significant or meaningful. That which matters comes to be the focus of material relationships – attending to what matters involves labor, action, care, expense of resources, and webs of reciprocity.

In this regard, the Tamil word *porul's* polysemy is quite apposite. It refers both to materiality as well as meaning/significance. *Porul* means "object," and it also means "meaning." And meaningfulness is not only a matter of symbolic significance. It also involves embodied engagement and an active relationship with something. For example, when talking about her parents with whom she is estranged, my friend Nisha said, "avanga ennai porutpadutthala, naanum avangala porutpadutthala." It can be translated as *I don't matter to them, and they don't matter to me.* But a translation more sensitive to the ethical relationality (or its absence) signaled by the

remark is: *They did not make me matter, and I did not make them matter either.* Here, *to matter* and *to make matter* involve attention to relationships; they require the work of care and maintenance. Speaking about the people in the neighborhood who care for her, Lakshmi Nani said, "enna oru poruttaa madhichi varaanga," *They come to me, considering me as someone who matters.* Here the word "poruttu," related to the word "porul," refers to that which matters. And something that matters is not just meaningful but it becomes the object of our attention and care. Therefore, *poruttaaga madhithal* is "to esteem a thing worth caring for."[38] What matters is not merely of symbolic value. It elicits embodied attention. Jack Sidnell, Mauri Meudec, and Michael Lambek (2019) see the concern with *what matters* as central to ethical life:

> …ethical considerations bear on much, if not all, I do insofar as I ask how my action reveals the kind of person I am or contributes to the kind of person I will become, how my action fits with my vision of good life, how my action bears on my duties and obligations to others, how my action may issue in consequences not just for myself and those around me but for an indefinite range of others. Ethics concerns *what matters.* (p.2, emphasis authors')

In the sections that follow, I hope to offer an account of some of the things that matter in this sense to my thirunangai interlocutors. These involve relationships with others as well as themselves, which involve embodied labor and care and which I could observe only when I cast my gaze around the around the world of relationships that expanded around the Thirunangai-Angalamman attachment.

2.2 Being with Angalamman – Scenes of Attachment

Thirunangai devotion to Angalamman can find expression in several ways. One powerful and sensorially intense form it takes is that of the *maruladi*, the one who dances (*aadi*) the deity in trance (*marul*). Thirunangai-maruladis are those thirunangais who are known to channel the goddess in states of trance and function as healers, oracles, counter-sorcerers, and exorcists by drawing on the goddess' powers. Many of my thirunangai interlocutors are also maruladis, but that is not the only mode of relating to the goddess. Ritual apprenticeship with a maruladi is an important role. Rituals are elaborate affairs. Depending on the nature of the ritual called for, there are specific preparations to undertake and protocols to follow. Rituals, or *saangiyam* as they are

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[38] J.P. Fabricius Tamil and English Dictionary. URL: https://agarathi.com/word/பொருட்டு. Accessed on April 24, 2020.

called by thirunangais, are conducted with the aim to realize diverse end goals: smoothe someone's path to marriage; remove whatever obstacles may be impeding a couple's path to conceiving a child; relieve someone of the effects of sorcery; release a person from the clutches of some demonic entity; free a house from hauntings by evil spirits; make an appeal to an Angalamman to cure a person of physical or mental ailments; bless a new endeavor someone is embarking on; make an offering promised in the past; complete an offering promised, but not fulfilled, by someone's ancestors; and more. A ritual apprentice or assistant learns – by watching, following, and by explicit instructions – what each of these rituals involve. In addition to these, there are also daily and periodic offerings to be made to the goddess. Thirunangais who function as ritual helpers to maruladis become well-versed in these protocols. A thirunangai can also serve the goddess by being neither a maruladi nor a ritual assistant, but simply by making herself available to help with the various tasks involved. For instance, cooking, making garlands, and decorating the deity as well as the ritual space are all important activities in Amman worship.

I offer ethnographic accounts of some of these diverse thirunangai ways of expressing devotion to Angalamman. Through these descriptive accounts, I show that valuing Angalamman's place in their lives orients my thirunangai interlocutors in particular ways towards the world around them. For Lakshmi Nani, her life in North Madras and her significant relationships go far beyond thirunangai identity and community. She is part of a web of relationships that is woven through shared devotional practices, histories of living as neighbors, similar caste backgrounds, and shared class status and occupations. In the case of Mala, Angalamman simultaneously affects her place within the natal family as well as the wider world around. While being a channel to the goddess offers acceptance for her transfeminine identity with the family, it has other entailments. Mala takes seriously the responsibilities that come with being a maruladi and subjects herself to ethical evaluation. Finally, for Nisha, who is a ritual expert and assistant, the force of her attachment to Angalamman is felt not through mediumship or maruladi status, but through embodied ritual labor and the sense of belonging it brings.

2.3 A Proliferation of Worldly Attachments – Lakshmi Nani's World

Lakshmi Nani is in her mid-sixties. We all call her 'Nani,' meaning grandmother in Hindi and also in hijra/thirunangai kinship. But in many ways, Nani challenges common expectations of how a thirunangai must look. She is almost never in conventionally feminine attire. Instead, she

wears ochre or otherwise brightly colored dhotis (wraparounds) that men wear. On top, she is nearly always bare-chested, just draping a towel or some other piece of cloth over the *tulasi*, sandal bead, and *rudraksha* rosaries that hang from her neck. If she is travelling somewhere, she puts on a crisply ironed shirt. Nani also has a receding hairline, but she finds her broad forehead to be excellent for marking with holy ash and vermilion, which are common sacred markings, especially for those who identify as worshippers of Shiva and/or Devi, the goddess. While she holds the status of a respected elder in the thirunangai community, she is not always and unequivocally perceived by others as a thirunangai. Her corporeal self-presentation complicates how others read her. For instance, the children in her neighborhood call Lakshmi Nani both *thatha* (grandfather) and *paatti* (grandmother). While elderly women in the area recognize her as a *saami-pottai* (a thirunanangai-maruladi), the men in the neighborhood call her *saamiyar* (a holy man). The women in the street where she lives often refer to her as *kizhavi,* old woman. And younger thirunangais and I call her *Nani*, grandmother in the thirunangai kinship sense.

Nani is also a maruladi. She enters states of trance and channels the goddess. When she is in trance, she has a distinct way of moving that I came to find entrancing. In one hand she holds lemons smeared with vermilion, and on the other hand she holds a bunch of margosa leaves or an earthen pot of fire. After swaying back and forth to the rhythm of the *pambai* and *udukkai* drums for a while, she takes one foot forward in a lunge. Then, as if she were locked in that position, she twists and turns her body in circular movements, her hands drawing arcs around herself in the air. One foot planted flat in front and the other stretched out behind and arched in such a way that the heel is raised up, she bears down heavily on the ground with each full-bodied thump, keeping rhythm with the drums.

Lakshmi Nani comes from a family of small landowning farmers from central Tamil Nadu. She moved to Chennai (then Madras) when she was fourteen or fifteen years old. Whenever I ask her about the past, she speaks in broad biographical strokes: "I came to Madras the year Annadurai died.[39] Or the year before, I think. Before that, I was in Mannargudi, near Thanjavur. I didn't want to continue my education. So I came here. My sister was married here. They helped set up a shop for me. I sold roasted peanuts, peas, and other pulses. Then I went away to Tirupati for some time. I worked in a shop there. Then I came back to Madras. That's when I met Gopal. She was a saami

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[39] C N Annadurai, a former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and an important leader in Dravidian politics, died in February 1969.

pottai. She had a stall in the market where I now sit. I started helping her with rituals. That's how Angalamma started coming to me. All the pottais I met in those days were saami-pottais. In the evenings we would sit in the Angalamma temple in Royapuram or Periyapalayathamman temple in Old Washermanpet. Other pottais would come there. We'd sit and chat. On festival days, we would go to Melmalayanur together. To the Angalamman temple. I worked in a candy factory for a year or so, not far from here, packing candied peanuts and other things. Then Gopal got me started at the vegetable market. I am still doing it. You know that. Since I moved to Madras, I have lived right here in this neighborhood."

Gopal, the first thirunangai Nani met in Chennai in the early 1970s, was a vegetable vendor and a maruladi in North Madras. Nani moved into a small house closer to where Gopal lived, but she did not start working in the vegetable market right away. Initially, she found employment in a confectionery, weighing and packing sweets made with jaggery (molten palm sugar). Peanut brittle, sesame balls coated in syrup, and the like. But she started accompanying Gopal to Amman temples and rituals. That was how Nani met other thirunangais. In the course of this work, one day, Angalamman "came over" her. The goddess had not been a clan deity for Nani's family back home. "Gopal moolama dhaan enakku Angalamma pazhakkam aachu," she said. *It was through Gopal that I got used to the goddess.* Or, it can be translated as, *It was through Gopal that I was habituated towards the goddess.* In other words, Nani encountered the goddess in North Madras when she met other thirunangais who were already attached to Angalamman and other Amman goddesses. It was as if Angalamman was simply part of the web of relationships in the middle of which Nani found herself when she settled down in North Madras. So along with human relationships, the place offered her an intimacy with the goddess. But it involved some kind of priming and preparing for it before the goddess would "come over" her. Nani did not do it all with a conscious intent to have the goddess "descend" on her. She simply started accompanying Gopal, her first thirunangai friend and lifeline in the city, to temples, rituals, festivals, and pilgrimages. And then one day Angalamma showed up.

Today, Lakshmi Nani's work as an Angalamman maruladi does not happen in an exclusively thirunangai worship space. In fact, some of Nani's primary attachments are not associated with the thirunangai community at all. On the contrary, she spends a great deal of time at an Angalamman temple that belongs to a family of vegetable vendors in Old Washermanpet where she lives. Over the past several decades, she has grown close to this heterosexual, extended

family cluster, with Angalamman serving as the connecting node of intimacy. In the early days when Nani found her attachment to Angalamman growing, she gravitated to others who also evinced a strong commitment to the goddess. And she settled on two key relationships. One was her thirunangai friend Gopal. The other was a cis-woman named Kannamma for whom Angalamman was a clan deity and whose entire family was devoted to maintaining a small public shrine to the goddess.

Over the years, Nani's connection to Kannamma's family has been strengthened by neighborly proximity, friendship, and shared labor towards rituals and festivals for the goddess. Their lives are also linked by the fact that both Nani and the members of this family are retail vegetable vendors in the local markets of North Chennai. Kannamma's family sell vegetables at the Korukkupet market. They pick up their stock every morning at the Koyambedu wholesale market, bring it to their appointed stalls at the Korukkupet market, divide up the vegetables among themselves, and sit down to do the selling. Nani, on the other hand, goes to a different wholesale market, the one at Flower Bazaar, and picks up bundles of curry, coriander, and mint leaves, and various kinds of spinach. Then she arranges them in her stall there, a place at the market she has sort of inherited from her friend Gopal who died some twenty-five years ago. Nani's day starts at 3 AM. She has a quick wash and walks to the market. There, before the trucks arrive with the produce, she has a glass of tea with the men and women who have their little stalls next to hers. Once the trucks arrive, it is all incredibly busy till about 12 PM when she is done and comes back home to cook lunch for herself and for some members of Kannamma's family.

The family comprises Kannamma and her two sisters, their spouses, children, their spouses, and grandchildren. Kannamma is a maruladi herself, and she often serves as a priestess at the family temple when she is not at the market selling vegetables. Nani's everyday life is entwined with that of this large family that is made up of several heterosexual conjugal units that are, at any given moment, in varying degrees of cordiality and conflict among one another. Nani too is often in the middle of some dramatic standoff with one or the other members of this family. "Don't bring up her name. I don't want to talk about her," she would say to me or Nisha if we mentioned one of the members of the family with whom Nani might have been laughing and joking just the day before. But no festivity in that family or at the temple, no pilgrimage, no ritual is conducted without Nani's consultation and participation. When I asked Nani to list ten people who were absolutely

important to her life, six of those whose names she listed were from this family of *duniyadhars* – a word thirunangais use to refer to heterosexuals, but which literally means "the worldly ones."

Nani is both loved and feared by her neighbors. She can be quick to take offense, and she is deliciously foul-mouthed. Sometimes, my younger thirunangai friends would do or say something just to rile her up, and she always rose to the bait and responded with a shower of expletives. One day during my fieldwork, she lost her mobile phone. Nisha, Karuna, and a few others decided to pool in some money and buy her a new one. But she got her phone back later the same night. And this was how it happened: she stood at her doorstep and said out loud, "I don't know who stole my phone. I am sure I left it right here at my doorstep and went in to attend to a pot on the stove. When I came back, it had vanished. Whoever stole it certainly has some miserable time coming their way. Let them mark my words!" Then she went back in and lay down on a mat. Just minutes later, a woman in the neighborhood came running, anxious and panting, to return her phone. She said her husband took the phone and expressed her woes of being married to a kleptomaniac. Remarking on this experience, Nani said to me, "The moment I spoke like I was laying a curse on the thief, the woman came running! She knows a saami-pottai's curse will definitely come to fruition."

Currently, in that neighborhood, Lakshmi Nani is the only thirunangai for a few blocks around. But far from making her lonely and vulnerable, this makes her a vital part of that neighborhood – a thirunangai-maruladi whose religious life is intertwined with those of her *duniyadhar* neighbors and friends, all devotees of Angalamman and related deities. People come to her nearly every day for matters big and small, to have a quick ritual performed to ward off evil eyes from a child, to arrange for a bigger ritual to be performed on a later date, simply to take her blessings, or just to chat. Some days, she spends time at the Angalamman temple down the street from her, attending to routine temple duties while the family priests/priestess take a break or go to sell vegetables in the market. Some evenings, she sits down outside her little tile-roofed house, stretching her legs into the narrow gully and chatting with the old women of the neighborhood. And sometimes they talk about other saami-pottais – other thirunangai-maruladis -- who used to live in the area, who are long gone now, dead. Nani is not particularly fond of talking about the past, especially of her thirunangai peers who are no more. But she shows me a photo taken some twenty five years ago, with twelve thirunangais, six seated in chairs and six others standing behind them. "All saami-pottais," she says. Then she points to each one and says, "She is dead. She is

dead. That is Vimala Aaya, you know her. That is Mayil, you know her. This other pottai is dead. Oh! Look at Ma la. How young and beautiful!"

Nani places a special value on relationships that have got something to do with Angalamman. One day, she summoned Nisha and me to help her with a task. Rani aunty, one of Kannamma's sisters, was in debt to a local moneylender and had defaulted on some payments. Nani wanted to see how much she could offer towards the amount Rani aunty owed. As Nisha and I sat on a mat spread on the floor of her house, Nani pulled out small wads of cash from various places – from behind some images of deities, from behind some pots and pans, from a plastic bag hidden in the rice tin… She threw these little rolls of cash (secured with elastic bands) on to the mat, and Nisha and I started sorting and counting them. It came to over twenty-five thousand rupees. Money she had earned selling vegetables, doing ritual work, and gifts from her chelas and other younger thirunangais. Then Nani asked us to get ready, so we could go meet the moneylender and give him that amount on behalf of Rani aunty. On the way, she said, "There might be children in the house. Let us not go emptyhanded." So we bought some fruits. On that day, Nani was gathering up a significant portion of her savings in order to settle the debt incurred not by one of her thirunangai kin but by Rani, one of her *duniyadhar* neighbors.

But in characterizing the relationship between Lakshmi Nani and Rani aunty in that manner, I risk falling into the same membership categories that I wish to call into question: thirunangais as separate from *duniyadhar*, the former signaling a renunciate and outsider status to the world of family and reproductive economy, including their own natal families. For instance, in Reddy's (2005) ethnography, renunciation emerges as a key locus of hijra moral personhood:

> While they are not mendicants in the strict sense of the term and do not completely separate themselves from the social world, they do in fact demarcate their social world from that in which they grew up, are dependent to some extent on 'people-of-this-world' (*duniyadari*) for their livelihood, and, what is more important, they are enjoined to renounce or abstain from sexual intercourse (the practice of *brahmacharya*), the quintessential lay and theological marker of *sannyas* – a marker that is embodied in the most radical manner for hijras through a complete excision of the genitalia. (Reddy 2005: 39)

Nani certainly uses the word *duniyadhar* ("people-of-this-world" or "worldly folk") to refer to heterosexual family units, but in doing so she does not necessarily conceive of herself, a thirunangai, as not-worldly, as ascetic and beyond the work of social reproduction. If there is an aspect of renunciation to thirunangai lives – exemplified by their stepping out of biological reproduction, conventional gender roles, and place in consanguineal kinship – it does not seem to

take an other-worldly orientation as almost-ascetics.[40] Instead, it embeds them differently in the social order, with a different set of attachments taking the place of one centered on natal family. Far from a mere severing of worldly ties, what thirunangais like Nani have is a proliferation of worldly commitments. Nani is a thirunangai elder, with her own chelas who have their own chelas who have their own…in different parts of the city. But her everyday life is anchored not in an exclusively, or even primarily, thirunangai world. Instead, her significant attachments, from instrumental to intimate ones, include non-thirunangais -- heterosexual families with whom she shares caste and class backgrounds, livelihood, and the neighborhood. Angalamman anchors Nani's place in that non-brahmin, middle-caste, working-class world in north Chennai.

2.4 Moral Integrity and Ritual Efficacy – Mala's Commitments

2.4.1 A Reluctant Participant

On the night before the Mayana Kollai ("the pillage at the cremation grounds") ritual in late February 2017, Nisha, Shobha, I, and several others were in Royapuram around midnight for the *mudi kattudhal* (literally, "the tying of the knot") ritual for Lakshmi Nani. It was the ceremony where maruladis and other devotees who have vowed to dress up as the goddess and to embody her in trance, would have a crown (*kireedam*) placed on their heads, while priests and drummers stood around them, singing hymns in praise of Amman and other deities, beating repetitive but compelling rhythms on their pambai and udukkai drums, helping the crowned devotee enter a state of trance. For this ceremony, people go to any of the numerous goddess shrines accessible to them. But a popular one is the Angalamman temple in Royapuram. As it was a very crowded night in that temple, Nani had decided to have her *mudi kattudhal* ceremony done at Renuka Devi Amman temple, a smaller shrine not far away from the Angalamman temple. After the ceremony, we walked towards the Angalamman temple in a small tableau, with Nani in the middle, swaying in trance to the rhythm of the drums. Earlier, on our way to Royapuram from Nani's place in Old Washermanpet, we saw hundreds of devotees dressed up as the fiery form of the goddess marching through the various streets and main roads of north Chennai towards the main temple for Angalamman in Royapuram.[41] As our tableau was about to enter the street leading up to the temple,

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[40] For a discussion of hijras, asceticism, worldliness, and renunciation, see Reddy (2005).
[41] This temple is recognized as one of the major shrines of the goddess, distinguished from small shrines people might construct for her in their streets and neighborhoods, of which there are thousands. In her work on

Nisha and Shoba pointed out Mala among a group of people. There she was, dressed as the goddess gone mad after taking on Sivan's sin of having beheaded Bramman, sporting a glistening papier-mache crown on her head, wearing a skirt made of bits and pieces of multicolored cloth and strings of plastic flowers and beads (representing the goddess wandering in tatters), carrying a firepot in one hand and a bunch of sticks on the other (to chase away demonic spirits), dancing and swirling in trance. "Mala's saami aattam (deity-dance) is always beautiful. A sight to behold," Shoba remarked before we moved away.

2.4.2 The goddess who makes, shapes, and molds

Initially, Mala was not very keen to meet me. For several weeks, she kept rescheduling our meeting, cancelling at the last minute but always asking me to ring her up later to fix up a time. But whenever I called to schedule another meeting, she was either busy or simply did not take my calls at all. Then finally one day, I did get to meet Mala. During a brief phone call, she asked me to meet her the same day at her apartment in the tsunami rehabilitation quarters in Tondaiyarpet. But when I showed up outside her door, I found it locked! Just as I was about to get frustrated, a woman peeped out from an adjacent apartment and said, "Have you come to meet Malamma? Please wait. She told us you would come." Then she asked her little kid to run along and find Mala and tell her she had a guest. State legislative assembly elections were coming up for the RK Nagar constituency, so political parties were engaged in feverish campaigning in the area. Mala had been hired by a regional party to do door-to-door canvassing for them in the area, since she was a familiar face and was well-regarded in the neighborhood. I waited at the neighbor's, joining the woman and her other kid, a daughter, in watching a celebrity game show on TV. There were two calendars on the wall to my right, one with the image of Jesus's beatific face gazing lovingly into my eyes, and the other with Mother Mary as Annai Velankanni, as she is enshrined the region's most important Mary shrine, some hundred miles down the coast.

Mala looked in, smiling, and asked me to go with her to her apartment next door. She looked exhausted, possibly from walking up and down several apartment blocks in the tsunami rehabilitation housing area, canvassing for the upcoming elections. She offered me some water

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Angalamman shrines in the Tamil region, Eveline Meyer (1986) discusses the Royapuram temple as an important one. For all those who were going to be ritual participants in the Mayana Kollai ritual in North Chennai, even though the rituals might center on their local and neighborhood shrines to the goddess, a visit to the main temple in Royapuram was considered important.

and asked me to sit on the bed. It was a tiny apartment, three hundred square feet or so, perhaps, and the bed occupied a good portion of it. She moved aside some clothes, and I hauled myself up and sat cross-legged on the bed. Mala sat facing me and said, not unkindly but tiredly, "Sollu." *Tell me.* I told her that my research had turned out to be about the relationship between thirunangais and goddess Angalamman and that I wanted to talk to her since she was a maruladi for the goddess.

At the mention of the goddess, Mala sat up straight and there was a glint of excitement in her eyes. She reached forward and touched both my knees gently with her hands, and said, "Ani, it is *her* doing (*avaloda seyal*). She is moving this. I have to tell you everything."[42] I was surprised at this shift in her. Seeing how kind she was to meet with me despite her exhaustion, I had made up my mind to have a quick chat and then leave. But she wanted to tell me about the goddess and herself. "Without her wish, you would not be able to do this research. If she did not like it, she would not have allowed you to proceed. She has made up her mind to shape you. She will." Mala would express again this idea of Amman shaping or molding people. *Uruvaakkudhal* was the Tamil word she used. It could mean *to shape, to mold*. But it could also mean *to create*. The former is the act of giving shape to something that exists in some inchoate form. The latter is the act of creation itself. The idea that these two senses come together in a single word's semantic field is perhaps suggestive of the fact that they are not two distinct or opposed ideas. I touch upon this here, because it has bearings for how thirunangais articulate Amman's role in shaping or creating their gender expression. As I will address in my analysis in Chapter 4, this articulation obliquely addresses the age-old nature/nurture question (in this case, whether one is born a thirunangai or one becomes a thirunangai), albeit in its own terms.

Mala seized upon my arrival at her doorstep asking about Angalamman as a sign from the goddess. As it would emerge later, Mala had been struggling with what she described as some distancing from the goddess. She attributed it to her own moral failing. And my arrival, invoking Angalamman, had "ethical affordances" for her.[43] It spoke to her current anguishes and self-

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[42] "Ani, idhu avaloda seyal. Ava nadatthura. Naan unakku ellaam sollanum."

[43] On the concept of "ethical affordance," see Keane (2016, 2018). Keane uses the idea of 'affordance' to refrain from essentializing certain objects and aspects of social existence as always already ethically charged. Instead, 'affordance' denotes the ethical potentialities that actors seize in what they encounter (objects, statements, stances, ideas, tone, facial expressions, etc.). That is, the *ethical* is not a property that either inheres fully in the so-called objective world or in the subjectivity of persons. Instead, it is co-constituted by the apprehension of possibilities and potentialities (affordances) that we come across.

evaluations. Not only did she spend several hours with me on that day, she also set aside considerable time over subsequent weeks, showing me photographs from Angalamman rituals and festivals and sharing stories of her experiences as a maruladi. I met at her apartment in Tondaiyarpet as well as at her parents' house in Royapuram where she showed me with great pride the poojai room where she had been conducting prayers and rituals since the age of seven.

2.4.3 Early Encounters with Angalamman

"I am from Royapuram. I was born and raised in Royapuram. I got interested in saami ever since I was seven years old. When I say 'saami,' in those days, it was Murugar whom my family worshipped mostly. So everyone thought it was Murugar who would come on me (*en mela varumnu nenachaanga*). But when saami first came over me when I was seven years old, it was Angalamman. Our family prayed to Murugar, but he didn't come. When they had me stand during the ritual and invited saami to come over me… I was seven. What would I know? Nothing. She came and descended on me (*en mela vandhu eranguna*). Now I am 47 years old. When she came to me first, I was seven years old. She has been with me for forty years now. I have been doing these festivals (*tiruvizha*) for forty years now. As far as Angalamma is concerned, we cannot say how she would come, how she would look, how she molded me (*eppadi enna uruvaakkuna*)…" she paused. "If you knew the experiences I have gone through… I overcame so many hurdles, I went through so much. But I came out of it all, and I am now this big person. She alone is responsible for that. She is the 'main' thing."

Mala used the English word 'main' to characterize Angalamman's role in her life. It is one of numerous English loan words that circulate in everyday Tamil speech almost as if they were Tamil words. Nearly all Tamils use the word, and it is usually pronounced "mainu." The way Mala used it brought to my mind the electrical mains, the nodal electrical supply to a house. During power-cuts, someone would ask, "Did you check the main?" referring to the electrical supply. Angalamma, it seemed, was "main" both in the sense of being the main thing or the most important thing, but also in the sense of being the very source of vitality, the main animating force in Mala's life. This connotation of the word "main" also brings to mind the well-known Hindu conception

of the goddess and feminine energy in general as "shakti," energy that animates matter and is mutually imbricated in it.[44]

"If we see Angalamma as the 'main,' you see, when she first came over me, I was a little kid who knew nothing. Then as she kept coming over me, her grace (*arul*) kept on increasing day by day. It is no small matter that I have been conducting these festivities for forty continuous years. It is going to be 35 years since I started dancing in a way the outer world knew (*veli ulagathukku theriyara maadhiri*). Before that, for 5 years, I danced but I had not come out into the world."

In speaking about the first five years of her religious life from the moment Angalamma first came over her, Mala used the expression *veli ulagathukku varala,* which translates as "I had not come out into the world." I was not sure whether she meant that her instances of trance embodiment of the goddess were restricted to rituals within the family in the initial years, or if she meant the years before people recognized her as a thirunangai-maruladi. When I asked Mala about this on a later occasion, she clarified that it was the latter. For the first five years, the family and others had continued to see her as a boy, but after that a general recognition began to happen that she was a "pottai," the word she used to denote others' awareness of her feminine comportment and expression (see Chapter 3). The family's recognition that Angalamma had chosen to "come over" their little "boy" reorganized their expectations of "him." Gradually, it eased her way into being accepted as a thirunangai in her family. Even today, Mala conducts all Angalamman ceremonies and festivals along with her natal family. While not all of my thirunangai interlocutors have loving relationships with their natal families, many of them have had their relationships with their families smoothe over the years. They now attend to their thirunangai families as well as their biological family, often taking care of their elderly parents and supporting their siblings and their families financially. I will address this aspect of thirunangai life in my discussion of "pottai" in Chapter 3. Whether they found acceptance from their natal kin or not, the thirunangais with whom I worked did not valorize "renunciation of natal family as a valued symbol and practice" (Reddy 2005: 15). Those who have had to break ties with their families feel the weight of that loss. But being associated with goddess worship seems to offer forms of familial and social acceptance in places like North Madras that have a visible and intense presence of Amman goddesses – in

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[44] For a historical discussion of how independent local and regional female deities came to be seen as aspects or versions of one unified goddess figure, the ultimate and undivided Shakti, see Mahalakshmi (2011). This work focuses on the commingling of ancient Tamil deities/sacred imaginaries such as Kotravai and Anangu with pan-regional and Sanskritic forms like Durga and Kali.

Chapter 4, I take up the question of others' bestowal of recognition on thirunangais' gender identity as well as sacred potentiality.

2.4.4 Giving to the Goddess – to give is to receive

"She will do for me all that I desire. To cool her heart, I too need to do a lot for her. I have been doing that. I don't do these festivities for money and wealth. Her existence is a fact. Without her, time simply wouldn't move. I trust her. Today, all people know about me is that I have been dancing her since I was seven years old. That is her greatness."

In just a few sentences, Mala offers an important commentary on the notion of "belief," which has had a vexed place in discussions on religion. Anthropologists and scholars of religious practice have critiqued earlier approaches in the study of religion that have focused on "belief" as a cognitive aspect, the inner movement that is the ontological basis for religious faith.[45] Mala's remark about Angalamman ("Her existence is a fact. Without her, time simply wouldn't move. I trust her.") brings to mind Jean Pouillon's discussion of the verb "to believe." Drawing attention to the French verb "croire" (to believe), Pouillon shows how belief is not only about conviction *in* the existence of god but a belief *that* god will come through.[46] In other words, it is also a statement of trust. Pouillon argues that expressions of trust might have for their background some movement of doubt or hesitation, something that motivates that (re)affirmation. He reminds us that we should not forget the ambivalence signaled by assertions of belief, whether it is a belief in the existence of something or it is faith that something will come through for us. It is a sign of an ongoing, dynamic relationship rather than a static, atemporal one of belief stated once and for all. He adds: "It is not so much the believer, I would say, who affirms his belief as such, it is rather the unbeliever who reduces to mere believing what, for the believer, is more like knowing" (Pouillon 2008: 94). For Mala, this "knowing" comes from seeing the effects of the goddess' grace in the way her life has unfolded, a key aspect of which is that Angalamman's coming over her has given her a place as a maruladi.

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[45] See Asad (1983). See also Durkheim ([1912] 1995). As Robbins (2007, 2015) has shown, Durkheim shifts attention to engagement in collective action as a source of generation of social values, and belief figures in this discussion as the cognitive and affective investment people come to make in collectivity. But as Sue Stedman Jones (1998) has argued, Durkheim also gives belief an ontological priority, but 'belief' here occurs not in our modern sense of faith in the face of rationalist discourse, but as the assent or affirmation we give to something we value – that which propels us towards something in the first place.

[46] See Pouillon's "Remarks on the Verb 'To Believe'" in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion* (2008), edited by Michael Lambek, pp. 90-96.

Talking about the annual festivals she organizes for the goddess, Mala said: "For the first Mayana Kollai ritual I organized, I spent 8000 rupees. Just 8000 rupees. But it was a lot of money then. And today, it takes at least one lakh and seventy-five thousand rupees to do the festival. I spend that much money. I don't collect money from others. I don't print donation books. All year round, I make money thanks to her. So when it comes to doing for her, I have to spend whatever it takes, even if I need to borrow money. I don't need to worry. She will help me repay it. That is how I have been living all these years. She makes time move. She is the 'main.'"

This sentiment about pleasing the goddess by making offerings beyond one's means was expressed by all my thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors. Conducting Amman's festivities in a grand manner is something they fervently desire. They put in great effort and resources into it, and, as I observed during the festivities around Mayana Kollai (February) and the month of Aadi (July-August), offerings are made with much pomp, joy, and gratitude. But if they have to borrow money to conduct the festivals (and nearly all maruladis I spoke to incurred some debt in the process), then what is the gratitude about? What are they grateful for? Mala's reply to that was this: "She keeps us well, without any diseases and ailments. We have enough to eat. There are people who respect us. The words we offer bear fruit. The rituals we perform produce results. She takes care of us." The same sentiment was echoed by many of the other maruladis, too. They articulated wellness and Angalamma's grace in terms of health, relationships, sufficiency, and the capacity to make effective action in the world (something that looks a lot like the notion of "agency"). When I brought up the question of material well-being, Mala mentioned greed, *perasai*. Greed, she said, can lead one astray, make one "lose one's path" (*vazhi thavari*). And she admitted that she had succumbed to that in the past, the consequence of which was letting slip her connection to the goddess.

Speaking specifically about money and income, she said, "I have done saangiyam (ritual) even for as little as one thousand rupees. That's because it is she who guides me to a place. She decides that someone needs my help. That's why they come to me. I have also done a lot of work in Andhra (neighboring state). There I get payments not less than a lakh or even a lakh and a half. Why would they give so much money? Because they trust me. That trust (*nambikkai*) is important. And they are doing well. Good things have happened for them. That's how I have earned my money. But if they have only very little to offer, that is fine too. They should be able to say that they are doing well after coming to me. That is the important thing. When I go somewhere to

perform a saangiyam, I take two or three helpers with me. They are all kothis, thirunangais. In addition to my blessings, if these thirunangais also place their hand on people's heads and bless them, it adds that much more power to the blessings."

It is important to pay attention to the Tamil word nambikkai. It is used, at least, in four senses: trust, belief, confidence, conviction. In her remarks above, while referring to people's trust in her, she used the word <u>nambikkai</u>. Earlier, while speaking of her trust in Angalamman, she had used the same word, nambikkai. In Tamil, when people ask you if you believe in god, they are likely to phrase it this way: "ungalukku kadavul nambikkai irukka?" which can both mean "Do you believe in god?" and "Do you trust god?" While the former is a question about the existence of god, a question prompted by a background of scientific rationality, the latter is a question about one's confidence in god, one's willingness to trust s/he will prevail. For Mala, the trust with which people come to her for ritual intercession mirrors the trust she has in Angalamman. Both are relationships based in nambikkai, trust and confidence.

2.4.5 Maruladi Ethic – Moral Probity and Ritual Efficacy

Mala also spoke about her work as a maruladi, a medium for the goddess, who also officiates rituals for healing and protection, conducts exorcisms, and offers religious advice. "When I go to someone's house (to conduct a ritual), I enter that place only trusting her (Angalamman). No matter what the problem is that the people want me to address, I say to her, 'I am not doing this. You have to do this. I am going here fully trusting you.' Then, within a month or two, they will call me on the phone and report back to me with positive results. There was no phone in those days. So they would come in person and inform me. Since I have been dancing the saami from a very young age – I should not say this about myself but – I am well-known. Angalamma is always with me. If something takes time to be remedied, I tell people to go directly to Melmalayanur. If you as much as step inside Malayanur, you would know how powerful Angalamma is. So I tell people, 'Go to Malayanur. Everything will be alright.' They would follow my instructions and go to Malayanur. Then they'd come back and tell me, 'We did as you told. We went to Malayanur. Everything got sorted out just like you told us. She came in your form and did good things for us.' When people say such things, when something good happens them through me, it gives me happiness, and my confidence grows."

She shared details from a few other experiences of helping people heal, get married, appeal to the goddess so that they could conceive a child, etc. For Mala, the evidence of the goddess' continuing grace on her is in the healing and well-being she is able to witness in those who come to her for help and in their recognition that she has been instrumental in the resolution of their problems. She also spoke to me about a time in her life in the recent past when things did not go well for her. Her ritual and healing work did not seem to produce desired results. Or, at least, there was some diminishment in their effects. Mala knew why that was. She said that she had been dishonest to someone. She had wronged them in some way and did not own up to it. "But she knows everything," Mala said, referring to Angalamman. "Nothing I touched bore results. I struggled. She knows everything." Mala connected her act of dishonesty to the diminished results her ritual work produced and to the sense of disconnect she felt from the goddess. For Mala, the morality of her own actions were linked both to her ability to be connected to the goddess and the ability to effect well-being for others by channeling the goddess' power and grace. When the people who sought her oracular or healing intervention did not see positive results, it saddened her, she said. In this moral order, it appeared, the well-being of others and the resolution of their problems were somehow dependent on her, the medium's, integrity. In addition to integrity, Mala also mentioned humility as an important virtue. It is possible to grow egotistic when you see your ritual powers, she said, and when that happens you think you are an independent agent, you forget it is not you but the goddess who is acting through you. Then too you lose your connection with Amman. Hubris can also serve to disconnect one from the "main" source of spiritual energy and sustenance.

It is significant that Mala speaks of spiritual dis/connection and in/effectiveness in terms of emotions of happiness and sadness. Joel Robbins (2015) has suggested that happiness could be culturally tied to realization of values. That is, what makes one happy might be the accomplishment of a desirable action – being able to make a gesture that is valued, being in the midst of social solidarity and cohesion, having a sense of wellbeing at a life lived well, and more. Extending Dumont, Durkheim, and Weber's analysis of the place of values in ordering social life, Robbins has suggested that happiness might be linked to values, actions, and the temporality of life unfolding. In other words, happiness, whether of the kind associated with particular moments or the sense of well-being that takes into account long swathes of life, can be seen as connected to

moral assessment.[47] In Mala's case, at least one thing to which her happiness is tied is her sense of connectedness to the goddess, which is what enables her to be effective in securing wellbeing for others. And she sees her own integrity as essential to maintaining that interlinked relationship between herself as the medium, the goddess, and those who seek her assistance. According to Mala (and many other thirunangai-maruladis with whom I worked), being an agent of good in the world requires a sharing of oneself with the goddess, and the effective accomplishment of this relationship depends on moral probity, reflection, and correction. The idea of agent and agency that animates these relationships adds to our understanding of both the paradoxical link that might exist between agency, practices of piety, and submission (Mahmood 2005) as well as the work that "care of the self" plays in ethical life (Foucault 1994; Laidlaw 2014). That is, on one hand, being an effective agent of goddess's powers in the world involves some form of surrender and submission to the goddess. On the other hand, that submission itself is accomplished only through an exercise of one's capacity to reason and reflect. In addition to the above, we also see that ethical life does not mean a constant vigilance and a thorough refraining from moral failings. What we see instead is that ethical departures do occur, but some criteria for ethical evaluation exist, which guide practical reasoning and reflection (Lambek 2010). Emotions like happiness and sadness guide actors towards a realignment with their values and the social-spiritual world from which these values derive.

2.4.6 A Ritual Experience

One day, Mala invited me to be present at a counter-sorcery ritual she was going to conduct. An elderly couple had approached her, saying that a house their son and daughter-in-law used to live in and which they now wished to sell seemed to have some strong negative energy in it. The younger couple had not been happy living in that house. And now they couldn't sell the house. When I showed up at the address she gave me, it was 11 PM. Mala and her three helpers had readied everything for the ritual. One of them had made images of a man and a woman out of rice flour dough, and laid them out on a banana leaf. When the ritual would be completed and the

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[47] See Robbins (2015) for a discussion of the different temporalities of happiness. Commenting on a range of ethnographic accounts of what happiness means for people in diverse contexts, Robbins distinguishes between what he calls the "temporal middle-ground" of ethnography in general, happiness as tied to specific life moments, and happiness as a sense of well-being or life lived well that can come through some kind of narrative accounting to oneself and perhaps others.

negative forces removed, these images would be burned, symbolizing the end of the negativity holding on to the owners of the house. When the ritual started, Mala held a *kalasam* in one hand. It was small metal pot containing sanctified water and its mouth closed with a coconut and margosa leaves and twigs. The outside of the pot was smeared with turmeric paste and decorated with vermilion dots. Mala stood in front of a framed image of Angalamman, holding the kalasam pot in her hand. One of her helpers lit some pieces of camphor in a bowl, and Mala started swaying back and forth. Once the goddess was in her, Mala started walking away from the make-shift altar. As she walked around the house, another helper gave her lemons, which Mala dropped in front of her and crushed them with her foot before she walked on.

I was asked to hold two chickens that were later to be sacrificed. So I stood by, holding by their claws a chicken in each hand. They hung upside down from both my hands, completely quiet for the most part except for an occasional flutter and protest of their wings. After she was done cleansing the living room, Mala moved further into the house and exited through a side door that had been kept open. She stepped outside, walked a few paces, and turned around. She stood quiet for a few seconds and then slowly raised her right arm and pointed at an angle. She then walked in the direction in which she had pointed, entered the house again, and walked into the kitchen. There she stood in front of the sink for a few seconds and then sat down on the floor. She then asked for a hammer. Holding the hammer in her right hand, she felt the floor under the sink with her left hand. It was a concrete floor. Sitting down more comfortably, she raised the hammer and brought it down forcefully on the floor under the kitchen sink. She kept at it for several minutes. She broke open the top layer of concrete on the floor. Then she asked for a crowbar. This time, one of her assistants took over the job. I stood by, watching anxiously, sedate chickens getting restless and fluttering as they hung towards the floor in my hands.

At some point, Mala took over the task again, and went about digging a hole at the spot where she had broken the floor open. All of this took about twenty to thirty minutes. When she felt she had dug enough, Mala set the crowbar aside and pushed her right hand into the hole. It went down almost up to her elbow. When she pulled out her hand, there was a dilapidated copper plate in it, green with oxidation and broken in places. As she brought it out, she went faint and fell backwards. Two of the assistants held her from the back and steadied her. The elderly couple, parents of the owners of the house, who were standing nearby, realized that the ritual was over. They appeared moved and pleased. It took only a couple of minutes for Mala to regain her balance.

As soon as she did, she gave instructions to her assistants on getting rid the object she had unearthed and the asked the supplicants to go and have a shower right away, so that they could complete the cleansing ritual. She then took the chickens from my hands, twisted their necks, and let their blood drip inside and around the dug-up pit.

Once we cleaned up after ourselves and stepped outside the house, Mala stood in front of each us, circled a lemon in clockwise and anticlockwise direction around us. She then dropped the lemon in front of us and crushed it with her foot. This was a way to ensure we were not carrying any traces of the negativity on us. Before I left, Mala said to me, "She has decided to mold you. And you will. She will definitely be with you. You come to my Royapuram house. Come and sit in my prayer room. I will show you photo albums from festivities from the past. You scan what you need. Don't worry about anything. No matter where you go, she will go ahead of you. She is always there in front of you. You will be well, there is no doubt about that. Don't worry about anything."

It was around 2 AM, too late for a bus, so I called a taxi and went home. As I waited by the curb, listening to the sound of the sea nearby, I wondered not so much about the logic or believability of what I had witnessed, but about the intensity of the ritual I had experienced, even though it had not really been a solemn affair. Mala's very playful apprentices had been constantly chatting and joking even after Mala had entered the state of trance. For them, the force of the ritual would not be diminished in anyway by a lack of solemnity. So there was banter, whispers, giggles, as they commented on each other's follies and foibles. But once Mala sat down next to the kitchen sink and started breaking open the floor, everyone had gone quiet. There had been a wordless recognition that Mala had zeroed in on the problem and the ritual would soon climax.

2.5 Nisha –Embodied Ritual Labor, Belonging, Belief

2.5.1 Early Intimations

Nisha is not a maruladi, a trance-dancer. That is, she does not embody the goddess in states of trance and serve as a medium and oracle. Nevertheless, she is deeply committed to Angalamman worship and is recognized as a ritual expert. She knows how to prepare for the various rituals: the rules and norms to be followed; things that need to be bought – flowers, fruits, camphor, clothes, etc.; offerings that need to be cooked; the efficient way and order in which ritual paraphernalia need to be kept ready; etc. When I started this fieldwork, with Nisha as my main point of entry

into the world of Angalamman maruladis, I had known her for over a decade, but I did not have any idea about the devotional side of her life. Our friendship had been circumscribed by our roles as LGBTQ activists and community organizers. But when my fieldwork took a turn towards studying thirunangai religious life, both Nisha and I experienced an interesting kind of "coming out" to each other. We were opening up to each other about religion and spirituality, an aspect of our lives about which both of us had complex feelings and thoughts. But, as I have described in the introduction, the way in which my research attention turned towards Angalamman had an inexplicable serendipity and intensity to it. Experiencing that shift together seemed to attenuate most of the tentativeness and hesitation either of us had had about discussing faith and spiritual life openly.

One day, in her house in Porur, where I spent a great deal of my fieldwork time, Nisha told me about her childhood foray into devotional practices. Chopping onions, tomatoes, and green chillis for the sambar, she spoke to me about her earliest memories of religious instruction. She grew up in the Kasimedu area of north Chennai, to parents who were both from agrarian communities and from villages not far from Chennai. Nisha has been estranged from her family for nearly two decades now, ever since her feminine self-expression became a problem for the family. So her reminiscences about her childhood were always tinged with sadness, and I rarely brought up the subject on my own. But this time Nisha preempted my concern: "Oh, it has been so long. I don't feel anything anymore. Sometimes when I think about the fact that they have not made any effort in all these years to look for me, it makes me a little sad. But that is how it is. What can we do?" On this particular day, though, Nisha's recollection of some specific aspects of her childhood were triggered by an interview she and I had conducted earlier that day. Listening to another thirunangai speak of her childhood and her interest in devotional practices had made Nisha think of her own childhood.

As she continued her reminiscences, she poured in some tamarind juice extract to the vegetables boiling in the sambar pot. But we had to pause to feed the cat, who had walked in a few minutes earlier and was demanding attention loudly and persistently. I liked to engage the cat in conversation, so for a minute or two the cat and I had a bit of back-and-forth, which Nisha found hilarious because the cat always seemed to be up for a good argument. But we decided to keep it short that day, so I put out some food for the cat, and the world went quiet except for the crunch-crunch of feline teeth on dry cat food.

"At first, when I was small, all of us children would run around and play out in the street. In Royapuram, there is a temple called Pachaiyamman Temple. If you go to Pachaiyamman Temple, you will find large statues of Muneeswarar and other deities. Looking at these statues, we used to feel scared even to enter the temple, but it was a beautiful place. There were a lot of plants there, plants with flowers. It was fun. So we would go to this temple to play around inside. There used to be a man there. He was always there. He never got married, so he was all by himself. He spent his time in the temple, reciting *mantrams* (sacred hymns/verses). He was an *aambilai* (man)," she repeated, to emphasize the fact that this person was not a pottai/ thirunangai.

When I visited that temple with her a few days later, Nisha's remark about the beauty of the temple space despite the fearsome, huge statues made sense to me. Even before I actually entered the temple, I could see to my left the row of large statues of Muneeswarar and other deities, all in seated posture, looking very much like the Ayyanar[48] statues I have seen at the borders of villages. Seated in open air shrines, with one leg folded at the knee and with a scepter in one hand, I remember Ayyanar images as huge and fearsome. The statues inside Pachaiyamman temple were not as huge, but they were nevertheless imposing. I could understand a child's apprehension about entering the temple when welcomed by this row of figures with their wide eyes that seemed to be alive and all-seeing. But it was also a beautiful temple. Concrete flooring had replaced the dried mud ground that Nisha remembered from her childhood. But plants and creepers thrived in that space, and a pleasant scent of flowers hung in the air, mixing with the fragrance from camphor. Pachaiyamman herself was most arresting, with large, piercing eyes on a wide face that was, true to her name, green in color (*pachai* – green).

Talking about the man whom she remembered from her childhood as a constant presence at the temple, Nisha continued, "He recited mantrams, but he was not an ayyiru[49]. He wore pant and shirt.[50] What he did was, he called out to us children, gathered us around and he asked us if we were going to school regularly, and all that. Then he said, 'I will teach you a mantram. If you chant that, you will do well in your studies.' He taught us that mantram and asked us to recite it every day:

sri vidhya roopini saraswati sakalakalavalli

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[48] Male deities guarding the borders of Tamil villages.
[49] Iyer – a Tamil Brahmin caste. But here a generic name for brahmin priests.
[50] Nisha perhaps mentions his attire as evidence that he was not a brahmin priest, who would certainly not wear trousers inside the temple.

saarabimbaadhari sharadha devi shastravalli
veena pustakadhaarini vani kamalapani
vakdevi varadayaki pustaka hastey namostute

I found it interesting that Nisha's very first introduction to devotional chanting should be through a sloka in Sanskrit. Having internalized a common-sense notion about caste and religious practice, I had assumed that Brahmanical forms such as Sanskrit slokas might have a very peripheral, if any, role to play in non-Brahmin, working class religious life. But the separation between Sanskritic and popular Hinduism is not a very clear and definite one. Scholarship on Hinduism shows complex interaction between local, regional forms and pan-regional, Sanskritic ones.[51] As we will see later, Angalamman myths too show a mutual imbrication between local mythical imaginaries and ones that we might call Hindu in a pan-regional sense. Radhika, a thirunangai maruladi from a non-Brahmin caste, prides herself for her knowledge of Sanskrit verses and Brahmanical ways of conducting ritual. Even when they were not explicitly citing Brahmanical texts or ideas, none of my thirunangai maruladi interlocutors placed Angalamman worship in terms of well-worn binaries of "high" and "folk" Hinduism or "great" and "little" traditions. In fact, no one ever used the word "Hindu" throughout my time with them in the field.[52] It was possible for them to speak of their interest in and attachment to Angalamman and other deities without invoking a self-conception as Hindus.[53] At the same time, neither did they invoke a sectarian identity; they did not even speak of themselves as "goddess worshippers." It appeared that they did not draw a definitive and demarcated religious self-identity from their practices. If they did, it was at least not expressed in language. A special attachment to Angalamman does not function as kind of a monotheism. Other deities are not neglected. Not only other Hindu temples, but Sufi Muslim peer shrines and

[51] See Milton Singer (1972), Mahalakshmi (2011)

[52] An exception to this was Nisha who, during our many conversations, expressed that she felt the need to separate her engagement in Angalamman worship from her public life as an activist. Otherwise, she felt, she might inadvertently present herself as Hindu – an effect she did not want to make in a political climate of right wing Hindu ascendancy that she opposed.

[53] It is important to separate engagement in religious practices from religious self-consciousness or self-conception. For an illuminating discussion of how religious communities demarcated theological and identitarian differences and retained distinctive "meaning-constituting systems," see Elaine Fisher (2017). Fisher argues that in early modern India "Hindu sects functioned autonomously from one another as meaning-constituting systems, each individually reproducing the religious institutions that endow participation in that community with sectarian-inflected religious identity" (p.13). Fisher's larger argument is that the ushering in of modernity in India involved a strong public articulation of religion and theology rather than a relegation of religion as is often argued in theories of modernity. Early sixteenth century in southern India, Fisher shows, saw a proliferation of engaged religious debates in new forms, through pamphlets and other publications that brought religious discourse out of institutions and monastic lineages and addressed a new religious public sphere that they also brought into being.

Mother Mary shrines are also fond pilgrimage sites for many thirunangais. None of these engagements are articulated in terms of Hindu or Muslim identities, but as a thirunangai approach to piety, which draws upon diverse traditions. The fact that Nisha's earliest experience of any kind of religious instruction was in the form of a Sanskrit verse in praise of goddess Saraswati, taught to her by a non-brahmin devotee at Pachaiyamman Temple is, perhaps, a glimpse into the interesting cultural life and history of north Madras, a composite site of migrations and settlements by a diverse range of communities.[54]

Once the vegetables were well cooked in the sambar broth and the fragrance of the added spice mix had blended well, Nisha gently poured in some cooked toor dal from a pressure cooker. Tasting the sambar for salt and then adding a teaspoonful, she continued: "That was the very first mantram he taught us. That was also my very first experience with all these things," Nisha said, before responding a question from me about the other children who accompanied her to the temple: "I don't know where all those other kids are now. They used to live next door to us. I am talking about when I was very young. I must have been in second or third standard… If we recited the mantram correctly, it made him very happy. He gave us chocolates. He bought biscuits for us. He'd even take us to the tea shop and buy tea for all of us. As we continued to hang out with him, he taught us more mantrams. I learned this one too:

> Om bhur bhuvah suvah
> Tat savitr varenyam
> Bhargo devasya dheemahi
> Diyo yonah prachodayaat[55]

Then he also taught us 'guru brahma gurur vishnuh….' Then, when the month of Margazhi[56] came, one day he… Actually, he lived in the street right behind us. But I didn't know that at first. Then

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[54] My sense of surprise at the appearance of Sanskrit verses in Nisha's earliest encounters with religion is largely due to a very common modern notion that clearly divides Brahmanical forms from non-Brahmanical forms of proto-Hindu piety. After all, several of the Alwars and Nayanmars, the early medieval Vaishnava and Saiva saints, were from non-Brahmin castes. And the contribution of non-brahmin ruling and warrior clans to the landscape of Brahmanical Hinduism is well-documented by scholars of religion in southern India: Appadurai (1977), Mahalakshmi (2011), Stein (1977).

[55] This is the Gayatri Mantram, which, in Brahmin traditions, is taught only to a young boy during his sacred thread ceremony, the upanayanam, which is also his initiation into religious life.

[56] The eighth month of the Tamil calendar, Margazhi falls in December-January and is considered a very auspicious month that precedes the harvest season. In Tamil vaishnavite traditions, this month is marked by an attention to the thirty verses sung by the ninth-century woman poet-saint Andal. Treating the month as one fit for austerities, Andal wrote the Tiruppavai in 30 verses, a verse for each day, describing the vow of austerity she and her friends were undertaking in order to meet with Narayana/ Krishna and receive his grace and blessings.

one day he told me, 'In Margazhi, you should join us. If we all go out as a group in procession, singing the Tiruppavai, it will bring us great blessings. You will do well in your life.' So I joined them for a few days, but it was very cold so early in the mornings, so I stopped going after a while. My mother said, 'You should go. These are good things. This is about Saami.' So I tried to keep going. In Margazhi, I would have a wash early in the morning and go over to his place. He put naamam on our foreheads and tulasi bead rosaries around our neck. Then we all set out, singing Tiruppavai songs. There were four of us children, and him. He wore a veshti, like a panchakaccham. He would sing a line and we would repeat. He also carried a pair of little cymbals in his hand. He said to me, 'You sing well. You pick up things quickly. Do keep at it….' I don't know where he went."

2.5.2 Entering the world of Angalamman and her mediums

Nearly all of the thirunangais Nisha first met and got acquainted with were maruladis; they were all devoted to the goddess, and they all spent time together every day in the goddess temples of north Madras. The first model of a non-cis-gendered embodiment and sociality Nisha witnessed was the gathering of saami-pottais in the temples of north Madras. During her visits to Pachaiyamman temple, she started gravitating towards the small groups of transfeminine persons who gathered there in the evenings. They would sit together, chatting, addressing each other as "amma," "ponnu," and "mamiyar," *mother, daughter, mother-in-law….* From time to time, they would perform small kazhippu rituals (warding off evil eye) for people who approached them. Otherwise, they would sit about, making strings of flowers, just talking and laughing. Something in young Nisha recognized them as "namma aalunga," *our people.* Gayathri Reddy (2005) has written at length about the force of that recognition in her discussion on "mannolu," the Telugu word that means "our people." For Reddy's hijra interlocutors in Hyderabad "mannolu" functions as a "shifting signifier," bringing within its ambit various categories of transfeminine persons depending on shifting social contexts and "their demarcation of insider-outsider binary (p.175). In the next chapter, I delve into thirunangais' deployment of the Tamil word *pottai* for similar (yet not the same) purposes. Two key ideas that animate Reddy's discussion of the idea of "our people" among hijras are: one, it is constituted powerfully by subtle readings of a person's bodily praxis, the femininity that is apprehended by looking at someone; and secondly, differences and hierarchies among different transfeminine identities and groupings can often be softened or

temporarily made irrelevant with the idea of "our people." The word *pottai*, as I will show in the next chapter, performs both these tasks and more. But here, what I wish to draw attention to is that, in Nisha's characterization, there was some quick, wordless recognition on the part of her young self that she somehow belonged among the saami-pottais she met at the temple. They too, she said, recognized her as a pottai. Soon she started spending a lot of time at the temple, hanging out with them, feeling free to be feminine in her gestures and comportment while she was with them, but also often scared that some visitor to the temple might spot her and report to her parents. Nevertheless, she was also happy to have found a group of people among whom she felt freer.

Despite these associations, Nisha herself did not become a maruladi. She came from a Vanniyar caste family, and Angalamma was, in fact, the clan deity, but the family had no experience of trance embodiment and ecstatic devotional practices. So while Nisha grew up familiar with Angalamman and her worship, it had not been a central aspect of her childhood and early adolescent life with her parents. But once she grew more comfortable with the saami-pottais whose care and friendship she had secured, she became a chela to Mala who was an Angalamman maruladi. Mala's guru Kameela too was a maruladi. Nisha remembered her guru's guru, her Kameela nani, very fondly. "She was a Muslim, but she was so fond of Angalamma. I helped her a lot with all the rituals. Her family somehow let her be. She became a thirunangai, she became a maruladi, she worshipped Angalamma, but she also stayed very close to her family. I spent a lot of time in her house. Her mother would give me Ramzaan food. Even today I have not eaten a biriyani as good," Nisha reminisced, growing wistful and sad, because her beloved Kameela Nani was no more. It was during her time with Kameela Amma that Nisha grew adept as a ritual apprentice. Her own guru, Mala, and Kameela Amma's guru, Lakshmi Nani, were maruladis, too, so she served as a ritual helper with them as well. But Nisha herself never became a maruladi. When I asked her about it, she said, "I don't know. I was not used to it. I was happy doing all the other things."

Nisha felt that being a maruladi was not the only aspect of a life devoted to Angalamman. All maruladis needed helpers who knew the rituals, protocols, and preparations, and it was an important role to perform. Active embodied work with all the materiality of worship is a vital part of this world of piety– cooking, cleaning ritual paraphernalia, making garlands of lemon, stringing flowers, washing the floor and altar, decorating the goddess image, helping maruladis when they enter trance and advise suppliants, cleaning up after a ritual, and much more. It is a contribution

of individual energy and labor to a collective process, one which, as Nisha said, can produce happiness, bringing to our mind Durkheim's idea of *collective effervescence*, which, for him, is the transcendence of the individual in the social and the concerted labor that reaffirms the social and holds it in place. Nisha played some of the most labor-intensive roles in nearly all of the rituals and festivities I observed and participated in during my research. She was the head cook for preparing all ritual offerings and priests. Whenever we undertook visits to goddess temples in and around the district, she packed ingredients and a portable gas stove, and at each temple, she cooked a pongal offering for the deity. In some places, she cooked elaborate meals for all of us on the trip, with us assisting her with the tasks. Cooking seemed to be the main activity through which she performed her commitment and love towards both the goddess and the world.

However, after her beloved Kameela Nani's death, Nisha went through a period during which she was unable to perform these tasks. Kameela Amma, the elder from whom Nisha had learned all Angalamman rituals and with whom she had worked for several years as a ritual apprentice, was only in her early fifties when she was murdered by her panthi (male partner) who coveted her money and jewelry. This painful loss and the inability to make sense of how a devoted maruladi could die such a violent death led to Nisha's distancing herself from the goddess and her worship for some time. She could not bring herself to engage in ritual practices and festivities. Nisha experienced all of this as a profound sense of unhappiness. Her sadness at the loss of a beloved elder had been compounded by her sadness at being unable to bring herself to engage in collective religious practices: "I still went and helped now and then, but not with my whole heart. Kameela Nani did so much for the goddess, but she died. I felt frustrated, so my mind did not really find interest in anything. But I was also unhappy without doing those things. When I cook for an occasion or get things ready for a saangiyam (ritual), there is some happiness in it. I missed all that."

While Nisha's disaffection sapped away her ability to espouse collective ritual activities and festivities enthusiastically, that very inability in turn made her unhappy. She was caught in a double bind: disappointment with the deity as well as unhappiness that arose out of that turning away from religious engagement. When I asked Nisha why she did not consider alleviating some of that unhappiness by participating in collective acts of piety anyway even if she couldn't feel very excited about it, she replied that she could not find the inclination (*naattam*) or sense of involvement (*eedupaadu*). She helped me understand that it was this absence of inclination that

made her unhappy. If we understand collective action as having the capacity to generate cohesion and energetic involvement, what Durkheim calls "collective effervescence" (Durkheim [1912] 1995: 245-252), how do we understand this "inclination" (or its lack thereof) that Nisha is talking about? How do we understand the embodied ability, willingness, and slantedness (a meaning contained in the world "incline") one has towards those collective activities? In other words, while being part of shared action can produce cohesion through an elevation in enthusiasm, purpose, and meaning, what enables or propels one to take part in those activities in the first place? What gives us the "inclination"? Why do we participate in the collective in the first place? And why did Nisha's disaffection with the goddess disable practice, and why couldn't she rely on the energy of collective practice itself to carry her through?

2.5.3 Belief as Practice

Daniel-Hughes (2018) offers a way to understand this through a discussion of Peirce's writings on the idea of *belief*. He argues that, for Peirce, belief is not an inner state that stands separated from practice and is not knowable outside of embodied engagement: "For Peirce, belief is preparedness to act; habit and action are signs of belief" (182). In Daniel-Hughes' analysis, belief for Peirce was not merely an inner, cognitive movement but is tethered to "habits of action." Belief here is not restricted to the religious realm; for Peirce, any ease of habituated action involves belief. And *doubt*, in this formulation, is the result of rupture in practice, a breakdown in the force and ease of habituated action. Doubt, for Peirce, involves struggle and inquiry and a search for something (else) in which to anchor our belief. Peirce's argument is that a crisis in belief is an impasse in habituated functioning. Belief here is not an ontological question about the existence of gods, but a practical one of finding value in giving oneself to certain orientations and actions in the world. A disruption in belief, then, leads to a breakdown in practice. Nisha did not stop believing *in* the existence of the goddess; instead, she found herself unable to believe *that* the goddess was seeing to justice. It was a crisis of confidence in the deity (in many ways a worse indictment of gods) and not a move towards unbelief. It was an experience of disaffection which took away her capacity to be excited about a set of actions. As much as collective action might generate energy and cohesiveness on its own, it also takes a prior desire and motivation to make

ourselves be part of such collective work in the first place.[57] Paying attention to how Nisha spoke about her unhappiness gives us a sense of the importance of affective orientations to effective social practice.

Despite not being a maruladi herself, strictly speaking, and despite her complex thoughts and feelings about religion, Nisha does partake of the perceptions of sacred status that come to thirunangais from the world outside. Many were the times when she and I were on some errand in a public place and people approached her for her blessings. She would place her hand on their head and bless them. Everyday social life in the city brings thirunangais in contact with people who believe that it is special to be blessed by them. But everyday life also brings them in contact with a greater number of people who are either apprehensive of meeting thirunangais or are outright hostile to them. So it takes some constant perception management on the part of thirunangais to make everyday social life smooth (see Chapter 5). But people do approach thirunangais seeking their blessings, and it happens regularly to Nisha and my other thirunangai friends who are not, in fact, maruladis. During such encounters, Nisha gladly performs the gestures of benediction and blessings expected of her. She savors the pleasantness of such experiences, where people come to thirunangais with reverence and goodwill. However, as an activist, Nisha is very aware of the problematics of foregrounding a Hindu identity at a time of political and muscle power of the Hindu right. Once, she needed a photo of herself to send to a reporter who had conducted a phone interview with her about her activism for thirunangai rights. We sifted through the photographs I had taken during my fieldwork, but she rejected all of them because they had been taken in ritual, festival, or pilgrimage contexts and showed her with prominent ash and vermilion marks on her forehead. In contexts where Nisha had to represent herself as a thirunangai activist, she did not wish to foreground the religious aspect of her identity. She was afraid it would be read as a Hindu identity. All my thirunangai interlocutors, including those who were maruladis, seemed to function in a tacit, collective agreement that, as a juridical identity, *thirunangai* need only refer to transgender identity stripped of religious connotations. One of the reasons *thirunangai* was able to replace the earlier label Aravani was that the latter term located transfeminine embodiment within a regionally salient religious tradition (Priyababu 2007). Scholars have also shown that the

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[57] Robbins (2016) has drawn attention to the *desirability* aspect of values and social goods in Durkheim's discussion. As I discussed in the Introduction, Durkheim has argued that the social does not bear down as a moral force on individuals commanding adherence to duties and norms through fear of sanction and punishment. For Durkheim, any normative vision must present itself as desirable to its constituents. See Durkheim ([1953] 2010).

"thirunangai imaginary" draws on the Dravidian political ethos of atheist rationality and humanism (Nataraj 2019, Tom & Menon *forthcoming*).

There is another important aspect of Nisha's life as a thirunangai that makes her commitment to Angalamman ritual life even more interesting. Nisha used to be Mala's chela and hence a part of the parivar (family) that included Vimala Aaya, Lakshmi Nani, Kameela Nani (who died), and Mala -- in descending order of seniority. But, at some point in the past, soon after Kameela Nani's death, Nisha had a falling out with Mala and ended the guru-chela relationship. This meant that she was no longer part of that parivar in terms of reet (ritual formalization). She became a chela to Azhagamma who is a guru in a different parivar. However, as part of her conversations prior to finalizing the reet, she told Azhagamma that even though she had broken her ties with Mala and did not strictly belong in that parivar, she was still connected to the elders (i.e., Lakshmi Nani and Vimala Aaya) by bonds of affection as well as by the years of Angalamman work. Therefore, she would continue to spend time with the elders in her previous parivar and this should not become a problem for her new guru, Azhagamma. And Azhagamma agreed. This shows that the force of Nisha's connection with the elders in her previous parivar is a strong one. It has been forged in years of working together on Angalamman rituals -- work from which Nisha has drawn sustenance, sense of purpose and belonging, and self-regard as a ritual expert whose knowledge and embodied labor matter.

2.6 Conclusion

Training our focus on the Thirunangai-Angalamman attachment brings into the frame aspects of the thirunangai lifeworld that cannot be understood primarily in terms of identity and community. We see that social relationships other than the ones defined by ritually initiated kinship also matter deeply to thirunangais. And these social relationships take diverse forms. The relationships that matter to Lakshmi Nani include not only her thirunangai kin but also the goddess as well as the cisgender world with which she shares Angalamman worship. Relationships to place, to deity, to people of similar caste-class-occupational backgrounds – all of these anchor her sense of who she is and what her commitments are. Mala's attachment to the goddess, evident at a very young age, secures her place within the natal family, keeping intact relationships that are often severed in the course of the expression of transfeminine identity for many others. As I showed, literature on transfeminine lifeworlds marks the breaking of ties with one's natal family as a

significant aspect of renunciation of worldly ties. Contrary to that, even as Angalamman makes a claim over Mala, the goddess also secures her family ties. And in addition to that, being a maruladi orients Mala towards the world in specific ways: she considers that role as a serious responsibility towards those who seek her ritual intervention. For Nisha, devotion to Angalamman takes the form of ritual expertise and the joy derived in collective participation in ritual life. She finds that affective intensity of belonging not primarily in the rituals and transactions of kinship, but in her work as a ritual expert and cook for Angalamman worship. Having Angalamman as a significant attachment in their lives orients these three actors towards the social world in particular ways. For each of them, it is not only a question of *what* relationships matter, but also *how* they are to be vis-à-vis these relationships.

The ways in which faith in Angalamman figures in the lives of my thirunangai interlocutors corresponds in some ways to Nathaniel Robert's (2016) characterization of "slum religion" in his work with Christian and Hindu Dalits in a slum in North Chennai. Even though none of my interlocutors lived in slums and very few of them came from families of Scheduled Castes (formerly "untouchables" and now addressed by Dalit political mobilization), there are some similarities in the way both groups consider their deities. Roberts has argued that, contrary to colonial as well as reformist Hindu representations, the deities animating the world of popular Hindu devotion are not amoral or immoral beings whose only role is to demand worship and offerings. For those who believe in these deities, they are "supremely moral and they want[ed] humans beings to be moral too" (174), and they all demand faith and commitment from believers. The deities also require of their devotees certain fundamental aspects of morality, which the devotees take to be common-sensical and universal: moderation, kindness, charity, not stealing, not killing a fellow human, etc. And, in addition to morality, devotion also involved accepting one's vulnerability to the powers of the deities:

> To enter into a relationship with a god was not simply a matter of mechanically following their ritual and moral precepts. Devotees are also expected to cultivate in themselves an attitude of personal faith in their god, both by rendering themselves willingly dependent and vulnerable before them and by expressing total confidence that that god was indeed a reliable provider of blessings and protections. (2016: 175)

The question of belief, here, cuts across religions. Both the Hindu and Christian slum-dwellers in Roberts' ethnography firmly believe in the morality of both their gods – that is, they believe that both their gods are moral beings who exert a moral force on their followers. They also firmly

believe in the universal ontological reality of their own gods -- an attitude Roberts calls "theological realism" as opposed to the "theological nominalism" of anthropologists and other moderns, where gods are real within their particular cultural worlds. As I showed earlier with Mala's claim that "Angalamma's existence is a fact," for Robert's interlocutors, the ontological reality of their gods is beyond question. A second aspect of religiosity in which my thirunangai-interlocutors appear to be in agreement with Roberts' slum-dwellers is that both groups openly express the sentiment that religion and worship are about wishing for and securing worldly goods. As Roberts argues, contrary to scholarly literature on Hinduism that ranks worldly interests as "lower than 'pure' (i.e. otherworldly or impersonal) ones," these worshippers foreground worldly interests as entirely valid motivations (2016: 156). For Roberts' interlocutors, the central aspect of their devotion to gods is their desire to live well in this world: health, prosperity, relationships, happiness, etc. As I have shown here, and hope to demonstrate through the chapters to follow, thirunangai devotion to Angalamman, too, is not about otherworldliness and spiritual transcendence. It is about ways of inhabiting *this* world in particular ways. In the ethnographic accounts I have offered above, I have sought to show that their attachment to Angalamman, albeit expressed in various ways, provides my thirunangai interlocutors with moral and affective orientations towards the world around. It can take the form of neighborly intimacy and care, commitment to serving others through one's spiritual powers as a maruladi, embodied and energetic participation in collective acts of devotion, and more. But all these are ways to inhabit *this* world – to secure loving relationships, to find places of belonging, to see oneself as an agent of good and healing, to earn the regard and goodwill of others. However, unlike Robert's interlocutors in the slum, for my thirunangai-maruladi friends, their connection to Angalamman is not arbitrary even when they expressed their frustration with her.

A conversation I had with Valar Aaya and Vimala Aaya, two thirunangai elders, illustrates this. One Amavasai (New Moon) day in the month of Aadi (mid-July to mid-August), many of us gathered in Lakshmi Nani's place in Old Washermanpet. While all New Moon days and nights are considered potent for the propitiation of the goddess, the month of Aadi is particularly special for her worship. On Amavasai, devotees would get together to make a gruel offering (*koozh*) to the goddess, which would then be distributed to many. While Lakshmi Nani, Nisha, and Shoba were engaged in preparing the koozh with raagi millet and buttermilk, I sat outside the house in the narrow alleyway with the two elders. They were both in their late seventies and knew each other

for five decades, so they sat chatting about the past, which mostly meant they remembered friends who were no more. Valar Aaya asked me to interview her for my research. She was nearly blind, suffering from a degenerative disease. She said to me, "I cannot see anything. Even today I needed someone to bring me here. I could not travel on my own. I do so much for Angalamma. Even though I cannot see, I wash her (idol), decorate her, put vermilion mark on her forehead, offer flowers. But she has made me go blind. She is not doing anything for me. I am frustrated. I have decided to go to Yesappa (Jesus). My neighbors go to Yesappa church in Perambur, I will go with them. I mean it. She is not doing anything for me." Vimala Aaya, who was listening to this conversation, chimed in, "Me too. Look at my legs, Aniruddh," she said, pointing to the swellings in her lower legs that had made walking and standing very painful for her. "I have spent so much money on this. I cannot even walk till, there, that temple," she pointed in the direction of the Angalamman temple in the neighborhood. "Verutthu pochu. I am frustrated. Our neighbors in Eranavur, too, go to Maadha Kovil (Mother Mary's Church). I am going to go with them… You saw how I decorated the saami today. I did not get up from the spot for over two hours. What is the benefit (*punniyam*)?" The point to note is that the reality and existence of Angalamma, Jesus, and Mary are all equally taken as given. The consideration that is relevant for them is which deity expresses sufficient care for them.

When I checked months later, neither of the elders had shifted their loyalties away from Angalamman. Vimala Aaya continued to spend a great deal of time in decorating the goddess, cooking, and cleaning ritual paraphernalia. And Valar Aaya continued to show up for rituals no matter how hard her blindness made it for her to be mobile. Expressing their disappointment with Angalamma to me was, perhaps, a way of making their discontent known to the goddess too. Both faith and frustration are communal gestures here. Moreover, just like Nisha, the elders too speak of their attachment to the goddess not in terms of a purely spiritual connection, a mental exercise of faith. Instead, their faith is their commitment to practice itself – all the attention they pay to the goddess's image, washing and decorating her and making offerings to her, even when their physical frailties have made daily functioning quite difficult. As a corollary to this, any disappointment in the goddess is expressed in terms of a withdrawal from embodied practice. Their incredibly pragmatic way of expressing it was to say something to the effect that they would take their attention and labor elsewhere since the goddess did not seem to care enough for them. Their

airing that sentiment felt almost like phatic communication – like a sigh or a clearing of throat to check if the connection was still intact, if the goddess was still listening.

Chapter 3
Making a World with a Word
Language, Intimacy, and Ethical Relationality

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on the social life of the Tamil word *pottai* in the thirunangai lifeworld. By tracking the varied ways in which my thirunangai interlocutors use the word *pottai* in everyday speech, I detail a range of ethical-relational work in which they are engaged. I first lay out the semantic field of the word *pottai* and distinguish it from the identity label *thirunangai*. I argue that while *thirunangai* performs the important work of being a widely-accepted identity label for transgender women of Tamil Nadu, it is not part of the intimate vocabulary of everyday relational work among thirunangais. Other words, such as *kothi* and *pottai,* take on that affective labor. Among my thirunangai interlocutors, the word *pottai*, in particular, carries a vibrancy and capaciousness for relational intimacy, which I attempt to depict ethnographically. While goddess Angalamman is not at the center of this discussion, we will see that the figure of the saamippottai*, i.e. the thirunangai-maruladi, is often in the semantic vicinity of *pottai.*

Pottai is not a word exclusive to thirunangais. It is a widely used word in everyday Tamil social discourse, primarily as a term of disparagement. If you call someone a "pottai" you are saying they are effeminate. It has the sting of calling someone a sissy or a faggot, or, at an earlier time, queer, before its recontextualization and appropriation occurred.[58] Thus, in some ways, it partakes of the qualities of various other terms of disparagement which allow for some incredible relational work and in-group intimacy and solidarity. However, the word *pottai* is not part of such histories of reclamation and appropriation. To be clear, it is an act of unmitigated insult for an outsider to call a thirunangai *pottai*. In everyday Tamil social discourse, to call a man a *pottai* is to question his masculinity. That is, *pottai* has status-lowering force. In some parts of Tamil Nadu, the expression *pottai-pillai* (or *pottai-pulla* in spoken form) is used to refer to girls or young women. This follows from the word's uncorrupt form *pettai*, which means "female of a species." For example, *pettai kozhi* means *hen*, as opposed to *rooster*. *Pottai* thus says something about

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[58] For an account of the cultural transformations of the word 'sissy,' See Harry Thomas Jr.'s *Sissy: The Effeminate Paradox in Postwar U.S. Literature and Culture* (2017). Also see Erin J. Rand's *Reclaiming Queer: Activist and Academic Rhetorics of Resistance* (2014).

gender. It is associated with femininity and is nearly always status-lowering in its performative force.

Growing up queer in Tamil Nadu, I have had my share of experiences with the word *pottai.* It was very much part of my years of adolescent turbulence, when my queerness and my passion for dancing shaped my bodily comportment in ways that were beyond my conscious control. *Pottai* was one of the things you were likely to be called, if you were male-bodied but effeminate. When used by boys your age, it was not only an occasional verbal insult; it also marked your outsider status to male peer groups at school. When I heard adult men on the street outside my dance school say that my gestures were "pottai madhiri," i.e. pottai-like, I knew instantly that they were not complimenting me. I folded the word into my young mind and body as something to reckon with, hopefully disprove, possibly dissociate myself from completely. Then when my dance teacher spoke to me about the need for boys to dance like boys, I knew that the word *pottai* lurked somewhere in the gaps between his words.

Since I carried with me this affecting personal history of experience with the word, I was a little surprised to hear my thirunangai interlocutors use the word a lot to refer to and address each other everyday. But within this world, I took the word *pottai* to be mainly a person-deixis. That is, when I heard "Ey pottai!" or "That pottai," I took them to mean "Hey girl!" and "That woman." I sensed that while *thirunangai* was an identity term, *pottai* was a person deictic, that it was pronominal in its use. For example: "Ey pottai!" (*you*), "andha pottai" (*she*), "indha pottainga" (*they*), etc. I was not incorrect in my reading. But as I paid closer attention to the ways in which my thirunangai friends used the word *pottai*, I came to see that it performed more than the work of a gender indexical. In being a relational index – that is, in being an index that said something about both the addresser as well as the addressee and the relationship that obtained between them in the context of use – *pottai* was deeply involved in the work of ethical relationality.[59]

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[59] See Fleming (2012) for a discussion of gender indexicality and the distinction between absolute and relational social indexicals. I do not commit myself to a fully-blown linguistic analysis of *pottai* as a social index. Nevertheless, I find it useful to draw on the distinction between 'relational' and 'absolute' indexicals. The relational type of index carries information about both the speaker as well as the addressee. In other words, it communicates the relationship that obtains between the two: "In order to interpret the information encoded in relational types one must attend to both elements of the role dyad (e.g. speaker þ addressee, speaker þ bystander)" (2012: 297). Fleming's point is that in order to understand relational indexes, we need to pay attention to the roles and stances of both the speaker and the addressee that are indexed.

3.1.1 To be a Pottai and to Belong – Ethical Affordances and Relationality

Azhagamma is an elder in the thirunangai community. She lives in the Kellys area of central-north Chennai, where she has a small temple for an Amman goddess. Azhagamma also happens to be my friend Nisha's guru and mother within the ritually formalized relationships of apprenticeship and kinship. One late-summer morning in 2016, Nisha and I arrived at Azhagamma's temple to do some cooking. It was Azhagamma's birthday, and she had requested Nisha to cook about 30 kgs of vegetable biriyani, so that she could do *annadhaanam* – distribute free food to all who are willing to receive it. I was to be Nisha's helper at the task.

At some point during the preparation, after Nisha and I had finished chopping several kilograms of potatoes, carrots, and tomatoes, Azhagamma sent me on an errand. She needed me to get her a medicine from the local pharmacy. While kickstarting Nisha's scooter to set out on my errand, I happened to notice Azhagamma ask Nisha something about me in a hushed voice. When I returned from the pharmacy, and as soon as I could catch a private moment with Nisha, I asked her what it was that Azhagamma had asked her about me.

Trying hard not to laugh, Nisha shared with me their exchange. She told me that Azhagamma asked her, gesturing towards me with a tilt of her head – "Is this one a brahmin?" To which, Nisha had replied, "Yes, ma." Then, Nisha said, there were a few seconds of silence, after which Azhagamma said: "See, this shows you. No matter what caste you come from, how great your family might be, if you are meant to be born a pottai, you will be born a pottai."

I was absolutely elated at this recognition. I was clearly not a thirunangai. I did not officially belong to any of the thirunangai lineages or kin groups. I had not done the things a person needed to do in order to qualify to be considered a thirunangai. But something about me was sufficient enough to merit inclusion in the category *pottai*. In that moment, I took that "something" to be primarily a recognition of some femininity in me. Interestingly, the same word *pottai*, which had, as a teenager, terrorized me into closely monitoring my own body and censoring any overt expressions of femininity, was now returning to me as a mark of recognition and belonging.

From that moment on, I started playing closer attention to the use of the word *pottai* among my thirunangai elders and friends. I found that it did a lot more than the work of gendering. Its interactional possibilities went beyond the recognition and validation of femininity in male-bodied persons (or person assigned the male gender at birth). I argue here that the word *pottai* carries important "ethical affordances" that allow it to perform the work of ethical relationality. Webb

Keane's (2016) concept of "ethical affordance" is useful in drawing attention to the deeply contextual ways in which people grasp the possibilities afforded by language, material objects, available discourses, etc., to communicate ethical stances, i.e. the quality of their orientation towards the situation at hand and those involved in it. The idea of affordance refrains from seeing people purely as subjects with a definitive interiority and agency to act upon the world. It also refrains from taking entities such as language, discourses, and the material world around as fully delineated objects with known uses and limitations. Instead, with affordance, Keane brings to attention the ways in which people might grasp the potentialities offered by the environment.

Here, in Azhagamma's usage and, as I will show, in the way other thirunangais deployed it, the word *pottai* shimmers with certain possibilities that make it conducive for ethical relational work. For instance, it has the property of not being an identity term with narrow membership criteria; it casts a wider semantic net over a wider range of gender expressions. So the word can allow for some broader inclusive gestures in interactional settings. However, such potentialities have to be seized by users for them to be realized as meaningful actions in the world. This coming together of possibilities, this human apprehension of the possibilities for ethical stances afforded by the things that gather around us (including language) is what Keane signals by the term: "By ethical affordance I mean any aspects of people's experiences and perceptions they might draw on in the process of making ethical evaluations and decisions, whether consciously or not" (2016: 27). Keane also reminds us that "affordances are objective features in contingent combination" and "they only exist as affordances relative to the properties of some *other* perceiving and acting entity" (ibid., 28). In other words, the weight of the action is distributed between the human actor and the things-with-potentialities that constitute the environment. What I seek to show in this chapter is that the word *pottai* lends itself to various kinds of ethical relational work. But I also hope I simultaneously keep in view the other part of my argument: such ethical relational work happens because my thirunangai interlocutors care about doing relationships in particular ways.

Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall's (2005) concept of *adequation* is helpful in understanding the ethical relational work Azhagamma is doing here. In theorizing the various dynamics of identity as they emerge in interaction, Bucholtz and Hall define adequation thus:

> The term *adequation* emphasizes the fact that in order for groups or individuals to be positioned as alike, they need not – and in any case cannot – be identical, but must surely be understood as sufficiently similar for current interactional purposes. Thus, differences irrelevant or damaging to ongoing efforts to adequate two people or groups will be

downplayed, and similarities viewed as salient to and supportive of the immediate project of identity work will be foregrounded. (599)

For Azhagamma, *pottai* affords a way to apprehend my gender presentation as something that brings me closer to thirunangais. It allows her to deemphasize aspects of my identity that would mark the differences between us and, instead, highlight what matters to establish intersubjectivity in the context of the interaction. It helps her highlight those aspects of me that she finds relevant for the purposes of inclusion and belonging. She explicitly lays out the things that separate us: my caste and class locations. But, she offers, my being a pottai is, in some ways, a challenge to my caste and class privilege. *Pottai* allows her to make sense of who I am in a way that facilitates intimacy.

Pottai, as I show in this chapter, allows my thirunangai interlocutors to perform an incredible range of relational work:

- it allows thirunangais to deemphasize differences and distinctions both among themselves as well as between them and others;
- it carries the potential to signal and bring into being intimacies beyond the bounds of identity;
- it indexes a plurality of conceptions of moral personhood; and
- it points towards multiple horizons of possibility, freedom, and desire.

3.1.2 *Thirunangai* and *Pottai* – Division of Labor

As I mentioned in the Introduction, *Thirunangai* is currently the most preferred and most widely embraced label for transfeminine identity in Tamil Nadu. It is useful to contrast *pottai* with *thirunangai*, because it helps us see how *pottai* brings particular kinds of ethical affordances to the table. As a label of collective self-representation of Tamil transfeminine identity, *thirunangai* came into circulation within the last ten years. It was introduced by a well-known transgender artiste, Narthaki Nataraj, and it gained wider circulation once it was endorsed and used by Dr. M. Karunanidhi, then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu (Tom & Menon, forthcoming). His stature as the leader of the political party that was responsible for instituting a range of welfare policies and systems for transwomen, and his reputation as a Tamil scholar, helped in popularizing the label *thirunangai* both among the transfeminine community as well as the wider Tamil public sphere. Unlike the identity label *aravani* that immediately preceded it, *thirunangai* is free of religious

connotations. Instead, in combining the honorary prefix *thiru* and the stylized word *nangai* which means 'woman,' *thirunangai* aligns itself with histories of Dravidian self-assertion of anti-religious and anti-caste regional identity and politics of self-respect.[60]

     Thirunangai is the identity through which transfeminine communities in Tamil Nadu now conduct their affairs with the state. That is, *thirunangai* is a juridical category, the locus of rights and representations. It is also the name in which they engage with the Tamil public sphere. *Thirunangai* has also come to be how the state addresses and interpellates transgender women as citizen-subjects. So while the label *thirunangai* does the important work of remedying transgender women's social status in language, it also becomes the name in which the state exhorts them to become respectable and responsible, reforming their sexual lives and livelihoods. As an identity category associated with state processes, *thirunangai* can also often be a policed category. Who qualifies to be recognized as a thirunangai is a question that comes up from time to time and is contested and argued passionately. Other than the question of status hierarchy, one important worry that animates this desire to draw the boundaries of thirunangai identity legibly is that people who are not really thirunangais might compete for the resources, benefits, and schemes the state allocates for them.[61] However, in everyday interactions, my thirunangai interlocutors never addressed or referred to each other as thirunangais. They primarily used the words *pottai* or *kothi* for that purpose.[62]

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[60] See Nataraj (2019) for a discussion of the influence of Dravidian political ethos in the constructions of the "thirunangai imaginary."

[61] The Transgender Persons' (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 has long been critiqued for policing the boundaries of transgender juridical identity by necessitating medical certification. For discussions of self-determination of gender identity (transfeminine, transmasculine, non-binary) and critiques of the medical model of identity, see: Press Release by members of transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming communities critiquing the Transgender Persons Bill 2019 (URL: http://orinam.net/content/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Press-Release-26.11.2019.pdf, access on 26 February 2019) and "Tamil Nadu protests Trans Bill 2019" (URL: http://orinam.net/tn-protests-transbill-2019/, accessed on 26 February 2019).

[62] *Kothi* is category that emerged into prominence in the early 2000s in the context of HIV/AIDS public health interventions and the classificatory paradigms of behavior and identity that they invoked. By and large, *kothi* is taken to refer to effeminate males who are sexually attracted to men and taken on the "passive" (penetrated) role in sex. That is a narrow definition for sure. Within the thirunangai world, *kothi* is sometimes used to refer to all thirunangais but more often to those who have not fully taken on feminine expression, attire, and bodily transformation (including, but not exclusively, sex reassignment surgery). For illuminating discussions on kothi identity, see Cohen (2005), Reddy (2005), Boyce (2007), Dutta (2012).

3.2 Entanglements of History and Language

3.2.1 Less than/More than: the Lack and Excess of being Pottai

Growing up in Tamil Nadu, I only encountered the word *pottai* as a term of abuse and ridicule. When hurled at boys like me, I knew that the word meant I was effeminate. In fact, "sissy" or "girlish" would be good translations for the Tamil word. "Pottai payyan" meant "a boy who was girlish." This derogatory sense of the word is well-documented in various narratives. As a gendered insult, this word has a robust presence in Tamil social life. Take, for instance, thirunangai author Priyababu's novella *Moondraam Paalin Mugam (The Face of the Third Gender,* 2008*)* and Shreedhar Sadasivan's short story *Vali (The Pain, Thinnai.com,* 2010*)*. Both these fictional narratives document the deeply wounding use of the word "pottai." So does thirunangai writer and activist A. Revathi's celebrated memoir *The Truth About Me* (2011).

In Priyababu's novella, the abuse is hurled at the protagonist Ramesh, who struggles with the discontent of being in a male body and having been socialized as a boy. In this narrative of struggle, self-discovery, and self-affirmation, he eventually becomes a thirunangai. But that path is strewn with struggles, insults, and abuses. Ramesh's own brother calls him a pottai. And barely a few pages after this scene, we see that a thirunangai is being physically assaulted and verbally abused by a moneylender, and he calls her a pottai.

In Sadasivan's short story "Vali" ("Pain"), the first-person narrator is an adolescent boy who is bullied at school. Here again, the word "pottai" carries the force of gendered abuse. Towards the end of the story, we see that the "pain" in the story's title refers both to the pain from the physical assaults he endures in the hands of his bullies as well as to the wounding caused by verbal abuse. The word "pottai" features prominently. The story's protagonist Kumar is a boy in his early adolescence, who undergoes much bullying at school for his perceived effeminacy. His bullies call him a "pottai" and constantly ridicule him. In this context, Kumar happens to befriend a new transfer student to his school, Ganesh. But the bullies target Ganesh too for his friendship with Kumar and ask him if he was a pottai too. Later, feeling bad that his new friend got into trouble because of their friendship, Kumar reaches out to him, only to be pushed away by Ganesh, who also calls him a "pottai."

In his ethnographic study of the thirunangai community, authored in Tamil, K. Padmabarathi (2013) suggests that the word "pottai" is meant to insinuate that a person is impotent. He lists the word alongside a number of other terms that are abusive and directed at thirunangais

in Chennai.[63] [64] In the two literary examples I discussed above, the word is used to mark a perceived effeminacy in an ostensibly male body. In Padmabarathi's claim that the word means "impotent," we see a slightly different shade of meaning. Is it meant to refer to those men who are believed to be impotent in the reproductive sense, or is it meant to impute a kind of social impotency, a charge of effeteness that is meant to goad and provoke? It appears that the word encompasses both these meanings and more.[65] In his 1859 compilation, entitled *A Tamil Vade Mecum or Guide to Ungrammatical Expressions Used in Ordinary Conversation; consisting of the Vulgarisms of the Tamil Language,* P. Singarapelavanderam Pillay has an entry for the word 'pottai.' He refers to it as a corruption of the Tamil word "pettai":

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பெட்டை, பொட்டை ; the female of bird பொட்டைக்கோழி ; a hen.—பெட்டைமாறி, a cuckold, one who exchanges his wife. பெண்ணைவாயன் or பெட்டையன், a hermaphrodite ; a eunuch ; a womanish or effeminate man. பொட்டை, a blind man.

It appears, therefore, that the word *pottai* was in circulation even in the mid-nineteenth century and was capable of signifying the female, the impotent, the cuckold, the hermaphrodite, the eunuch, and the effeminate. Interestingly, such a bundled-up signification in which the category eunuch, the performative recognition of effeminacy, and the imputation of impotency

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[63] As has been the case in a number of works about thirunangais (earlier works speak of them as "alis" and then "aravanis"), Padmabarathi too speaks of them unproblematically as intersexed people, suggesting that their gender identity is congenital abnormality based on chromosomal defect or ambiguous genitalia (Samuthiram 1994, Ramakrishnan 2013). The vast body of literature on Hijras also grapples with the question of whether they are homosexual men, or impotent men, or intersexed persons, or eunuchs who were castrated. Reddy (2005) and Shane Patrick (2009) discuss in detail the representations of gender variant people in the long duree history of the Indian subcontinent. What is evident from these discussions is that there has been a constant shift in categorizing who hijras are. As Patrick demonstrates, colonial logics of classification have had a great impact on this categorization, figuring 'hijra' not only as a gender category but also as one of sexual and social deviance and criminality.

[64] Padmabarathi titles his work *Aravanigal – An Ethnographic Study*, since 'aravani' was the accepted and non-derogatory term during the time of his research. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the term 'thirunangai' has replaced 'aravani' as the label embraced by the community.

[65] More recently, on Twitter, Tamil actor and celebrity Kasturi used the word 'pottai' to ridicule a man who went silent after starting an argument with her. When another person asked her why she would use a term that was "degrading a feminine," Kasturi tweeted back that 'pottai' did not only mean "woman," but that it also meant "useless," "uncultivable," and "impotent."

appear together corresponds to British colonial governmental framing of hijras in the Criminal Tribes Act. As Gayatri Reddy has observed:

> Under this Act, the term *eunuch* was "deemed to include all persons of the male sex who admit themselves, or on medical inspection clearly appear to be impotent," a classification that then allowed for the registration, surveillance, and ability to arrest all such individual. This category included individuals who… "appear dressed or ornamented like a woman, in a public street or place, or in any other place, with the intention of being seen from a public street or place." (Reddy 2005: 26)

Drawing upon scholarship on colonial representations of the hijra, Reddy shows how divergent British understandings of the hijra were. According to one line of colonial understanding of the category *hijra*, the term referred to " 'naturally impotent men." A second view focused on males who had "malformed" genitalia. And the third view focused on "artificial eunuchs" which referred to those who underwent castration willingly for religious or other reasons (Reddy 2005:26). Thus, colonial knowledge about the hijras' gender and sexual identity converged around a framing of deficient masculinity that had both a corporeal inside and outside, with the idea of impotence marking the inside and a feminine gender performance marking the outside. The governmentality of "medical inspection" becomes the regime that establishes the truth of the hijra by matching the inside with the outside. As Lawrence Cohen has shown, hijras and thirunangais often play with this inside/outside truth regime when they (threaten to) lift their saris or skirts to show the wounded place or "hole" in public (Cohen 1995).

My objective is not to inscribe *pottai* as a category that carries residues of pre-modern, pre-identitarian understanding of gender and sexual identities. As Aniruddha Dutta (2012) has argued with regard to the historicity of *hijra* and *kothi*, such a claim will restage arguments about the force of colonial institutions in turning into rigid identities those social formations and groupings that were ostensibly fuzzy and more negotiable prior to colonial interventions. As Dutta has shown, while scholars like Arjun Appadurai and Nicholas Dirks have advanced such an argument about the effects of colonial governmentality on local social forms, others, like Sumit Guha, have challenged such readings as overvaluation of the reach of colonial governmental technologies (Dutta 2012). A similar argument can be made with respect to the interventions of neoliberal gender and sexual identity politics ushered in by what Lawrence Cohen calls "HIV cosmopolitanism" (Cohen 2005). Dutta (2012) recounts these debates and recommends an analytical move that would neither claim continuity nor radical discontinuity for Indic gender and

sexuality categories vis-à-vis colonial intervention and, later, globalized HIV-human rights-identitarian discourses. Instead Dutta recommends that we look at the "collusions between the self-representation of subcultural networks or communities and (post-)colonial cartographies of identity." By engaging in such a reading, we can pay attention to a form like *pottai* and its discontinuity with newer formations like *thirunangai*, but without attributing such a discontinuity and consolidation of identity purely to governmentality. In other words, we should see the articulation and consolidation of *thirunangai* identity over the past decade as processes involving the creative labor of the people whose sense of self and lived reality are implicated in it. As Dutta puts it: "The translocal consolidation of these identities creates significant temporal discontinuities between the older forms of gender/sexual variance and emerging identity formations in India, but this rupture itself might be instituted in collusion with older communities and subcultures" (2012: 827).

If we return to the word *pottai* with a sense of this complex and contested history of the third sex/gender in India, we see that the word already served to group together entities that were perceived in terms of phallic deficiency – starting with women and moving on to the effeminate, the impotent, and the castrated, including also the cuckold, who allegedly loses his masculinity by failing to retain singular ownership of his wife. Contemporary dictionaries of the Tamil language too provide these meanings, establishing that the word "pottai" as it functions in spoken usage (*pecchu vazhakku*) is a corruption of the word "pettai," while the actual Tamil word "pottai" is meant to mean "blind."[66]

3.2.2 Why *Pottai*?

If the word *pottai* is still used by thirunangais despite its pejorative meanings, could we say that it is, like *queer* in the U.S., a word reclaimed through moves of activist self-assertions in the face of social stigma? Here I draw upon Hall (2003) to briefly detail the reclamation of the word *queer* that occurred in the radical activism of groups such as ACTUP and Queer Nation. The word *pottai*, however, does not follow a similar trajectory. It has not become the reclaimed label of

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[66] The acclaimed Tamil writer T. Janakiraman has a fine short story titled *Pottai*, about a blind man in his 80s, who takes offense to being called a "pottaiyan." The story is a brilliant depiction of all that he could see before he went blind and all that he did continue to "see," even when those with eyes couldn't see them – the wrongs and injustices of the society.

collective self-assertion, or an umbrella category for diverse identities, or a locus of activist-intellectual work. The neologism *thirunangai*, devoid of any significant history, is the one that the community has embraced.

Reclamation of words of abuse as powerful markers of self-identity and radical politics is a known phenomenon. Take the word *queer*, for instance. Long in circulation as a term of insult aimed at gay, lesbian, and transgender persons in the United States, the word entered a new history of usage in the early 1990s when the Queer Nation was formed to add strength to the work of ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) that had been working through the years of the AIDS crisis, staging powerful public demonstrations and media events to bring moral accountability to the fact that the way the crisis had been framed was letting gay men die without proper assistance. ACT UP and Queer Nation brought much-needed visibility to the mounting homophobia not only from the public but also from the government. Speaking of the Queer Nation's work, Donald Hall (2003) writes:

> Queer Nation's public demonstrations included kiss-ins, leaflet and manifesto distribution, and other 'in-your-face' displace of same-sex affection (especially in such 'ordinary' spaces as shopping malls, straight bars, etc.) to make their well-known overall point: 'We're here, we're queer, get used to it.' (Hall 2003:53)

Speaking of the group's reclamation of the word 'queer,' Hall locates that act alongside other similar acts of linguistic wresting of power from the hands of abusers and oppressors:

> 'Queer,' a term commonly used to deride and vilify same-sex desiring people, was reclaimed by Queer Nation and others as a umbrella term to celebrate rather than castigate, difference from the 'norm' at a time when the oppressiveness and implicit violence of that norm was clear and undeniable. Just as other oppressed groups and individuals have 'turned the tables,' so to speak, on oppressors by occupying and rewriting the meaning of slurs (such as "bitch" or "nigger" in music culture and certain intracommunal usages), political action groups responding angrily to governmentally sanctioned homophobia took back a term that drew immediate attention to itself as a (now positive) marker of difference, and that more broadly drew attention to the way language has long been used to categorize and devalue human lives and lifestyles. (Hall 2003:54)

The term *pottai* does not function in any of the above ways. Even though it continues to be used by thirunangais, its current usage is not a result of activist reclamation that has imbued it with radical and positive meanings. Besides, thirunangais do not use *pottai* as equivalent to *thirunangai* – that is, it does not figure as a term of positive self-assertion or as term that qualifies to be a juridical or even a public category. Is that only because of its entrenched pejorative meanings? If

yes, why would thirunangais continue to use it even in the limited ways in which they do? We can begin to find answers for these questions only if we pay attention to the contexts of its usage among thirunangais.

3.3 Indexical Valences and Ethical Entailments

3.3.1 *Pottai* as belonging

One day, Nisha called me on the phone, and said, "Nani just called. You know the house she has bought in the street next to hers? She is having a ritual performed there tomorrow. She has invited us. I can't go, I have some other work tomorrow. You go if you can." While I thought it was sweet of Nani to invite me to the ritual, I suspected she was just being nice to me. I reasoned – I have been hanging out with Nisha a lot; I have pretty much become her "plus one;' and I have only ever gone to Nani's place along with Nisha, never by myself. So I told myself that I wouldn't just show up at the ritual Nani had arranged, if Nisha wasn't going, too. And I didn't go. After all, she was Nisha's Nani. Lakshmi Nani was Nisha's former guru's guru's guru, or we might say mother's mother's mother, depending on whether the terms of guru-chela relationship or mother-daughter relationship were invoked. Imitating Nisha, I had started addressing her as "Nani" as well. But that didn't mean, I told myself, I had any kind of independent relationship with Nani yet.

Two days later, I was pleasantly surprised, when Nani called me on the phone. "Nisha gave me your number," she said. "Can you come for lunch today?" I said yes. "What should I cook?" she asked. I felt very moved by her affection. I told her that I would eat whatever she made. I already knew that Nani too was a vegetarian, so I didn't have to explain my diet to her. She said, "Seri. I will make manga and murungakkai sambar. Shall I also make karnaikizhangu (yam) poriyal?" She had just offered to make my most favorite meal. How could I resist?

It was around noon when I arrived at her place in Old Washermanpet in North Chennai that day. Nani lived in a tiny house in a narrow street in Old Washermanpet. The entire house was about 300 sq. ft. in area, within which were a kitchen, a toilet, and living room which was also the prayer room and a bedroom. I sat in the living room, loudly giving her an account of my days since I saw her last, raising my voice over the din of the TV. As soon as Nani finished her cooking, she put some food on a plate and placed it in front of the stone image of the goddess. Among the liturgical paraphernalia was a small copper cup holding water, with a little copper spoon inside. Nani took some water in the spoon, circled it around the plate once, and emptied the water on the

floor close to the plate. The offering completed in that swift gesture, she then turned to me, and said, "We can eat in a while. Let's go get some tea." Nani picked up the usual tea thooku, a little carrier with a lid and a handle, and we set out. She took me through the various narrow streets of her neighborhood, all washed clean and sporting kolams, ephemeral designs on the ground with flour or white chalk powder, that were in various stages of disarray under the walking and running feet of adults, children, and stray dogs.

On our way through the narrow winding streets, women were sitting in small groups outside some of the houses, engaged in various activities – picking stones from rice on a winnowing fan, washing dishes, or just chatting. At the first such scene, Nani stopped to greet the women. And she said, pointing to me, "This is my daughter. She is studying abroad." She then turned to me, and said, "Daughter or granddaughter? Doesn't matter!" and laughed, throwing her head back in abandon. I was too moved by the gesture to respond. Nani stopped at a few other houses where women were hanging out outside, and again introduced me as her granddaughter. "En paethi ma," she said, touching me gently on the arm each time she said that. At that point in our relationship, Nani had not even managed to say my name right. She often called me "Asmath," and Nisha and others corrected her impatiently. But here she was, introducing me to her neighbors as her paethi. And all the women smiled in welcome. We moved on after Nani and the women exchanged a few more pleasantries.

At the tea shop, as we waited for our tea, Nani said to me, "In this area, there is a lot of respect for pottais." I realized that this was a significant moment and remark. I felt that I was being placed in the vicinity of the category *pottai*. It was not the first time this was happening. By then, some other thirunangais had already used the term to gesture towards something we had in common. Until then, I had simply allowed myself to bask in that affectionate gesture of inclusion, but now, after Nani's remark, I began to wonder if *pottai* had more to it that I needed to understand. I began to suspect that it was a kind of unassuming linguistic corner where a lot of wonderful and complex social dynamics and knowledge were hiding in plain sight, as it were. Back at her place, as we sat drinking the tea, she said, "I asked Nisha why you didn't come to the pujai at the new house yesterday. She said, 'How do I know? Ask him yourself. Maybe he had some other work to do. Or maybe he felt shy to come without me.'" I just said, "Sorry, Nani."

Nani's efforts that day had been, at least partly, to make clear to me how she saw the relationship between us. She accomplished that not only through private gestures of hanging out

with me and cooking for me, but also by claiming the relationship publicly. She used the language of close female kinship to introduce me to a small audience of women in the neighborhood, none of whom showed even a sliver of doubt or surprise in their faces. The women knew her well, so they knew I was not really her granddaughter. They could see me in front of them, and I didn't look like anybody's granddaughter. For that matter, Nani did not look like anybody's grandmother either. But the women acknowledged Nani's words as if there was nothing surprising or out of the way about it. And Nani's commentary on that experience was that in that neighborhood there was "a lot of respect for pottais." That is, the regard I saw in the women's eyes was a recognition of Nani as a pottai. And she seemed to suggest that I could partake of that recognition, too. But she also managed to let me know gently that being part of her pottai world had its entailments. I needed to show up.

3.3.2 *Pottai* – the Great Leveler

Kumari, a kothi (effeminate male) who also went by the male name Sekar, quit her job at a community-based organization (CBO) after months of enduring put-downs and other kinds of differential treatment from a male superior at work. Even though the organization was run by, and for, transgender welfare, the thirunangai leader and colleagues at work had not supported Kumari sufficiently in the face of discriminatory treatment from a male superior. Kumari spiraled into a depression at the unfairness she had experienced and her sudden state of unemployment. She also felt that her being seen as a kothi, and hence as less than a thirunangai, was at the heart of the poor treatment and lack of support she had endured.

Kumari's friends decided to intervene and put together a show of strength in support of her. So one day, a group of about ten thirunangais set out in a van to meet the staff of this organization. I was recruited to document the proceedings. Soon after we arrived there, a member of the staff brought cups of tea on a tray and offered it first to one of my thirunangai friends. She pointed to the elder who was sitting next to her, and said, "Offer tea to elders first." And the elder remarked, "Oh, it does not matter. How does it matter who drinks tea first? We are all pottais here. Aren't we?" *Naama inga ellaarum pottainga dhaana.* Then turning to me, she said, in a louder voice, "What do you say, ma? All pottais here." At a later moment in the meeting, she stood up and said emphatically to the representatives of the organization, referring to Kumari by pointing, "We cannot just stay quiet simply watching an injustice being done to a thirunangai."

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In the first instance, she used the word *pottai* to express the idea that the differences and hierarchies between thirunangais and kothis were immaterial in the face of the fact that they were all pottais after all. In the second instance, she used the word *thirunangai* to signal that she considered Kumari to be a thirunangai (even if many others might consider her only a kothi), a point that was not going to be openly disputed when made by a vocal and powerful thirunangai leader like her. Nevertheless, in order to bolster up her claim, she listed the long years of work that Kumari had performed in service of the community: her work as an HIV outreach worker, then as a peer-counsellor, as a counsellor trainer, and later as a program officer.

She marshalled the paradigmatic contrast between 'pottai' and 'thirunangai' to good effect. On one hand, she pointed out to everyone's *pottainess* as what they/we shared in common. On the other hand, she explicitly referred to Kumari as a thirunangai, countering the gender ideology by which she would be treated as a kothi and hence somehow less than a thirunangai. However, throughout the interaction, she never explicitly pointed out that Kumari might have been discriminated against because of the thirunangai/kothi hierarchy. She did not explicitly moralize what she took to be the structuring assumptions of the other group. She made her point simply by calling attention to everyone's fundamental *pottainess* and by claiming thirunangai identity for Kumari.

Instances such as these can illuminate the question of scale with which the anthropological literature on ethics grapples. For example, one prominent discussion in the ethics literature has been on the question of "ordinariness" or "immanence" of the ethical to everyday life. Veena Das (2010), Michael Lambek (2010), Cheryl Mattingly (2013), and others have argued for seeing the ethical not as a distinct domain of social life where we stand aside from the flow of life and face the ethical considerations we are presented with. In their view, considerations of *how-to-be* do not have to take the form of "moral breakdowns" (Zigon 2008), nor do they only have to be moments of conscious reflection and self-cultivation (Mahmood 2005, Hirschkind 2006, Foucault 1997). The ethical, they have argued, can be "immanent" to ordinary life, suffusing the minutiae of our relationships with one another – gestures of care, ordinary speech, commitments to routine, etc. Other scholars, however, have pointed out the problems with such a characterization of the ethical as "immanent" to ordinary life. Michael Lempert (2013) has argued that formulating the ethical as always already there in interactional ebb and flow of everyday life could keep our attention away from "the labor and methods through which actors strain to make the ethical not just effective but

intersubjectively relevant" (2013: 371). His point is that ethical events require some kind of communicative labor to occur. The ethical is made manifest in some form that is semiotically recognizable to the actors involved.

In the ethnographic vignette I offered above, we can see the ethical in all of these dimensions. In the first instance, when the host performs a social faux pas in not offering tea to the elder first, the elder responds to it with a kind of face-saving gesture that Erving Goffman (1967) has shown us is a ubiquitous feature of social interactions: "Oh, it does not matter. How does it matter who drinks tea first? We are all pottais here." We might see this perhaps as an example of ethical immanence, the sense in which ethical stances are already part of interactional templates and stances readily available to us. However, in repeating and emphasizing a portion of that utterance -- "What do you say, ma? All pottais here" – the elder appears to switch to a metapragmatic level, drawing attention to her own language and its implications for the situation in question. Here, the ethical act has already switched gears, as it were, towards becoming a conscious stance. Later, when she stands up to affirm Kumari as a thirunangai (even though the other group might see her as a kothi and hence of a lower status), that utterance gathers some of its performative force from the paradigmatic contrast between *pottai* and *thirunangai*, the former levelling the differences and the latter doing some status-elevation. In making this final gesture, the elder draws upon Kumari's history of community work as relevant criterion for inclusion and respect.

In these three discrete ethical moments that are part of one continuous social encounter, we can see the possibility for the ethical to be of three different scales: as embedded in the prior force of the interactional order; as calling for some metapragmatic work to emphasize and frame relevance; and as involving complex communicative labor to accomplish an ethical act. Here, we see yet another feature of ethicality as it presents itself in the flow of life: *ethical imminence* (Dave 2010, Sidnell et al. 2019). Even in a situation such as the one presented above, where the overarching ethical question is well-defined as one of solidarity, there is no telling what ethical affordances will present themselves and what stances will be taken. What is about to come can only be foreshadowed by the possibilities of a given moment. The host making a social error in not offering the cup of tea first to the thirunangai elder was a fortuitous occurrence, which elicited a socially agreeable, face-saving response from the elder. But it opened up the possibilities for further ethical stances and gestures. Beyond these interactional scales, enveloping them is the

background that is the discourse aspect of the ethical: what makes these utterances and stances meaningful is the discourse about the hierarchies of kothi and thirunangai identities that frames the entire context.

Gayathri Reddy (2005) has pointed out similar dynamics of relationships among hijras and kothis (seen as effeminate males who have retained some aspects of masculine self-presentation) in Hyderabad. The Telugu word "manollu," meaning "our people," is invoked as a "contextual signifier" to include different kinds of people depending on the demands of the situation:

> For the most part, family for hijras refers to other hijras, and yet not all non-hijras are excluded from consideration: non-hijra kotis are also considered *manollu* (our people). The use of this term implies a wider, shared community of actors. It is a contextual signifier, depending to some degree on the particular actors present. For hijras *manollu* refers to the members of their own in-group – hijras – in the context of other kotis, but it refers to the entire *koti* community when the social context includes panthis (or narans). (175)

While the elders use of *pottai* and *thirunangai* in the above ethnographic context appears similar to the shifting sentiment of inclusivity observed by Reddy in the notion of "manollu," there is a key difference. In the incident I have detailed, the elder's reminder to everyone that they are all pottais and her claim that Kumari (who is otherwise seen as a kothi) is a thirunangai is not addressed primarily to outsiders, but to thirunangais themselves. She reminds her fellow thirunangais of the various criteria of inclusion that apply other than differences and hierarchies of identity. No one shall treat Kumari as merely a kothi and hence somehow less than a thirunangai. Her years of work and her commitment to relationships within the thirunangai community mattered, not just a superficial reading of identity. What the elder was making was not a strategic gesture of inclusion but an ethical one. And the ethical act was made possible and rendered effective as much by the affordances of the unfolding interaction as it was by larger frameworks of identity and community that lay outside it.

3.3.3 *Pottai* as Limits, Potentialities, and Freedoms

Karuna, one of my closest thirunangai friends, was in love with a man. After a few years of love and romance, sometime in 2017, Karuna's boyfriend got engaged to a woman. He told Karuna that he had somehow managed for several years to put off getting married but not anymore. His family was exerting a lot of pressure on him. For the social background he was from, he explained, trying to console a very heartbroken Karuna, any man or woman not being married was a matter of grave concern. Saying "I am not interested" is not enough to allay worries and

suspicions. He had younger sisters who needed to be married, and people would wonder, in fact they already wondered, why he, the brother, was still unmarried. What was wrong with him? What was wrong with his family that no one had married their daughter to him? So he got engaged to a woman. Karuna and I had some long chats about this situation. In a way, she sympathized with him, but she was also disappointed and depressed. For several weeks, Karuna grew quiet and sad, often with puffy eyes from the constant crying. She was mopey and dull, and this was commented upon by her thirunangai peers, but always with sympathy and understanding. They too had experienced heartbreaks of their own, so they had some idea of how hard this could be for her. Even though Karuna said she had made her peace with that reality, closer to wedding, she came unraveled. She was overcome with great sadness at the imminent separation from her boyfriend. What made her even sadder, she said, was the prospect of becoming just a "side dish" in his life.

While we, as her friends, offered Karuna as much support and understanding as we could, Lakshmi Nani, one of our elders, decided we were all wrong to indulge Karuna so much. So one day, she gave Karuna a firm talking-to in our presence. She said:

> You are a pottai, not a pombalai (cis-woman). Don't forget that. Can you offer him children and family and all that? You cannot. You should not come in the way. It is wrong. I have had panthis. But I have never stopped them from getting married. In fact, I have participated in their weddings.

Even though Karuna quietly accepted Nani's advice, she later raged against it while talking to her peers.

> Do pottais become such cheap and easy things for men? So what if I am a pottai? I shower him with love. I give him my body. That's not enough?

But her close friend and roommate Nisha, also a thirunangai, had a different view on the subject of men (even though she did not think that was the time to bring it up). She said to me:

> In my opinion, the good thing about being a pottai is that we can be free of this inconvenience that is men (ambilainga thollai). They will make us cry. By the time they abandon us, we won't recognize ourselves. So I think we should just enjoy but not get trapped with men.

Here, three thirunangais who were part of an intimate kin group came to see that being a pottai oriented them towards different objects of desire, conceptions of good, and horizons of aspiration. In many ways, Nani's remarks felt like a brutal cutting-down-to-size, as if she were disabusing

Karuna of her misguided expectations. "We are pottais, not pombalai," she said – pottais, not women. 'Pottai' here had an 'after all' quality to it: *We are after all just pottais, not women. Let us not forget it.* It served to mark some limitations, the extent to which one's grasp on femininity and some form of womanhood could go. Nani seemed to say that reproductive capacity, which was central to the traditional familial economy, marked a real limit to the kinds of things pottais could desire. Her use of the word *pottai* here contrasted it with *pombalai*, i.e. cis-women, with whom thirunangais could not compete for the enduring affection of men, according to Nani. But for Karuna, a recognition of those limitations was not cause for resignation and acceptance but a chance to see the unfairness of life. Nisha, on the other hand, saw in being pottai the possibility for freedom from normative desires for conjugality and monogamy.

It is useful to juxtapose the use of the word *pottai* here with the identity term *thirunangai.* As Shakthi Nataraj (2019) has analyzed, the "thirunangai imaginary" involves positing a terrain of identity that is distinct from the nationalizing tendencies of the category *hijra* and the religious undertones communicated by the earlier Tamil label *Aravani.* A key feature of *thirunangai* is to affirm "thirunangais as a distinct kind of woman" and not as a " 'third-sex' that was placed outside of male and female gender roles" (p.57). The label *thirunangai* indexes that claim and connection to womanhood through the use of the word *nangai,* meaning *a woman*. And the honorary prefix *thiru* emphasizes the distinctive nature of that womanhood, affirming thirunangai identity as a particularly respectable form of womanhood, a woman-plus status, as it were.[67] Through a careful reading of thirunangai poet Kalki Subramaniam's poetry, Nataraj draws attention to what she has termed the "Dravidianist thirunangai imaginary," which marshals a specific kind of "pure" Tamil language form associated with the Dravidianist political imagination and traditions of oratory and also articulates *thirunangai* as a new location, a place beyond caste, a please of freedom and forging of new kinds of kinship and solidarity (p.74). Analyzing certain Tamil mainstream media representations of thirunangais, Nataraj also shows us that such constructions imagine *thirunangai* in contradistinction to *woman*, highlighting the former as a location signaling a heightened kind of womanhood that is without the encumbrances of procreative sexuality. In a story by Tamil

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[67] I am indebted to Prof. Martha Ann Selby for drawing my attention to the force of the new Tamil label *Thirunangai* in making a simultaneous claim to womanhood as well as an elevated status signaled by the honorary prefix *Thiru.* The use of this prefix has been widely understood as an emphasis on respectability and a call for respect towards transfeminine persons. But the label's simultaneous emphasis on and distinction from womanhood is important to note. Nataraj (2019) has highlighted this aspect of imagining thirunangai identity through distinction from the category woman as an important feature of the thirunangai imaginary.

newspaper columnist Paul Suyambu that Nataraj analyzes, a thirunangai emerges as the ideal kind of wife and mother, with full claims to belonging in traditional family structures, deserving of monogamous conjugality, familial acceptance, and motherhood through adoption. In these representations, thirunangais appear as "models and guides for the family structures of the future" (p.89), disaggregating sexuality, reproduction, womanhood and motherhood across new forms of embodiment and newer structures of belonging. However, in the ethnographic example I have presented above, at least in Nani's view of the world, the word *pottai* is invoked in contradistinction to *pombalai* (colloquial for *woman*) not to signal the possibilities of a thirunangai life. Instead, Nani presents *pottai* as a reminder of its limitations. Karuna too recognizes that her being a thirunangai has come in the way of the kind of conjugal happiness that can be accepted by her partner's family and the wider society. But she sees that limitation as an unjust and unfair result of the resilience of conventional family structures and valorization of heterosexual conjugality. She sees being thirunangai as "enough." She feels that her offer of love, sex, and companionship should be sufficient basis for a relationship.

The word *pottai* here appears capacious enough to support three different conceptions of moral personhood and significantly different ideas about what is desirable in thirunangai life. What contributes partly to these divergences is the fact that the three thirunangais draw on different models of being thirunangai. In many ways, Lakshmi Nani's ideas about the limits of thirunangai life are shared by other elders. At least three of the thirunangai elders I worked with had taken active part in making sure their panthis (male partners) got married to women and had their own children and families. Some of these thirunangais even financially supported these heterosexual families of their lovers whenever they could. Sometimes, they continued their relationships on the side. At other times, they ended their relationships with the men once they got married. But they all were of the opinion that they couldn't come in the way of things that they themselves could not offer: one's own children, socially accepted family life, etc. In contrast to this, Nisha's view, that being a thirunangai can be freeing precisely because she is not a cis-woman, derives partly from her queer-trans-feminist praxis. As an activist who draws on feminism through her engagements with various groups and social movements in the region, Nisha sees trans* as already signaling a departure from normative gender horizons. It is not that she thinks that being a cis-woman necessitates one to desire heterosexual monogamy. In her view, an important advantage in being trans is that she is not subject to the pressure of gender-normative expectations and roles.

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None of this, however, makes Karuna's desire for romance and heterosexual conjugality simply outrageous (from Nani's perspective) or normative (from Nisha's perspective). At the time when Karuna was going through her break-up with her boyfriend, she was also involved in making marriage arrangements for her niece, her older sister's daughter. She used up nearly all her savings on her niece's wedding. For nearly two weeks, Karuna, Nisha, and I spent time shopping everyday, purchasing clothes, jewelry, household items, and kitchen utensils for the young couple to be married. Karuna's natal family relied on her to make these arrangements. Even though Karuna's thirunangai identity had caused the "kinship trouble," to use Lucinda Ramberg's (2014) phrase, of extracting her from her earlier, projected role as a maternal uncle, in reality Karuna actually ended up taking charge of her niece's wedding and taking on the expenses.[68] That is, being a thirunangai did not diminish her commitments to her natal family. Therefore, Karuna wondered -- when she was so vital to the social reproduction of heterosexual conjugality if not through biological reproduction but through her embodied labor as a thirunangai and through expenditure of energy and resources, why did she have to accept being a pottai as a limitation and a hurdle to conjugal happiness? The severing of ties with natal families that Gayatri Reddy (2005) highlights as an important aspect of hijra authenticity and the basis for forging of new ties of kinship does not apply to most of my thirunangai interlocutors.[69] Many of them, like Karuna, continue to support their families both financially and through their embodied labor of care. Even though most of my thirunangai friends have had to step out of their natal family homes at some point in their lives and have had to find protection and support within networks of thirunangai kinship, for many of them their relationships with their natal families have been restored at some level. Their elderly parents as well as siblings and their families have come to rely on their income and support. Any understanding of the materiality of thirunangai lives today has to take into account their role in the social reproduction of the heterosexual family: their natal families, their siblings' and their

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[68] See Ramberg (2014). In her discussion of Yellamma devadasis of northern Karnataka, Ramberg argues that in being dedicated to the goddess, the jogatis become, structurally, sons to their families, not daughters. They are the source of their families' material wellbeing from then on. The goddess, in this manner, contributes to "kinship trouble."

[69] Reddy does not suggest that hijras in Hyderabad did not maintain any relationships with their natal families. She documents the mending of relationships between certain hijras and their mothers. However, within the rubrics of hijra moral personhood that she documents, Reddy observes that any significant relationship with one's natal family was not considered ideal or desirable: "Despite the retention of this strong link between natal mother and son in practice, such a relationship went against the ideal norms of the hijra community. The renunciation of natal kinship ties is a clear marker of hijra identity, serving to differentiate them from other kotis such as the zenanas…" (2005: 174).

children's, and also the families of their lovers. Karuna's refusal to accept her gender identity as a limitation to certain conventional relationships and desires has for its background this reality – the extent to which so many heterosexual family units relied on thirunangai labor and resources for their sustenance.

As for the elder Lakshmi Nani, even though on this occasion she characterized being pottai has a site of limitations, on a different occasion, Nani also said, "We must be blessed to be born pottais." And when I looked at her quizzically, she said, "Nejama. Really. We are the images of Ardhanari," invoking the iconic half-female form of Shiva. "Pottais are very dear to Angalamman," she added. This was a sentiment I would hear expressed in various ways throughout my fieldwork. And, indeed, most of my research and this dissertation are devoted to understanding why and in what ways "pottais are very dear to Angalamman." How do we square this blessed specialness of being a pottai with the heartbreaking exclusion from enduring love and romantic relationship? Is the idea of specialness just a sentimental overcompensation for the harsh reality of the latter? Or was there indeed some positive content to the specialness to which Nani was alluding? In the next chapter, I seek answers for some of these questions.

3.3.4 *Pottai* as striving

My research with the thirunangai community involved several trips to various goddess shrines in and around Chennai. One experience associated with these trips, which I came to look forward to very much, were the moments at the various highway toll plazas. Thirunangais feel that as poor people eking out a living doing sex work, begging, and ritual work, they should not have to pay highway toll for the trips they took to temples and festivals. So at every toll plaza, a highly entertaining performance would unfold:

Just as the vehicle approached a toll area, someone in the van would call out, "Hey, toll booth!" just in case people were distracted or sleeping. Then as we approached the booth, we'd all roll down our windows, and my thirunangai friends would immediately notch up their voice, language, and demeanor to a highly performative pitch. "Hey! We are hijras. How can you ask money from us? We are going to a temple. Let us go. God will bless you." Usually, the people at the toll both reacted in one of two ways: they either got acutely self-conscious and embarrassed at being confronted with this intense, collective display, and they waved us away just to be done with the encounter; or they stopped to enjoy the performance, engaging in some casual banter with

thirunangais. Either way, my thirunangai friends thoroughly enjoyed these moments and they looked forward to them.

On one such occasion, we had with us a young thirunangai who had at that time only spent a short period of time with her older thirunangai kin. During a toll booth scene, she seemed embarrassed and participated quite perfunctorily. As the van drove past the booth after successfully avoiding paying toll, Karuna addressed the young thirunangai. She said, "Once you have come to be a pottai, you should give up shame and all that. You have to learn to clap your hands without any shame. They should feel ashamed, not us." Here, pottai comes to involve some kind of effort or striving for someone to inhabit it fully. It involves cultivating a kind of shamelessness that would prepare them to be confrontational if need be; to be ready to cause embarrassment to others and to refuse to traffic in the face-saving work of social niceties.[70]

Interestingly, in the very first vignette I presented, the word *pottai* was applied to me without any striving on my part. Something about my gender enactment and others' inferences about my sexuality were sufficient to characterize me as a pottai. But here, Karuna was suggesting that being a pottai also had entailments. Fully inhabiting that role involved cultivating certain ways of being. Pottai, it seemed, was both an ascribed as well as an achieved state of being. The question of what kind of effort and striving ethical life involves has preoccupied anthropologists for some time now. While scholars like Saba Mahmood (2005) have focused on the kind of striving it takes to cultivate forms of selfhood and bodily praxis to become exemplary subjects of certain normative orders, others, like Veena Das (2006, 2012), have drawn our attention to kinds of striving that are not about transcendence but the opposite: towards inhabiting the ordinary without falling apart. In her work with survivors of communal violence and with those negotiating interreligious relationships in times of communal discord, Das shows us that what people strive for is not a way to escape the effects of violence and trauma but a way to achieve the everyday itself as a site of the ordinary. Yet another form that ethical striving can take is resistance, in "speaking truth to power," as Foucault expressed the ethical imperative of political action. The point I am driving at is that these different conceptions of ethical effort point to a domain of practice, a way of working on oneself to be particular kinds of actors. In Karuna's view, being a pottai involves cultivating a

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[70] Thirunangai activist, performer, and poet Livingsmile Vidya documents in her memoir (2007) an instance when her friend Satya comments on Vidya's initial inability/reluctance to clap and ask for money: "Satya was fed up with me. 'What kind of kothi are you? Can't even clap your hands'" (85).

kind of immunity to shame and an ability to engage in certain forms of public interaction that do not uphold norms of respectability in social encounters. Scholars have highlighted the value placed on the cultivation of such shamelessness (*besharmi*) in hijra lifeworlds as kind of a pre-emptive response to social stigma and marginalization.[71] [72]

Later that day, I asked Karuna how come they had not demanded any such effort or striving from me. Her response was instructive in the way it brought up questions of class privilege and respectability that are implicated in these questions of ethicality: "You are a pottai… but you are gay. You are with your family. You have been raised that way… You are studying in a foreign university." It recalled to my mind Gayathri Spivak's phrase, "unlearning one's privilege as one's loss" (Spivak 1990). Here, what stands in the way of my fully inhabiting pottainess is my class and caste privilege. As emblems of my investment in social respectability, they make it harder for me to pursue as a goal the kind of public demeanor that Karuna was recommending to the young thirunangai. The word *pottai,* therefore, has allowed my thirunangai friends to enact a particular kind of relationality and intimacy with me, but the other macro-social markers of my identity – class and caste – were always there in the field of recognition. *Pottai* allows for an ethical relationality that takes full, implicit cognizance of the social distinctions that matter. What it does is to keep the door ajar for connections to happen despite and across those distinctions. Their recognition of the pottai in me was an offer of sociality, a gesture of friendship. I was different from my thirunangai friends in a million ways, but in our encounters they chose to highlight the element that was similar enough to "adequate" us.

3.3.5 "That's what we had before other names came along"

It was a late February afternoon, and I was in Nani's house in Old Washermanpet, helping Vimala Aaya dry all the brass ritual paraphernalia using a piece of cloth. Aaya happened to be Nani's guru, and although she lived in Eranavur, she came over to her chela Nani's house for all

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[71] See Reddy (2005), Hall (1997), Nanda (1999). Rajic (2016) has argued that genres of self-narration, especially autobiographical writings by thirunangais, are "instances of queer performativity negotiating inescapably painful memories of shame and stigma in the development of individual tirunangai identities and even a distinct thirunangai culture" (2016: 83).

[72] While I broadly agree with this analysis, in Chapter 5 I show ethnographically how thirunangais set their own limits on their performance of shamelessness. A better way to see this aspect of thirunangai social life, rather than as "shamelessness," is as a refusal to commit to what Erving Goffman has called "Face Work." It is useful to see it as thirunangais' refusal to uphold the social face of their interlocutors in situations where they anticipate being treated disrespectfully.

religious festivals and occasions. On that day, we were getting things ready for next day's Mayana Kollai ritual, *the pillage in the cremation grounds,* which I describe in greater detail in the next chapter. Aaya was in her late seventies and had severe pain in her legs and couldn't get up easily once she sat down on the floor. So I was helping her with getting things ready for the pujai the next day. It was going to be a simple affair at home, since everyone was busy working at the Angalamman temple down the street, where the Mayana Kollai ritual was going to be enacted in a bigger scale. There at the temple, there would be trance-dancing, singing and playing of drums and cymbals, the enactment of the mad and hungry form of the goddess, animal sacrifice, and the offering of incredible quantities of fruits, vegetables, and grains to satiate the goddess who, according to myth, wanders the cremation grounds looking for buried and half-burned corpses to eat. The goddess at home would not be neglected. Vimala Aaya would wash the stone idol carefully and decorate the goddess lovingly – draping a bright new sari around her, affixing a new nose ring on the deity's nose, and adorning her with garlands and strings of flowers. There would be offerings of food too, and the pujai at home would be completed soon after the ritual at the temple. I kept shuttling back and forth between the temple and the house, a matter of a hundred yards or less, eager to taken in everything. But Aaya needed my help in the house, so I stayed put for an hour, assisting her mostly by fetching the things she needed in decorating the goddess.

It was then that I asked Vimala Aaya about the use of the word *pottai.* By then, I had heard her use the word quite a lot. "That Shanthi pottai who lives next door to me…" she'd say. "This entire block is occupied by pottais," she once said, referring to the section of the tsunami rehabilitation quarters in which she lived in Eravanur. More than once she said, "All those saami pottais who used to dance in those days… only a few are left now. I see a lot of new people." Responding to my question now about the word *pottai,* she said: "In those days, *pottai* was what we had. All these names, *thirunangai, kothi, aravani…* they all came up just now. In those days, most of the names were demeaning. *Ali, Uss, Ombodu…* like that. *Pottai* was what we called each other." When I asked her if *pottai* was not demeaning, too, she said, "Not among us. Only when others say, 'Hey, pottai!'…" Then she added, "We are pottais, aren't we? We are pottais. God has created us as pottais. What do you say?"

Aaya did not disagree that *pottai* too was potentially a term of abuse, but for her it was somehow not of the same class as "ali," "uss," or "ombodu." That is because, for her, *pottai* was what she was, what thirunangais were, so it was not just an arbitrary choice of word. *Pottai,* for

her, said something about who she was in some essential sense. When Aaya said, "We are pottais, aren't we?" she used the inclusive "we" in Tamil – *namma pottainga dhaana?* Once again, I found myself gently included in a relational space with them, where something about me became relevant enough to characterize me as a pottai. I asked her what she meant by her remark. And she replied, "We are neither man nor woman, are we? Only at the level of the body we are male. In our hearts we are women. We feel feminine (*pen thanmaiya)*. People look at us and say, 'He acts feminine.'" Nani's conception of being a pottai was a *neitherness* as well as a *bothness*. Time and again, many thirunangai maruladis expressed the same sentiment, that being a thirunangai meant being neither male nor female, and also both. Ignoring this bothness and foregrounding primarily the neitherness when it comes to third-gender or transgender lives would hide from our view the simultaneity of lack and excess that characterizes thirunangai self-understanding.[73] At the same time, according to Vimala Aaya's remarks, this self is experienced at the level of the "heart" by oneself and recognized at the level of the "act" by others as feminine. That is, what signals pottai-ness to others is a feminine comportment. In a single remark, then, she speaks of pottai-ness in terms of a givenness, personhood, feelings, bodily performance, and intersubjective recognition (others read you as pottai). The word *pottai* is an important site where we can see these layered ideas about being transgendered play out.

3.3.6 *Pottai* as affection

One summer afternoon, Nisha, Shoba, and I were lolling about in Nani's house in Old Washermanpet, comatose after a large and delicious meal that Nani had cooked for us. Nani was putting away the dishes. We had closed the door to keep the sun out, and it was all very quiet outside for a little while. Then we heard a male voice call out from the outside, "Nisha, Karuna, what? You are all asleep?" It was Ravi, Nani's neighbor, a young man of about twenty-five from a family of vegetable vendors and Angalamman worshippers who lived in the same street. In response to his question, Nani said, "Come, come, Ravi pottai! Have you had your lunch?" It was the first time I was hearing Ravi being called a pottai by Nani. From what I saw, there was nothing of the pottai in Ravi. He was very masculine, hypermasculine, in fact, if you take into account his general demeanor of bragging and bravado. And, besides, he was constantly hitting on one or other of the younger thirunangais. So I whispered to Nisha, who was lying down next to me, looking at

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[73] See Nanda (1999) for a characterization of hijras as "neither man nor woman."

YouTube videos of a Tamil reality show singing competition, "Ravi is a pottai?!" She replied, "No, pa! Nani sometimes calls men 'pottai' affectionately. I have told her not to do it. If one of them takes offence, then it will become a problem." But Ravi clearly didn't. He walked into the house, grinning from ear to ear, and handing over a lunch carrier to Nani. He then sat down to chat with us while Nani filled the carrier with food for Ravi to take to the Washermanpet Market where his mother, aunts, and cousins sold vegetables in retail every day.

Since that day, I noticed that Nani called or referred to a number of local men as 'pottai.' And they didn't seem to mind. For her, *pottai* seemed to be a term of endearment, and she used it only with the men she knew, men from the locality. Ravi and his male cousins were often the most frequent recipients of such affection from Nani. When Nisha warned Nani, "Why do you call everyone 'pottai'? What if they take it amiss? Somebody is going to be upset and start calling you names," Nani defended herself: "Aiye! I don't call everyone 'pottai,' I only use that with the boys I know well." This suddenly made me wonder if I was a pottai because I had something of the pottai in me or if I was just a boy she knew well. This blurriness is part of what makes 'pottai' pliable and roomy. Moreover, it appears that whether being called a pottai is an insult or an expression of fondness depends on the networks of affection and friendship to which one belong. For Ravi and others, who share that social space every day with Nani and who work with her as fellow vegetable vendors and relate as neighbors and friends, being called a pottai by Nani was not an insult. However, Nisha's warning to her reminds us that there is always the risk that it could be taken as an insult to their masculinity.

Months after this incident, Ravi happened to join us on a visit to a temple outside Chennai. As our van pulled over at a toll booth, Ravi joined my thirunangai friends enthusiastically, clapping and raising his voice, hitting the right tone, and saying the right things. All the thirunangais in the van commended him on his impressive performance. Keerti said, "Nani has been calling you a pottai for so long. Today you have shown it!" It was not that any of his thirunangai friends actually considered him a pottai. Far from it. What they applauded was his mastery of a particular genre of action associated with being a thirunangai. He had parodied it masterfully and earned their commendation.

3.3.7 "We are all pottais here"

It was very early one December morning. Some five or six of us had gathered in Nisha's house in Porur the night before. The plan was to spend the night in one place, so that we could be

ready very early the next morning to leave together to go to a temple that was some distance away. In the morning, we were all aflutter, jostling around in the little space that was Nisha's house, vying for our turn in the one bathroom that was in the premises, which Nisha and her roommate Karuna shared with a neighbor, also a thirunangai like them. As we were all changing into our temple attire – brighter saris and some jewelry in their case and a dhoti and a nicely pressed shirt for me, a young thirunangai I hadn't met earlier arrived; her name was Akila and she was to join us on the trip. Soon after she arrived, Akila looked for a place where she could change into her sari. It became evident to me that it was my presence in the space as the only non-thirunangai that made her look for privacy to change clothes. I was nearly ready by then, so I was about to step outside to give her some space. But before I could, Karuna said to her, "No need to feel shy. We are all pottais here." Hearing that, Akila smiled at me, then turned her back to me so she could change. And I averted my eyes.

Karuna's choice of the term *pottai* here is very important. Her move was to put Akila at ease by making my identity clear: I was not a panthi, a masculine man, so she need not feel shy or immodest in my presence. However, Karuna did not single me out for this clarification. Instead, she opted for the common denominator that could encompass all of us present there: "pottai." The use of the term here performed more than denotational work. Its function was deeply indexical, in that it served to make my identity clear to the intended hearer. The word "pottai" here had a particular relationship to its specific communicative context, a context in which it was my presence that required the clarification. And it had the added effect of making me feel included in this feminine space. In doing so, it also implicitly communicated to me my responsibility, as a cis-gendered pottai, to blend into the bodily praxis of that space. In this instance, it took the form of my averting my gaze to accord a little privacy to Akila to change her clothes. In other moments, this inclusion in the space also meant the freedom to talk in certain ways about the body, hormones, sex, desires, love, heartbreaks, self-image, ageing, etc.

To reiterate, thirunangais do not socially situate themselves to others as pottais, only as thirunangais. I do not identify as pottai in any other setting, only as gay or queer. In other words, 'pottai' is not how any of us speaks of ourselves to the world. It circulates only in social interaction among people who index by it certain qualities in themselves and others, and not as a socially and politically legitimized term to be energized with rights and recognition. For these reasons, the term 'pottai' could be called "a transitory interactional position" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). But the term

does say something about those to whom it refers – something broader about a way of being gendered in the world; about our known or inferred sexual preferences; about our bodies, its movements, its postures, its excesses and betrayals; etc. In this capaciousness that is more about performativity more than identity, the term 'pottai' could hold my thirunangai interlocutors and me together. Here, the field of inclusion signified by the word 'pottai' also goes beyond "some of the important criteria for membership within the hijra community, such as the dress code and *nirvana* operation" (Reddy 2005:79). It provisionally suppresses those criteria and, instead, casts a broader net over a field of feminine expressivity observed in ostensibly (once) male bodies.

3.4 Conclusion

Where does one's pottainess dwell? How does it reveal itself to others? How did they detect mine despite what I thought was my very subtle femininity – a bodily caution I had cultivated since my teen years to protect myself from bullying? *Pottai* appears as a threshold of femininity, the contours of which are spread across bodily performance (from gestures subtle to pronounced); sexual desires (that we express or that others assume we hold); and a sensibility, the kind that allows my thirunangai friend Nisha to whisper, "This is a pottai, pa!" about someone she has observed for barely a few seconds.

Drawing on Judith Butler's (2006) words about how identity gets shaped around a culturally inscribed body, we might say that *pottai* is not a category of "true sex, discrete gender, and specific sexuality," and it is not a "stable point of reference" that could function as an identitarian ground for politics (Butler 2006:175). To put it differently, what thirunanagis gesture toward when they use the word *pottai* is not to themselves and others as juridical subjects but to an indiscreteness below the thresholds of identity and juridicality, to a sort of what-we-are-underneath-our-current-socially-discrete-elaboration-of-gender. In the thirunangai discourse of gender that I was able to observe, pottainess sometimes figures as that basic material over which thirunangai identity has been elaborated historically. If we recollect Vimala Aaya's words about "being born a pottai," it would seem that she was positing the figure of the pottai "as passive and prior to discourse," to continue to borrow from Butler's critique of the apparent prediscursivity of the body even in critical approaches (such as Foucault's) that argue for desire and identity to be seen as discursively inscribed on the body (Butler 2006:178). But that is only part of the story. Vimala Aaya also added that being a pottai was also about feelings of the heart, about an embodied

enactment in the world, and about others' recognition of that enactment as a form of femininity. So, what starts appearing as a prediscursive passivity quickly receives qualifications: pottainess involves both subjective and intersubjective recognition, it involves knowing something about oneself through existing frames of knowledge, i.e., in and through discourse. It is discursivity that makes pottainess intelligible in terms of lack and excess, femininity and masculinity, both and neither.

When I asked Radhika, a thirunangai, about how she would know if someone was a pottai she said, "No matter how much pottais try to hide their true nature, it will somehow come out. In the way we stand, in the curves in the postures, in the way we use our hands, even a small thing will reveal us." Radhika is drawing attention to the body's excesses and betrayals. To be a pottai then is to be betrayed by the body which signifies and suggests beyond our control. Finding a community is to find a space where the body's betrayals can be owned and elaborated into a performance of gender, offering it a deliberateness and a definitive orientation.

Is pottai then the *nature* to the *culture* that is thirunangai, kothi, or gay? Is it the "inherently untidy" over which culture has done the work of bringing a "semblance of order"(Mary Douglas via Butler in Butler 2006:178)? The answer would be a no. Even if *pottai,* as I have been developing the argument here, refers to something that is not quite congealed into an identity, and even if it comes through like a *qualisign* (to speak in Peircean terms), suggesting the apprehension of a quality before it becomes a culturally codified sign, that quality can be sensed and apprehended only because it comes materialized in a body for reading which conventions are in place.[74] Pottai-ness is an apprehension of quality, but as Peirce puts it, a quality "cannot act as a sign until it is embodied; but the embodiment has nothing to do with its character as a sign."[75] In other words, the vague sensing of femininity, that Peircean *firstness*, does not stand alone. It gives way to the sensing of a legibility that is grounded in cultural conventions of how bodies are read and made sense of. *Pottai* then, is more a *legisign*, which has a stable ground for interpretation because it relies on cultural habits and conventions. Therefore, *pottai* is as much a cultural category as

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[74] For my use of Peircean semiotic terms, I find it useful to turn to Valentine E. Daniel's Introduction to Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way (1984).
[75] Peirce on "Three Trichotomies of Signs" in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce,* ed. Justus Buchler, Dover 1955, cited in https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/peirce2.htm, accessed on 24 October 2018).

thirunangai or *kothi* or *gay*, but with a more open semantic field, because it does not aspire to be a socially significant identity category, let alone a juridical one.

Here, it is useful to draw on Akshay Khanna's distinction between the "juridical subject" of gender-sexuality and the gendered-sexual self that moves about in the world, making sense of itself and forming relationships with others. Speaking of the necessity that sexuality rights activism in India has faced to articulate sexuality as an identity that could become a juridical category of rights and to articulate the sexual subject as a potential juridical citizen-subject, Khanna states: "… desire and sexual interaction relate to, or more precisely *refuse* to relate easily to ideas of personhood in India. The juridical subject…lies at a distance from the multiple sexual selves that may be experientially or ethnographically gleaned" (Khanna 2013:122). Khanna's argument about sexuality-as-identity, or "sexuality types" as he calls it, can be extended to gender identities as well. The thirunangai enters the juridical register as "transgender" or "third-gender" or "thirunangai," framed in terms that are intelligible to the juridical orders of the state. But the experiential unfolding of thirunangai lives, the self-understandings, and expressions and life-worlds are incredibly diverse, and they far overflow the senses implied by the juridical identity. As Khanna puts it in the context of the queer movement in India and its work addressing the state for rights, there is a "multiplicity of projects that lie outside of the juridical register" (Khanna 2013:139). One of those projects is to produce forms of sociality that would engender friendship, intimacy, and solidarity. This is true of the thirunangai community, too. The use of the word *pottai* has allowed me to track some of these projects of world-making in which thirunangais are engaged.

Speaking of the difference between the rich complexity of living as a gendered self in the world and the narrow intelligibility that juridical register requires, it is interesting to return to consider Nani, whose mode of being in the world certainly overflows the boundaries of rigid conceptions of gender. Despite being a respected elder in the community of thirunangai transgender women, Nani does not appear in the visual corporeal field unequivocally as a thirunangai. She has not had her castration procedure or sex reassignment surgery. She does not have a transformed, feminine body. In fact, she is taken to be a man by many. She wears her hair short and has a receding hairline. Around her waist, she wears a veshti, a wrap-around. She is often bare-chested, except for the tulasi and rudraksha rosaries she wears around her neck. Or just has a shawl or towel draped over her chest. In terms of her gender identity too, Nani demonstrates great fluidity. The women in her neighborhood and at the market often use the word "Kizhavi," old

woman, while speaking about her, and address her as "Nani." Many men in the neighborhood call her "Samiyar," which genders her as male in Tamil. Whenever I went to the little store in the street corner to buy anything, the shopkeeper refused to take money from me. He said, "Samiyar's house, right? No problem." I later found out she had asked him not to take money from me. The little children in the street call her "Thatha," grandfather. Nani responds to all these modes of address.

One day, she happened to show me her Thirunangai Identity Card issued by the State Social Welfare Board. Thirunangais need this card to be able to access welfare schemes of the State Government of Tamil Nadu (housing, senior pension, etc.). Nani was wearing a wig, flowers, and ear rings in the photograph in her identity card. When I exclaimed at how different she looked, Nani threw her head back and laughed. "Nisha and Karuna pottais got me dressed for this photo and took me for registration." The juridical register needed her to dress up and appear intelligible to the state as a thirunangai. In her everyday life, however, 'Nani' can be a grandfather, a grandmother, a priest, a priestess, and, as the womenfolk in the neighborhood called her, "kizhavi," old woman, often all in a single day.

Returning to *pottai,* if we recall Ravi and the other men in the vegetable market whom Nani calls pottais, it appears that it need not have anything to do with recognition of femininity at all. *Pottai* does not need a positive content, a subjective core at all for it to be effective. In other words, there needs to be nothing like a pottainess, an inhering quality, for the word *pottai* to do its work. It can simply be a way to signal intimacy, affection, and belonging. In fact, there is nothing "simple" about that work of ethical relationality. It takes work. The work of achieving the everyday and holding together the attachments that matter.

Chapter 4

Given by the Goddess, Giving to the Goddess
Contours of Attachment

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is devoted to understanding how thirunangai-maruladis articulate their attachment to goddess Angalamman. I will start with four brief accounts in which we see thirunangais detailing their earliest encounters with the goddess and the transformative significance those experiences have had for them. Then I point to some key features of such accounts, such as the importance of others' recognition and validation of the emergent thirunangai-goddess connection, the element of surprise and choicelessness involved in encountering the goddess, and the complex ways in which thirunangai-maruladis attribute their gender identity to the force of the goddess' power. The rest of the chapter contains analyses of each of these dynamics by drawing on the four brief accounts that follow as well as the ones I have presented in the earlier chapters. The chapter ends with a discussion on sexual morality in maruladi life.

4.1.1 Thangam Amma

"I was born in Kerala. I was three years old when we moved here (Chennai). We lived in Vyasarpadi (a neighborhood in north Chennai). I did not know I was a thirunangai, but since childhood I had a feminine nature (*pombalai subavam*). I wanted to wear skirts and saris and blouses, I wanted to wear large dangling earrings. That's how I grew up. Since childhood, I have been growing up as a thirunangai, but I did not know it then. When I was five years old, I used to play a lot with other children. We would gather stones and rocks and build a temple for the goddess. Then we would make believe that we were carrying karagam on our heads. We even used sticks from a broomstick to fashion alagu piercings! Then we'd walk around holding the stick in our mouths, imagining that we were going out in a procession.

"After I turned ten, I actually became a saamiyaadi. Amman came and descended on me. The woman who raised us was from here (Chennai).[76] We were from Kerala. My father was much

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[76] It was never clear who this woman was who raised Thangam amma and her siblings and whom they addressed as "atthai" (paternal aunt). What I could gather was that the woman was not a relative. She was a neighbor who took care of Thangam amma and her siblings when they were little children. Their mother was unwell and could not care for them adequately.

older in age. He ran a tea shop. And my mother never stepped out of the house. The woman who raised us was from these parts. Goddess Kali used to come over her. But she fell very ill, because someone had targeted her in sorcery (*pilli sooniyam*). Her arms and legs swelled up, and she could not do anything. She was in constant pain. I was a little boy. Ten years old. But I used to do chores in the house. I didn't attend school properly. Only up to the third standard. But I used to work at the aluminum factory. My job was to clean the grease off the various metal parts. I'd use sand to wipe off the grease. I got seventy-five paise per day for that. One day, when I returned home from work, atthai was lying on the cot. When I say atthai, I mean the woman I just told you about, the one who raised us. She was lying on the cot. And suddenly, I got into a trance state (*marul*) and uttered some words. I did not know what was happening to me. This was over forty years ago. I didn't know what happened to me, but everyone said Angalamma came over me…."

4.1.2 Ragini Amma

Angalamma was a clan deity for Ragini Amma's family, which belongs to a middle-level dominant caste (landowning farmers) in Salem district in the western part of Tamil Nadu. But trance embodiment was not something with which the family had first-hand experience until Ragini Amma had her first experience of entering trance when she was six years old. Her family still remembered that instance, she said. But the most decisive connection with Angalamman occurred for Ragini Amma when she was sixteen or seventeen years old when she went to the Melmalayanur temple for the first time.

"In those days, at the shops outside the temple, you could buy a lot of lemons for just 2 rupees.[77] When I bought those lemons as offerings for Angalamma, I prayed, 'Today I spent 2 rupees for these lemons. If you give me powers, I will soon spend 2 lakhs and offer *kollai* to you.' That same night, when I was sleeping… I don't know if others saw it, but I certainly did… It was a young girl, she was carrying a basket and a cane in her hand. She sat next to me, gently caressed my head, and said, 'You don't worry about anything. From now on, I am here for you. Take courage in that. Good or bad, I will be with you.' The very next week, I got into a state of trance

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[77] Lemons are ubiquitous in Amman worship. Their cooling properties are believed to have a cooling effect on deities who might be angry and hot. At temples devotees are given lemons as offerings blessed by the deity. They could consume the juice of those lemons or simply keep the fruit in their homes as objects carrying Amman's blessings and healing powers. But lemons are also used in rituals conducted to ward off evil eyes or demonic entities; here, lemons seem to serve as the objects into which the effects of those forces are driven. In such contexts, the fruits are crushed underfoot at the end of the ritual.

(*marul*) and I predicted my father's death. 'On Sunday, 10.05 am, he will die,' I said. My mother thought I was just blabbering in my sleep. But it was Amman. She said, 'His time is over. No matter which hospital you take him to, you won't be able to save him.' But my mother didn't believe. But, just as predicted, on Sunday morning at 10.05 am, he died. Then, in my family, they all started consulting me in times of trouble."

Responding to my question about the connection between Angalamman and transgender identity, she said, "This is the truth. If Angalamma comes over a young boy, he is going to be a thirunangai in the future. I can say with absolute certainty that is how it will be. He will become a thirunangai. That's what will happen."

4.1.3. Mala

"I am from Royapuram. I was born and raised in Royapuram. I got interested in saami ever since I was seven years old. When I say 'saami,' in those days, it was Murugar whom my family worshipped mostly. So everyone thought it was Murugar who would come on me ("en mela varumnu nenachaanga*)*. But when saami first came over me when I was seven years old, it was Angalamman. Our family prayed to Murugar, but he didn't come. When they had me stand during the ritual and invited saami to come over me… I was seven. What would I know? Nothing. She came and descended on me ("en mela vandhu eranguna"). Now I am 47 years old. When she came to me first, I was seven years old. She has been with me for forty years now. I have been doing these festivals (*tiruvizha*) for forty years now." Mala has not been conducting the annual festivals for Angalamman on her own. She does it with her natal family. Soon after she started channeling Angalamman, her gender self-presentation started shifting. "I became a pottai. enn penmai velippada aramichuchu. *My femininity started coming out*. It is a known fact that when Angalamma starts coming over a boy, he will become a pottai."

Later she elaborated: "If Angalamma comes on someone, even if he is a boy, she will change him. He will become like a thirunangai. He cannot be a man. Do men wear anklets? Can they wear bangles? Ear rings? As thirunangais, we wear all these. A woman wears all these. When Angalamma starts coming on a man, what can he do? He will feel afraid to start wearing jewelry. So for the first few years he would dance just as he is. But in the fifth year, he would slowly start wearing jewelry. He is not doing it because it is his desire. It is not his wish (*viruppam*). He does

it because she is in him. Even married men, when Angalamma is in them, they dress up and wear jewelry at least during her festivities. Because she is in them."

4.1.4 Radhika

"The very first time Angalamma came over me, nobody expected it to happen. I have a sister (cousin) by name Mary. She used to dance the deity. It was festival time, and they thought Amma would come over Mary. That's what everyone thought. I was a small boy then. I was a small boy wearing torn half-trousers! Mary akka had an infant. They gave the baby to me to hold. So I stood watching, waiting for saami to come over Mary akka. But when they started beating the pambai and udukkai drums, something started happening inside me. Even without my knowing (*ennai ariyaamaleye*) something started happening inside me. Angalamma came over me. Nobody expected Amma to come over this little boy who was just standing to the side. But she came over me. Then the poosaris started talking to the saami and confirmed that it was indeed Angalamma. Angalamma has been coming over me since then.

"I keep some distance from my family. Some are fine with me. But some others don't want to associate with me too closely. But I go there frequently. They all know I am living well, that I am doing saami work, that I am working in an organization, helping thirunangais like me. They know all that."

In this chapter, I take up some of the recurrent themes emerging in the thirunangai accounts above and the ones we have read earlier. Some consistent elements we find through most of those narratives are the following:

- The suddenness and surprise involved in the goddess' showing up on them -- All thirunagai-maruladis narrate their first encounter with the goddess as unexpected. The goddess did the choosing, not them. A sense of diminished human agency animates this narrative.

- The importance of the first encounter being an embodied one of trance (as opposed to dreams or visions) – Unlike in certain other mystical traditions where the transformative encounter for devotees have been sudden dreams and visions of deities, in the thirunangai narrative, we see that ecstatic trance embodiment holds a pride of place.

- The fact that these first encounters with the goddess occurred in ritual-social contexts with others to bear witness – The immediate social world, in the form of the family, the neighborhood, and other devotees of the goddess, assumes importance as a witness to the attachment forming between the goddess and a thirunangai.

- The nature of the attachment itself – Once the goddess has chosen a person for her embodiment, what kind of control or agency does the person have? Considering that the goddess simply showed up the first time on the person she chose, does it mean that the goddess could now take over the person whenever she pleased?

- The thirunangai-maruladis we have met so far clearly consider Angalamman to be central to their transgender identity. But what exactly is her role? Does she make them thirunangais? Or does she come to them because she sees them as thirunangais/pottais in the first place? Is her role then an intensification and consolidation of thirunangai identity?

- Sexuality and sex work do not pose a moral problem for the thirunangais devoted to the goddess. How do they, then, reframe the morality question?

4.2 Forms of Recognition

4.2.1 Triadic Encounter of Recognition

The thirunangai-maruladi accounts I have provided above and the other ones I collected during my research present the earliest encounters with the goddess not as private moments of spiritual connection but as public occurrences. These encounters take the form of Angalamman coming over them in public or semi-public ritual contexts in the presence of others to bear witness to it. In other words, these narratives are invested not only in describing the earliest moments of connection between young thirunangais and the goddess, they also highlight the presence of an audience – a public to which the encounter is meaningful – in some evidentiary capacity. How can we understand this importance accorded to the presence of others in these thirunangai-maruladi accounts about the first significant experience of embodying the goddess in trance?

In her discussion of the "transsexuality and bisexuality of Hindu Gods," Doniger (2014) draws on a sixteenth century Tamil text about "the transsexuality of the worshipper of Parvati," referring to one of the most prominent female deities of the Hindu pantheon (Angalamman

narratives, too, link her to Parvati, often portraying her as one of Parvati's earthly forms).[78] In this text, a Brahmin boy dresses up as a woman in order to accompany his male friend as his wife, and they both pay a visit to a very pious woman, an ardent devotee of the goddess. This devotee, a woman of some means, is known to bestow lavish gifts on Brahmin sages who visit her with their wives. She considers them to be the very earthly manifestations of the divine couple, Siva and Parvati. According to the story, the boy who dresses up as a woman to pretend to be a sage's wife ends up actually turning into a woman. This occurs not only by the grace of the goddess but also, importantly, because of the grace of the devotee who treats him as a woman despite her suspicions. As Doniger puts it, "a human man… changes to a woman under the combined influence of the goddess Parvati and her agent on earth, a pious devotee" (2014: 336-337). It is significant that the boy's transformation to a woman is accomplished not only by the grace of the goddess alone, but also by a bestowal of recognition by a pious devotee of the goddess. In this configuration, we get the human individual, divine grace and embodiment[79], and recognition by a sympathetic human other (the social) bound up together in a triadic encounter of recognition.

With this story and its composition of figures in mind, if we return to thirunangai maruladis' narratives of contact with goddess Angalamman and the origin or intensification of their gender expression, we can see that the encounters are not simply dyadic ones— i.e., between the individual and the deity. Instead, all these narratives depict encounters where the social is always vibrantly present in some form, mediating the transformation, bearing witness to it, and offering recognition to the relationship forming between the thirunangai and the goddess. In doing so, the social -- in the form of other devotees of the goddess, the individual's family, the priests and drummers, and other maruladis -- also bears witness to the concomitant shift in the individual's gender and social status. That the goddess' coming over these individuals is publicly ratified serves to mark them as certain legible kinds of figures within their worlds. This, in turn, provides for others a frame through which to make sense of the subsequent transformations in the individual's corporeal self-presentation, their sacred status, and gender identity.[80] As Mala puts it, "It is a known fact that when Angalamma starts coming over a boy, he will become a pottai."

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[78] Doniger draws on David Shulman's translation of a section of *Piramottara Kantam,* a late16[th] century Tamil text authored by Varatungarama Pandiyar. See Shulman (2012).

[79] When the boy dresses up as a sage's wife, he is not impersonating any woman but a figure who is considered to be an earthly representation of goddess Parvati herself.

[80] I hasten to add this: the social is, of course, always present whether or not it finds explicit place in our self-narratives. Even if we were presented with narratives where the thirunangai individuals spoke of their encounters

Let us look at how this triadic structure of recognition animates the way thirunangai-maruladis narrate their first or early encounters with the goddess. Mala's first experience of channeling the goddess occurs in a ritual context in the presence of priests, drummers, and her family. Those present recognize that the goddess has chosen to 'come over' Mala (then a boy of seven), even though they had expected it to be Murugan. Such a ritually validated beginning of her attachment to Angalamman subsequently helps Mala's thirunangai identity find accommodation within her family and extended kin. In other words, the intensification of her thirunangai gender expression becomes something that her family folds into their understanding as something that could happen to a person marked and blessed by Angalamman. Similarly, Radhika's first encounter with Angalamman, too, occurs in a ritual context, where her cousin Mary is expected to channel Angalamman. But when Radhika, as a "small boy wearing torn half-trousers" enters a state of trance and channels the goddess, the priests and drummers present on the occasion focus their attention on this new embodiment. This publicly recognized connection to Angalamman has since facilitated her family's acceptance of her thirunangai identity. Radhika later shared that while she would not say that her family's acceptance of her as a thirunangai has been a wholehearted one, the fact that she was a maruladi, a saami-pottai, has helped attenuate their opposition. It has given them an acceptable narrative with which to explain Radhika's thirunangai identity to their extended kin and others. In all these narratives, we find the suggestion that the link between embodying Angalamman and being-becoming a thirunangai finds some recognition in their families and immediate social contexts.

The importance of the triad – the individual in question, the goddess, and a goddess-affirming other to bear witness to the encounter – is even more strikingly evident in Thangam Amma's narrative of her first experience with the goddess. Her own family had no deep investment in devotion to this particular deity or in ecstatic devotional practices. But Thangam Amma has interpreted her attachment to the goddess as facilitated by the woman who raised her, who was already known to channel goddess Kali. This recognition and validation by a devotee of the

with the divine in purely dyadic terms – as moments involving just themselves and the deity -- it would not simply signal the absence of the mediating social. Our disciplinary approach to discourse would behoove us to ask what kinds of discursive formations make such dyadic claims possible and intelligible. That is, particularly since Foucault, we proceed with the understanding that any story told about the self is made possible by historically contingent discourses. Then, no matter what kind of self-narration we encounter, it is helpful to ask what makes those particular form of narration possible, intelligible, and meaningful for those who enact them.

goddess has carried an authoritative force in socially securing the connection between the goddess and Thangam Amma, who was then ten years old and considered a boy by everyone.

This is a good moment to examine whether such a triadic encounter of recognition also characterizes the experiences of other devotees of the goddess, who do not identity as thirunangai. Isabelle Nabokov (2000) has documented a few striking narratives of encounter with Angalamman given to her by devotees who, since the attachment, have become soothsayers, oracles, and exorcists. Let us consider a couple of those self-narratives. A young male farmer recounts his first experience of the goddess thus:

> I was plowing my field when something cut my foot. It began to swell up. Like a trident it pierced my foot, but I did not see the trident. This was the first time that Amma came. She came as a trident and pierced my leg. For a month I was sick and unable to eat properly. I did not know what was happening to me until Amma came in my dream in the form of a little girl and told me, 'I am with you. Don't worry, you need not to seek any treatment. I will protect you. Through you I will say *kuri*[81]. You must do good things for people. (Nabokov 2000: 19)

The following is an account Nabokov received from a middle-aged, male soothsayer:

> On that day I left home earlier than usual to sell milk because my wife and I had had a fight. Those days we were often not on speaking terms. On my way to Gingee a beautiful lady appeared to me, asking me to follow her to a clump of thorn bushes. I did, but she disappeared. I heard a voice that said 'don't stay here' and I fell unconscious. When the villagers found me and woke me up I realized I had been lying in the thorny bushes for three days… [A week later] I began to clear the ground where the goddess had first appeared to me and slept there every night. Sakti[82] kept coming back and instructed me on how to heal people's body aches. Later the people I cured provided me with enough money to acquire the things necessary for worship—a lamp, bells, trident, spear. I was able to build this temple for Sakti. (Nabokov 2000: 20-21)

In these and the other narratives Nabokov has documented, we see that the male devotees' first experiences of the goddess were not instances of trance and ecstatic embodiment of the goddess in their own bodies. Instead, their experiences took the form of dreams and visions, which nevertheless marked a key moment of change in their lives. Moreover, their first encounters with the goddess were private ones, involving just themselves and the goddess -- as a vision, as an unseen trident buried in the ground, etc. In contrast to this, what we have seen in the narratives of

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[81] *Kuri solludhal*, to "say kuri," means to decipher "signs." It involves a reading of the current conditions and to point towards a resolution in the future.

[82] The word *Sakti* derives from Sanskrit *Shakti* meaning energy or power. A grammatically feminine word, it widely used to refer to the goddesses.

the thirunangai-maruladis is that they present their moments of transformations as involving both trance embodiment as well as the presence of sympathetic others to bear witness to the moment. Their first encounter with the goddess is an intensely embodied one that involves culturally legible corporeal signs: "a trembling and shaking body, erratic movements followed by an inability to stand upright, eyes that are fixed or unfocussed" (Meyer 1984: 258). And these signs appear in a context where others, especially other devotees of the goddess, priests, ritual drummers, and the individual's family members are present.

In Nabokov's ethnography, the cis-men's encounters with the goddess do have important, life-altering consequences for them: it turns them toward a spiritual path as healers. But in the case of thirunangais it has another powerful implication: it offers some legibility and sacred legitimacy to their transfeminine expression and identity. As we see in the narratives, the knowledge the others around them gain about their connection to Angalamman plays an important role in facilitating the acceptance of their feminine gender expression and, subsequently, their thirunangai identity. As in the sixteenth century Tamil text that Wendy Doniger foregrounds, the individual devotee under transformation, the goddess' grace, and recognition by goddess' devotees are all present as a triad of interlocked recognition in these accounts that the thirunangai maruladis present to us.

4.2.2 Semiotics of Recognition – Interpretive Communities

Peircean semiotics offers a way to understand the importance of community as a ground for intersubjective recognition and meaning. Peirce's scheme postulates a triadic relationship involved in the process of signification:

> A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It address somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object.* (Peirce 1958: 2.228; cited in Daniels 1984: 14).

Unlike Saussure's dyadic model of the signifier and the signified, in Peirce's schema, we have a third entity, the *interpretant*, which is another sign, formed in the mind of the reader of the sign. That is, the First sign does not directly signify the *object* which is the Second. There is a process of mediation involved, whereby the First sign produces in the mind of the perceiving entity another sign, "perhaps a more developed sign," which moves the process of signification towards the *object* for which the sign stands. What is key in this formulation of the Third, the *interpretant sign*,

is that the perceiving entity is brought to the fore. Peircean semiotics offers us a way to foreground the interpreter of signs – not an autochthonous entity, but a socially and culturally situated and shaped one. Something does not even have the status of a sign, if no one perceives it to be so. Moreover, not everything is a sign, because there is a community of interpreters drawing upon a necessarily limited repertoire whereby, in Peircean terms, some things function as signs. And they signify by either possessing some qualities of the object they stand for or by resembling the object somehow (*icon*), or by contextually pointing to the object (*index*), or by means of convention (*symbol*). But things signify at all because there is a community of interpretants acting as the shared ground for meaning-making to occur and accrue.

With this brief detour to Peircean semiotics in mind, let us return to our own contextual triad: the individual devotee entering a state of trance and embodying the goddess, the goddess herself, and the community or the immediate social that perceives and validates the relationship. The importance of the ritual context as a social context becomes clear. The presence of the family, the priests and drummers, other devotees, and perhaps even curious onlookers is important to establish the relationship forming between the individual and the goddess. In reading the encounter as meaningful, they bestow it with recognition and meaning. The thirunangai-maruladi narratives emphasize the ritual-social context and the presence of others perhaps because they value the importance of locating their thirunangai identity and their relationship with the goddess not in private, esoteric terms but in a cultural world shared with others. What their narratives insist is that the relationship between them and the goddess is meaningful not only to them but it has meaning within a world of piety they share with others around them.

4.2.3 Intersubjectivity as Recognition and Vulnerability

Alessandro Duranti's discussion of intersubjectivity is useful here. Explicating the importance of "the sense of the other" in Husserl's theory of perception, Duranti remarks: "Any act of perception is part of a field of perception in a communal, shared world, where the body plays a major role as the zero point of orientation, which is also available for others to interpret…" (Duranti 2015: 229). As the "zero point(s) of orientation," bodies are always already slanted towards or away from other bodies, objects, ideas, beliefs, etc. That is, we are always oriented vis-à-vis other entities in the world around us. Whether we are oriented in the same way as others are (aligned agreeably towards the same things – the straight line of conformity, in Sara Ahmed's

terms)[83]; or we are oriented obliquely, turning away in a different direction (queering away from the straight line of normative alignment, to invoke Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology again)[84]; or oriented towards a shared object but from our different places in the social scape (like spokes in a wheel); or decisively turned away from others in conflict -- we are not in a blank world, equally disposed towards all things. We are oriented, we have directionality. And we are seen by others, too.

It is possible, then, to think of the triadic encounter of recognition as a communal ground of intersubjective recognition. While on that ground, others bestow on the thirunangai entering the state of trance their recognition of her sacred status (which opens the possibility for their future recognition of her thirunangai identity). And thirunangais bestow on others the recognition that *their* seeing and their recognition matter. This intersubjective recognition is rendered possible because it occurs in a "communal, shared world," the world where devotion to the goddess already has certain shared affect, forms, and practices. Duranti adds,

> the recognition of the communal quality of life experiences is important because, among other things, it allows for correction… when there is a problem in understanding, people can move out of the 'natural attitude'… and consciously engage in an act of interpretation or reinterpretation. (Duranti 2015: 230)

During a thirunangai's first embodied encounter with the goddess, the others who perceive it are offered a moment to reinterpret their understanding of the person in the light of this religious occurrence, and to re-orient themselves accordingly – a process that Duranti, by way of Husserl, calls "correction."

We should, however, not be in haste to romanticize such intersubjective anchoring of recognition and meaning. It is possible that in placing value on others' recognition of them, thirunangais open themselves to new kinds of disciplinary regimes. What if the recognition that

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[83] Sara Ahmed (2007) takes seriously the word "orientation" seriously and draws us into a phenomenological reading of desires as orientations towards various objects. Sexual orientation, then, becomes a way to map our relationship to the social and political space as it is organized around us: "The normalization of heterosexuality as an orientation towards 'the other sex' can be redescribed in terms of the requirement to follow a straight line, whereby straightness gets attached to other values including decent, conventional, direct, and honest" (p.40). Also, "The discontinuity of queer desires can be explained in terms of objects that are not points on the straight line: the subject has to go 'offline' to reach such objects" (p.41).
[84] "Queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy. Queer orientations might be those that don't line up, which by seeing the world slantwise allow other objects to come into view. A queer orientation might be one that does not overcome what is 'offline,' and hence *acts out of line with others.*" (p.63, emphasis Ahmed's)

thirunangais receive from their immediate social world with respect to their sacred status were both a boon and a burden?

> The very possibility of seeing the world from the point of view of an Other, who, in turn, constitutes us as objects of his shared field of perception and evaluation, makes us vulnerable. In making a world a shared field of perception aiming at a shared or exchangeable understanding, intersubjectivity also makes it into a world of mutual monitoring. (Duranti 2015: 231)

In other words, if others' recognition of their sacred status matters to thirunangai-maruladis, it is possible that such recognition and the desire for it have their own entailments. It could make demands on how thirunangai-maruladis must conduct themselves in order to retain that recognition. We might recall here Victor Turner's argument that by virtue of being outside certain normative claims of the social order (reproductive labor, for example), liminal entities might enjoy certain freedoms, but their situation is "hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions," so their ostensible unruliness does not turn altogether subversive of the social structure (Turner 1969: 109). James Faubion offers an illuminating discussion of the mystic as a charismatic and liminal subject who has the freedom to stand outside the social order in some senses and be a "systemic irritant," but that site is not one of endless freedoms (Faubion 2013). It is very much within the socially "shared field of perception and evaluation" that Duranti points out above, and it comes with its own limits and conditions, as Turner has pointed out. What are the entailments of being recognized by others as a person close to the goddess? In Chapter 5, I take on some aspects of the thirunangai ethical work of figuring out the boundaries, possibilities, and limits of social action.

4.3 Surprise, Agency, Mutuality

4.3.1 To Be Caught, To Be Overcome

In this section, I would like to draw attention to another consistent feature in the thirunangai accounts of their first contact with the goddess. Running through most of the accounts is the sense that whether or not they came from families that were familiar with the goddess, trance embodiment, or ecstatic ritual practices, the first encounter had a quality of surprise and choicelessness. The goddess, in these accounts, showed up on those she chose. In Mala's case, even though her first experience occurred in a ritual setting where the family expected her to channel a deity, it was the family deity, Murugan, whom they thought would show up. However,

it turned out to be Angalamman whom Mala first embodied in trance. As for Thangam Amma, while her mentor was a known channel for goddess Kali, she herself ended up embodying Angalamman in her very first experience of trance.

Literature on goddess worship is not unfamiliar with this phenomenon of surprise and diminished agency when it comes to embodied attachment to goddesses. In their separate works on transgender and cis-women devotees of goddess Yellamma in northern Karnataka, Nicholas Bradford (1983) and Lucinda Ramberg (2014) draw attention to how these devotees articulate their attachment to the deity in terms of being "caught" by her. Bradford discusses both transgender (jogappa) and women (jogamma or jogati) worshippers of Yellamma as people "who are 'caught' by the goddess and who act as her human agents" (Bradford 1983: 307). Despite their different foci, approaches, and research periods, in both Bradford and Ramberg's analyses, the jogappas' and jogatis' accounts of this "caughtness" are similar. And the condition of being "caught" by the goddess is inferred through certain signs—the forming of matted locks of hair; certain persistent ailments, especially those of the skin; loss of masculinity; etc. Presence of these signs in a person leads others to suspect or infer that she or he has been "caught" by the goddess. This recognition has strong social entailments. It involves giving up family life to commit themselves to goddess worship and, as Lucinda Ramberg has powerfully shown in the case of female devotees of Yellamma, it involves the possibility of being dedicated to the goddess and her temple by their families (Ramberg 2014), a prospect that is rife with violences of gender, caste, and class disenfranchisements.[85] Moreover, since being "caught" by Yellamma shows up in physical and physiological symptoms – such as the appearance of matted hair, skin ailments, (perceived) loss of masculinity, etc. – it suggests that within this cultural idiom, an association with the goddess is not only a matter of grace but also one of affliction. The goddess can mark her presence and her choice by afflicting someone.

Scholarship on Hindu goddesses has long pointed out the importance of "ambivalent" deities in the wider Hindu mythico-religious imagination (Meyer 1984, Srinivasan 2009, Ramberg 2014). There are deities in devotional Hinduism who are seen not only as purely benevolent beings

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[85] *Jogatis* or *Jogammas* are women who dedicated to goddess Yelamma by their natal families. As human gifts offered to the deity, they are wedded to her. In addition to such dedication by families, there are ways in which the goddesses preference for a particular person manifests itself, the most visible among them being the appearance of a matted lock of hair. In the case of *Jogappas*, the transgender devotees of Yellamma, the major outcome of their being "caught" by the goddess, is their transfeminine self-expression.

who bless, protect, and rescue their devotees, but who also afflict them through ailments and hardships. This is largely unsurprising within a moral-mythological imagination where good and evil, perfection and fallibility, ethical behavior and cunning are not neatly apportioned to different divine entities. Over the longue-durée of Hindu practices and mythological imagination, it is possible to find both examples where such dualities are sustained and also those where such dualities become difficult to sustain. Goddess such as Mariyamman and Sitala are believed to manifest themselves as cholera, chicken pox, or measles, and the cure is to invoke the cooling effect of the same deities (Srinivasan 2009, Arnold 1993). In Tamil folk etiology, to be afflicted with "ammai" (pox) is to be blessed-afflicted with Amman (the goddess) herself, especially the "hot" aspect of her, which requires to be "cooled" down. Scholars of religion and tradition in Hindu India have pointed out the salience of the hotness/coldness structural opposition in Hindu thought and classification. As Bradford points out:

> That basic Hindu conceptual paradigm which is structured around oppositions of hot to cold, erotic to ascetic, female to male, low-caste to high-caste, and outside to inside, is as crucial to a proper understanding of Yellamma as it is to that of many other forms of the Indian goddess… (Bradford 1983: 307)

Within this structural logic, qualities like fierceness or a tendency to afflict are marked as "hot," and qualities such as healing and calmness are rendered as "cold," and one does not exist without the other. The key point is that unlike in Brahmanical or "high" or Sanskritic Hinduism, where the goddesses, at some point historically, begin to appear as primarily benevolent deities, the Amman goddesses, who are regional, indigenous deities, appear both in their fearsome, afflicting aspects as well as their benevolent and healing aspects. Meyer (1986) has even suggested that there are reasons not to dismiss the idea that the goddess who is now worshipped as Angalamman could be the deified form of a human woman who was wrongfully killed. The Tamil term for such entities is *pey*, a word that is often used to refer to evil and restless spirits. Scholars of Tamil religion have argued that a number of deities worshipped and propitiated in local and regional contexts were once humans who were wronged, whose lives ended abruptly, and whose restless spirits had to be appeased and satiated (Paramasivan 2016). Regarding the possibilities of considering Angalamman in this light, Meyer (1986) has the following points to make:

> The benevolent (life-giving or life-sustaining) spirits generally dwell in or near the house or in a cultivated area, whereas malevolent (life-destroying) spirits roam about in cremation grounds, uncultivated areas or unfamiliar, rarely frequented places. (208)

> That the goddess Ankalamman… has evolved from a *pey* is suggested by her tastes (dead bodies and children) and by her dwelling place, the cremation ground. Exactly how and at what point in historical time a transformation from *pey* to goddess could have taken place, we do not know… there is no myth which makes Ankalamman a human who died a violent death, but what can be assumed, with reasonable certainty, is that the core rituals must express a very old and elaborate propitiation ceremony addressed to a particularly dangerous spirit or force… (209)

Meyer further suggests that, considering Angalamman's importance to matters of fertility and children's and maternal health, and considering the negative role as a fetus-slayer she plays in a key myth, it is possible to surmise that Angalamman is a deified form of a pregnant woman who died at childbirth or during her pregnancy. However, Meyer holds that what is important to understand is not whether Angalamman as a deity evolved from a *pey*, a restless human spirit, but to understand what it means to see her as an "ambivalent" deity. To posit the *pey* and the deity as distinct and separate entities, she says, "is to see life and death, health and disease as separate and in opposition to each other rather than as contained within each other, as aspects of the same force" (220). Meyer further explains what it entails not to separate "life and death, health and disease" as oppositional and drawing from different divine powers:

> If the loss of a child, barrenness, etc. are attributed to a *pey*, all avenues for a restitution, for a healing process are blocked; if they are, however, attributed to a deity, the ill may be remedied and more importantly, the ill itself can be transformed from a negative to a positive: the suffering becomes the *grace* of the deity. Just as small pox and cholera are goddesses, so can the loss of a child, death of a woman in child birth, etc. be seen as the goddess or as the play, the *lila*, of the goddess. This does not alter the fact that the ill itself (i.e., disease, death) is experienced as something horrible, something even to be feared but it does mean that the ill (by recognizing it as part of the deity) can be tolerated, and, to some extent, understood. (Meyer 1986: 220)

The purpose of the above discussion is to bring in the idea of "ambivalent" deities, and to establish a context for how goddesses such as Yellamma and Angalamman might be perceived in that manner -- as both afflicting and curing, as fearsome and motherly, as life-giving and death-dealing at once. For the purposes of this discussion, it suffices to understand that such a typology of deities exists and the available literature suggests that non-Brahmanical goddesses like Yellamma and Angalamma fit the category of ambivalent deities. Now, in the case of Yellamma, we saw through Bradford's and Ramberg's analyses that her devotees speak of their attachment to the goddess in terms of being "caught" by her, which makes for connotations of the pathological sort: Bradford calls *jogappas* and *jogatis*, "carriers of Yellamma" (Bradford 1983: 311). We might

ask if Thirunangais, too, speak in terms of being "caught" by the goddess. My research suggests that they do not.

Despite the choicelessness and diminished agency that my thirunangai interlocutors emphasize when they narrate how they encountered Angalamman, they do not use the metaphor of being "caught" by her. They do not speak of her in terms of affliction. Instead, they speak of the goddess "coming over" or "coming on" them (*en mela Angalamma vandhaa*). Verbs denoting some kind of an arrival – *varudhal* (to come), *irangudhal* (to descend) – are used to refer to moments of trance embodiment of the goddess. My thirunangai interlocutors invariably used the preposition *mel* (over, on) along with this sense of arrival, and spoke in terms of the goddess "coming over" them or "descending on" them, most often the former. None of them expressed the goddess' presence in terms of a "caughtness" as the Yellamma devotees appear to have. In fact, thirunangais reserved the verb *piditthal* (to catch) to refer to how non-divine spirits took possession of a person: *avangalai pey pidichirukku* ("S/he has been caught by an evil spirit"). The goddess' grace was meant to set a person free from the clutches of demonic entities, and of ailments and misfortunes.

Notwithstanding the goddess literature's characterization of Amman goddesses and other tutelary deities as ambivalent ones, and despite Meyer's classification of Angalamman as a deity who can be both malevolent and benevolent, thirunangais largely characterize Angalamman as a mother and a friend, as a deity who removes ailments and bad luck and showers them with her kindness and generosity. They do not characterize the difficulties in their lives or in the lives of others as those dealt by Angalamman, but overwhelmingly as consequences of their own failings. Angalamman can certainly test their faith and integrity, they say, but she would do so only if they gave her cause, if they become egoistic and arrogant, if they act dishonestly. Thirunangai-maruladis do accord a place for the externality of evil or misfortune: effects of sorcery, demonic spirits, and, simply, thoughtless or hurtful actions of others. And they invoke Angalamman to fight away these forces. Angalamman's fearsome aspect becomes for them the image of the powerful force that fights away negative forces. But they do not classify the coexistence of her fearsome and calm aspects (and representations) as "ambivalence." Meyer herself points to the incommensurability between scholarly characterization of the goddess and the devotees' perception when, towards the end of her discussion of Angalamman's *pey* (negative or malevolent)

qualities, she says that "devotees would never call her a 'pey,'" even though there exists a myth or two in which she exhibits such behavior (Meyer 1986: 252).

In her important work on Mariyamman as a pox goddess, Perundevi Srinivasan (2009, 2019) has argued that reading embodied experience of the goddess in terms of "possession" or caughtness does not fully take into account the complex Tamil emic perspectives about pox diseases. Through a careful explication of Tamil approaches to goddess worship, the body, fertility, and natural occurrences like rain and drought, Srinivasan argues that while pox illnesses are approached as conditions that need healing, they are nevertheless seen as signs of the goddess's presence and grace and not as being possessed or caught by her. I suggest that part of her argument is applicable to the case of trance embodiment and the maruladi's receptivity to the goddess, too. Being marked by Angalamman as her medium or channel is not spoken of in terms of caughtness. It certainly has entailments and responsibilities, and sometimes they weigh heavily on the maruladis. But they consider their special attachment to the goddess a matter of immense grace. Srinivasan's views also concur with my observation that the language of possession and caughtness are reserved in Tamil goddess traditions to refer to the attacks of demonic entities, in exorcising which the goddess' power is invoked.

To sum up, even though thirunangai-maruladis express that they had no choice in the matter, even though they say that Angalamman just showed up on them one day, they do not speak of this attachment in terms of being "caught" by her, as devotees in some other goddess cults appear to do. Thirunangais reserve the sense of "caughtness" to refer to possession by evil spirits or misfortunes, from which Angalamman can provide release and redemption. When they speak of the goddess as "coming over" them, it seems to suggest that the new relationship is not one of a complete and permanent takeover by the goddess. It suggests a mode of relating to the deity in which the deity can come and go, descend and take off – in which case, does it mean that the individual chosen by the goddess is subject to her whims? Does she "come" and "go" as and when it pleases her? Do they have any sort of control over these comings and goings?

4.3.2 The Goddess Who Wanders

One early August day, some eight of us undertook a trip to a few goddess shrines in the district adjacent to Chennai. Seven of my thirunangai friends and I set out one morning from Nisha's house in Porur. We first went to the famous Bhavani Amman temple in Periyapalayam.

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But before we entered the temple for a darisanam or glimpse of the deity, we lingered for about an hour in the parking lot. Nisha and Shoba took out from the back of the van the single-burner gas stove we had brought with us, and set it up in a clearing in the lot. Then they brought out rice, ghee, jaggery, and cardamom from a bag and set about preparing a sweet pongal offering for the deity. Later, we stood in line inside the temple, and had our darisanam of the goddess. We also got one of the priests to place our pot of pongal at the feet of the goddess and make an offering to her. Receiving the pongal prasadam (offering blessed and returned to us by the deity) back from the priest, we stepped outside the sanctum to complete our clockwise circumambulation along the pillared corridor.

As we were about to complete our walk around the sanctum, Mallika suddenly went into trance. Her eyes withdrew their focus, and she fell to the ground and tossed and rolled about rather violently as onlookers watched anxiously, hoping she wouldn't hit her head against the sharp edge of a raised stone platform on one side and a decorated concrete pillar on the other. Nisha and Karuna quickly sprang to action. One of them got hold of her feet, while the other her head. Mallika's body continued to thrash and leap, so Nisha held her head up and away from the floor, so that she wouldn't hurt herself too badly. Nisha then asked someone else to take over her position, and she stood up and asked for someone, anyone, to bring some *thunnooru* (colloquial for *thiruneeru,* holy ash). An onlooker rushed into a nearby shrine and fetched a bowl of ash. Nisha picked up a handful of ash in the palm of her hand and, holding the back of Mallika's head in her other hand, smacked the palmful of ash on Mallika's forehead. And Mallika slowly calmed down and her movements slowed down. Laying her down on the floor, Nisha, Karuna, and the others stood up, and Nisha remarked, "This keeps happening in all sorts of places (*kanda edathula*). We are going to Selliyamman temple next. There, let us light camphor, invite the deity properly, and make it promise it wouldn't just come on her whenever, wherever." Nisha was referring this unnamed deity as "it," because they did know yet if it would be a female or male deity.

On that same afternoon, when we were in the Kaattu Selliyamman temple that was less than an hour away from Periyapalayam, Mallika entered trance again when devotees rang the many bronze bells hanging around the sanctum. Once she settled down a bit, held and supported by others, Nisha stood in front of her and asked who had come. Which saami had come? The deity was asked to declare herself or himself. Dazed and incoherent, Mallika uttered the name of a goddess. But her thirunangai friends were not satisfied. Nisha kept urging her for more

information, but since Mallika could not offer any further details, Nisha decided to end the inquiry and then asked the goddess to put out a lit piece of camphor with the palm of her (Mallika's) hand and promise that, henceforth, she would come on Mallika only when called, that she wouldn't show up in odd places and at odd times and affect Mallika's everyday life. Once that was done, they offered Mallika some water to drink and some prasadam, and soon we were on our way to cook and eat lunch under the shade of a neem tree.

When I asked Nisha about the incidents, she explained to me that the act of promise was called *satya vaakku* (literally, true speech) - a verbal seal, an agreement from the goddess. The goddess might have chosen on her own to come over a person, but that did not mean there was no negotiating with her. It is common practice, not just among thirunangais but also other worshippers of goddesses, to receive *satya vaakku* from the goddess when she begins to show up on a person. "Yes. The pottai might be walking on the road, travelling by bus, then she might hear some drums and start dancing and falling down. It is dangerous. That is why we take *satya vaakku* that the saami should come only when called by lighting camphor." Nisha told me that there was a way in which deities announced themselves. "If it is a male deity such as Murugan, it would come saying 'Arohara! Arohara!' If it is a female deity, she will always first mention her brother's name, saying 'Govinda! Govinda!'" Since neither of those utterances had come up in Mallika's speech in trance, Nisha and others had been dissatisfied. Walking away from the temple, when one of the other thirunangais asked Nisha if Mallika was faking it or if it was perhaps a negative entity pretending to be a goddess, Nisha said, "Could be… But I don't think so. I think since this is *pudhu mudi* (new bond, new trance embodiment)….doesn't know how to speak yet."

The elision of the subject in that last sentence of Nisha's is remarkable. Who "doesn't know how to speak yet?" The goddess who has chosen a new human entity to come over? Or is it Mallika? What does this knowing mean? If it is a matter of Mallika knowing how to speak, then is it a question of her knowing the culturally appropriate form of speech for announcing the deity that has come over her? Or is it about knowing how to translate into language the divine impulses coming to her ? The responses I received to these questions were ambivalent. But one thing was clear. The deities have a formulaic way of announcing themselves, and they engage in conversation with those who know how to conduct these conversations. And they make promises to act in certain ways. Thus, it is not a question of complete surrender of human agency to the goddess, even if one

did not have a choice in the matter of being the recipient of her grace and arrival in the first place. Instead, the relationship takes the form of a pact.

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4.4. Causality, Intensification, Affection

4.4.1 Angalamman's Role in Thirunangai Identity

My thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors characterize Angalamman's role in the articulation of thirunangai identity primarily in two ways. One is a narrative of intensification and cultural emplacement. According to this narrative, as children and adults, the thirunangais had already become aware of their feminine expressions and their comfort with conventionally feminine activities. They speak about their fondness to play together with girls their age, their desire to help their mothers with household chores, and their engagement in activities such as drawing the *kolam* design at the entrance to their homes, doing elaborate prayers and offerings to their household deities, and so on – activities that many thirunangais consider to be outward manifestations of their pottai-ness.[86] During one of our conversations about her childhood, Nisha remarked that when a boy starts taking a lot of interest in conducting worship, rituals, decorating the deities, and making food offerings, it is a sign of his being a pottai. In this narrative, as young thirunangais navigate their way through available avenues for gender expression within the domestic sphere and in their association with other children, at some point, their first encounter with Angalamman occurs. And this attachment, with the reckoning and recognition of the world around, performs some crucial work of crystallizing a more public and open claiming of feminine embodiment and thirunangai self-identification.

The other way in which thirunangais have linked the goddess to thirunangai personhood is by claiming that when Angalamman comes over a man, she slowly turns him into a pottai, instilling in him the desire to grow out his hair, start wearing jewelry, and so on. Radhika went so far as to say that such gender-transforming powers of Angalamman were part of her desire to re-establish the balance between femininity and masculinity in the world. The goddess, therefore, can play a causal role in thirunangai identity.

This brings us to ask: does the goddess come over young thirunangais and contribute to a cultural instantiation of that thirunangai identity? Or does the goddess actively turn a person into

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[86] For a discussion of the ubiquity of such narratives among hijras and kothis, see Cohen (2005).

a thirunangai? If it is the first, then it satisfies certain functionalist rationality: attachment to a deity serves to offer cultural legibility and legitimacy to thirunangai identity within the social world they inhabit. God and deities do not pose a serious challenge for this framing, as long as we can show that they are objectification of human desires, conjured in the service of some social function. But what do we make of an argument that the goddess can also turn a person into a thirunangai? Our "hermeneutics of suspicion" trains us to dig beneath the surface of that claim.[87] A rationalist approach becoming of the sciences would require us not to take their claim at face-value. Instead, it urges us to receive their words either as, say, an instrumental distortion of the truth of gender (in which case, my thirunangai interlocutors come through as highly agentive, even shrewd, actors working to mystify their gender identity); or to think of it as a concealment of deeper logics that are perhaps unavailable to the actors themselves – the well-known charge of false consciousness, or what Bruno Latour (2010) calls fetish accusation, whereby we see actors as having mistakenly attributed agency to entities that were made by them in the first place. In a familiar narrative, this then presents the social scientist as the "purified" (dis-enchanted) expert who can true operations of discursive powers. Margaret Trawick (1990) recognizes the violence that is possible in that move, and she offers an alternative metaphor:

> Let us try another metaphor. Let us not think of the person, the native, as a sphere, with a surface to be stripped off or gotten through to the real stuff, the contents. Let us think of consciousness, or better yet, culture (how do we distinguish between these two ethereal constructions of consciousness, or culture?) as an activity-culture/consciousness as an activity not done by one person, but done among people, leaving its traces in memory (which we shall admit is a mystery), which will be part of the matrix for the next cultural act, the next interaction. Let us say that culture is in the interaction. After all, where else would it be? Then when we view things this way, we find that there is no surface or depth. Instead there is only the turbulence of confrontation, with ourselves as part of it, and this turbulence is the most interesting, because the most active, thing. It is where the rocks get carved. We can study the rocks later. Now let us consider the turbulence in which we together with others are swept up.[88]

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[87] Introduced by Paul Ricoeur (1970) in his discussion of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, the idea of hermeneutics of suspicion refers to interpretive modes that approach a text with the aim to demystify and unmask. Here Ricoeur's invocation of "suspicion" refers to a refusal to accept the most readily available interpretation but to question the premises and agendas behind phenomena. For a useful discussion of the place of "paranoia" in "the methodological centrality of suspicion to current critical practice," see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading…" (2003).

[88] Trawick (1990): Kindle Locations 1311-1317

Fortunately for us, thirunangais themselves offer a way out of privileging one interpretation over another. Paying closer attention to how they talk about the role Angalamman plays in their thirunangai selfhood helps us see that they do not essentialize any single possible reading. On the contrary, for thirunangais, whether Angalamman causes thirunangai-ness or if she intensifies and finds a social place for already existing thirunangai-ness is not a question that needs to resolved one way or another. They can both be true at once. My thirunangai interlocutors tack back and forth between claiming that "Angalamman comes over pottais because she is very fond of us" and claiming that "Angalamma comes over us and turns us pottai."

4.4.2 The Messy Art of Creation – The force of the *a priori*

The clue to this approach lies in a story that Thangam Amma told me about how the goddess created the world:

> She is responsible for birthing the world. Who? Amman. They say, "Umaiyal (goddess) was born before the ulagam (world) was born."[89] People say that the world was created in this manner, in that manner, and all that. No. Umaiyal was born before the ulagam was born. All the ants, flies, and all thousands and thousands of living beings are all her creation. Let me tell you that story briefly. Amma gathers up some clay and makes a lump out of it. From this she creates Vinayagar (Ganesha). He is the first one she creates. But what can she do with Vinayagar? What can a mother do with her son? Nothing. She then makes another lump of clay and performs a penance. She prays, "I asked you for a husband, but you gave me a son. What can I do with that?" This time, Mahavishnu is born, and he addresses her as his sister. What can a thangacchi (younger sister) do with her annan (older brother)? They can just be brother and sister. That's all. The third time she puts together a lump of clay, Bramman is born. People don't talk about this story. They say he came out of Vishnu's navel. No. He too was her creation. Finally comes Isan (Sivan). She has finally found a husband for herself. But when she comes closer to him and tries to embrace him, the fire emanating from her scorches him. What Amma has in her forehead is not a pottu (vermilion mark, bindi), it is her third eye. The fire from it scorches him. She says to Sivan, "Saami, you are not able to come near me. What can I do? Tell me. I will do it." Using her

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[89] Historian R. Nagaswamy documents that *Kalladam*, a Tamil work from the tenth century CE contains verses that speak of goddess Uma as the creator of the universe (1981: 20-21). This is among the many extant Tamil sources he cites to show the long tradition of goddess worship in the Tamil region.

words as excuse, Mahavishnu takes away her weapon. He does that to his own younger sister. Don't we hear stories about brothers cheating sisters [of their inheritance]? This is the story. Sivan says, "Take everything from her, machan (brother-in-law). Otherwise, we cannot control her. She is an arrogant woman." So her brother Vishnu takes away all her weapons. You know what some women can do out of their desire for their husbands? They give away everything. Don't they? Likewise, Amman gave away everything right then, during the creation of the world. But even after she has given away all her weapons, Sivan is still unable to embrace her. Then he says, "Please pluck away your third eye and give it to me." Mahavishnu teaches him. It is all his doing. What does Sivan know? He knows nothing. He is a madman. It was all Vishnu's doing. So she gouges out her third eye and gives it to Sivan. All because she wants a husband…. She gives away her third eye. Using that they reduce her to ashes. They cannot control her by any other means. Only her own shakti (power). They divide her ashes into three parts, and they place one each on alai (waves), malai (mountain), and kalai (the arts). Alaimagal (Lakshmi), Malaimagal (Parvati), and Kalaimagal (Saraswati) were born. So they had created three goddesses to marry the three gods. Lakshmi for Vishnu, Sarasvati for Bramman, Isvari (Parvati) for Isan (Sivan)…. Then we know the story where Bramman goes to trick Amma, and Sivan plucks away his fifth head….

This creation myth has a lot of the features of the stories of the Puranic tradition – the medieval compendiums of origin myths, stories, and exploits for various gods and goddesses, where the deity in question is elevated above all the other gods, framing the relationships among them in terms of enmity, deception, cooperation, usurpation, reconciliation, and other dynamics. We can see this myth as emerging from a goddess cult, where not only is the female deity hailed as the creator of worlds and the other gods, but in which we are also told of her subjugation by the conspiracy between her brother and her spouse. Elements of a feminist critique of traditional kinship arrangement, where the woman is rendered powerless by her own brother (because of whom she is dispossessed of what is rightfully hers) and her husband (who is threatened by her own powers), are very much in evidence in this narrative. In the narrative Thangam Amma has

offered, the goddess is not so much a woman caught in the patriarchal gift exchange "traffic," but a woman with originary agency and power, which she loses by her own desire for a husband.[90]

What I would like to draw attention to here are some apparent contradictions in this narrative. At the outset, Amman is claimed to be the creator of worlds. She sets out to create other gods from lumps of clay. But, as they appear, she already apprehends them as son, brother, and spouse, recognizing taboo relationships and permissible ones right away. In other words, Amman's creation is not completely ex nihilo. She does set out to create a world, but she keeps running into the dynamics of a world that already exists, with its norms, relationships, allegiances, insecurities, and proscriptions already in place. According to Thangam Amma's story, the goddess' undoing at the hands of these *a priori* forces occurs because of her overwhelming desire for a husband. We could, perhaps, understand this as a desire for the normative that turns out to be detrimental to the goddess. What is key here is this narrative's comfort with describing an act of creation while also placing as central to its plot forces from a world that already exists. My way of tying this up with thirunangai views on Angalamman's role in thirunangai identity is: the question of whether Angalamman shapes a thirunangai-ness that already exists, or if she creates it anew is not one that can be resolved either way categorically, because what she makes and what exists prior to that both matter in the way they relate to one another. This story is, in fact, deeply illustrative of a Foucauldian approach to discourse: Discursive regimes that are anterior to us produce us as subjects. It is in and through discourse that we acquire our selves and subjectivities. But these discursive regimes also have the capacity to place us in a relationship of externality to themselves, presenting themselves as our objects of our reflection and contention.

4.5. Angalamman – a Transgender Deity?

4.5.1. Iconographic Interpretations

Alongside these ideas about the goddess' role in making or intensifying thirunangai identity, we also find claims that Angalamman herself is a transgender goddess. Not only does Radhika make such a claim, she also supports her claim with an interpretation of Angalamman's iconographic representation. She offers a new interpretation of the main Angalamman image in

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[90] I have in mind here Gayle Rubin's (1997) influential essay, "Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," where she analyzes kinship and marriage through the logic of gift exchange offered by Marcel Mauss in his classic work on forms of social reciprocities.

the sanctum sanctorum of the goddess' temple at Melmalayanur. In order to lend credence to her argument that Angalamman herself is a transgender deity, Radhika draws upon available visual semiotics of the goddess' image:

> If you look at Amma in her *moolasthanam*[91]...if you look at Meenakshi Amman, she has the feminine qualities of modesty and grace. If you look at her idol. When you look at Angalamma, you see her chest, the way she looks, the way she is seated, she looks different. She is like a *thirunambi*, she is a woman who has a man within her. That is how I would explain her. Amma is a thirunambi. I might be a woman, but the masculine in me dominates… Amma is the ardhanaari form, which is a combination of one half male and the other half female. It is because of this power of hers that thirunangais are very attracted to her.

Drawing attention to the goddess' posture and body language, she reads it as an expression of masculinity in a female body. Radhika relies on a familiar visual semiotics of divine iconography, offering Meenakshi Amman's representation as a contrast, which is a striking comparison to make. Goddess Meenakshi (or Minakshi) is the central deity in one of the largest and oldest temple complexes in the region, in the city of Madurai in southern Tamil Nadu. With an origin narrative in which she first appears as a masculine and courageous warrior-woman sporting three breasts and who later becomes the consort of Sivan (her third breast vanishes the moment she locks eyes with him), Meenakshi is seen as a goddess straddling both her own individual divinity as well as her status submissive to her husband Siva (see Fuller 1980):

> … images of the goddess generally show her with two arms when she is held to be accompanying Siva but with four when she is independent. However, some goddesses, such as Minakshi, are shown with two arms even when they are apparently independent, thus suggesting the continuous primacy of the married state. (Fuller 1980: 323)

Fuller adds that Meenakshi's status undergoes a shift between day and night: during the day she is an independent goddess, residing in her own sanctum. At night, she is Lord Sundaresvara's wife, figured as inferior to him. Fuller describes the Goddess' iconography thus:

> In the central sanctum of Minakshi's temple is her main, immovable stone image. It is made of green stone and shows Minakshi standing in the "bent-leg" posture and with two arms: in her raised right hand is a lotus bud on which perches her special bird, the green parrot while the left arm hangs by her side. (Fuller 1980: 322)

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[91] The sanctum, the core of the temple architecture. Radhika is referring to the main deity as found in the sanctum of the temple.

It is this well-known image of goddess Meenakshi that Radhika calls to our attention, to provide us a contrast for reading the Angalamman image for the gender dynamics it conveys. Angalamman is in a seated posture, her right foot placed victoriously over Brahma's head (from the clutches of which she has released and redeemed Siva). She has four arms, she carries weapons in two of her hands, a *udukkai* drum in the third, and a pot of food in her fourth. Unlike Meenakshi who has her sanctum all to herself, with her consort Sivan in a separate sanctum, Angalamman has Sivan to her right side. However, in the iconographic representation in the Melmalayanur temple, considered the most important temple for Angalamman in the region, Sivan is less than half the size of the goddess. He is a diminished form, and understandably so, because the goddess has just reclaimed him from the life-depleting hold of the severed head of Bramman. Thus, Radhika's pithy interpretation that Angalamman is not simply a female deity, but one with a complex configuration of gender, is rooted in certain practiced ways of reading Hindu iconography.

In addition to performing a culturally informed reading of the goddess image, Radhika also contemporizes the representation by saying that the goddess is a *thirunambi*, a trans-man. Thus she finds place in the iconography not only for a reading of transfemininity but transmasculinity too. Moreover, her subsequent claim that Anglamman is nothing but the half-male, half-female Ardhanaari form, a remark made by several thirunangai-maruladis, is supported by literature on the goddess. Eveline Meyer records a myth in which Angalamman's key purpose is to find a place for herself as Sivan's left half (1986: 36-37). Elaine Craddock's study of thirunangai healers and mediums in Melmalayanur also confirms the circulation of the idea that the goddess wanted to gain her place as one half of Sivan (Craddock 2012: 120). However, no existing literature argues that the Angalamman as we see her in the sanctum of the Melmalayanur temple is that androgynous form. Unlike Radhika, Craddock interprets Angalamman's iconography as sharing many features in common with other Tamil goddesses. Radhika's rendering of Angalamman's posture and body language as that of a transgender or androgynous person is, perhaps, a uniquely thirunangai way of interpreting the iconography.

Emphasizing the role of cultural knowledge and reading practices a viewer might bring to interpret an iconic representation, historian of religion R. Mahalakshmi remarks: "… the visual narrative contains that which is alluded to but not manifest, signifying meanings and symbols for the viewer from a vast cultural repertoire that may or may not be linked to the iconic portrayal"

(Mahalakshmi 2011: 296). In her reading of the Angalamman iconography, Radhika works with certain culturally salient ideas about gendered bodies. She brings into play conventions and norms about feminine grace, appropriate posture, and demeanor to suggest that Angalamman deviates from these gendered norms. She also taps into a comparative knowledge of iconography when she places the Angalamman image alongside other familiar goddess images, those that express certain conventional feminine grace common in Hindu representations of deities.

4.5.2 Narrative Claims – Why Angalamman is a Thirunangai

Ragini Amma, on the other hand, says that Angalamman is a thirunangai, a trans-woman herself. What is more, her way of substantiating that claim is to offer a mythological narrative. Neither the *sthala puraanam* (history/hagiography of a holy site) of the Melmalayanur temple, nor the range of myths collated by Eveline Meyer make mention of this mythology that Ragini Amma has to offer. It was, however, corroborated by some of the other thirunangai-maruladis. "There is a story from olden days. But that story has been erased, and it has been claimed that Angalamma and her worship belongs to the Sembadavas," Ragini said, referring to the fact that the rights to priesthood and temple management of the Angalamman temple in Melmalayanur are held by several generations of Sembadava fishing community. In the myths and stories that come from the Melmalayanur area, Angalamman either features as a member of the Sembadava community or as a deity who was helped in a time of need by Sembadava fishermen, in reward for which Angalamman stations herself in Melmalayanur and grants the primary right of worship to the community (Meyer 1986, Melmalayanur Temple Narrative 2016). Ragini Amma had a different narrative to offer.

> When Angalamma is taken over by brammahatti dosham (after rescuing Sivan from the clutches of the severed head of Bramma) and she wandered around, she came across a hut that was in the shade of a date palm tree. A thirunangai was living there. She had built that hut, and she was living there under the date palm tree. It was the month of Maasi (mid-February to mid-March), and Amma was under a curse from Kalaivani (Saraswati) for stomping on her husband Bramman's head. So she had become a possessed woman. Her eyes were bulged out, her teeth had grown longer, she wore a garland of entrails. She was wandering all over the place, from village to village, looking for something to eat. She comes to Thazhanoor, she comes to Poongaavanam, she comes to Koovathur. Then finally

she came to (Mel)Malayanur. She sees the thirunangai's hut under the date palm tree. You go and ask other thirunangais, ask senior (*moottha*) saami-pottais. They will tell you this story is true. This story has been completely erased…

Angalamma went to that hut. She went there as an ordinary woman. The thirunangai said to her, "You can stay in my house." But that thirunangai was unwell, so Amma healed her by finding the right herbs and making a medicine for her. Then when the month of Maasi came the next year, Amma again took her horrific form because of the curse. She needed the entrails of an animal to wear as a garland. Where would she go to find one? Looking at this, the thirunangai tore open her own stomach and offered her intestines to Amma. And she said, "Amma, when you sit down here as saami, you should not sit down in your form, you should show yourself in my form. This place should become green and lush (*pacchai pasel*). We should hear the chatter of parrots. Peacocks should dance, cuckoos should sing, and my people should thrive here." She took this promise (*satya vaakku*) from Amma. That is why Angalamma looks like a thirunangai in the temple. She is a thirunangai. This is why so many thirunangais go there and there is so much regard for thirunangais. There are so many Ammans. There is Karumari Amman, there is Maankaadu Amman, there is Muppatthamman. Are thirunangais so keen about any other… The other thing is, the very first deity who comes over thirunangais is Angalamma. That is the truth. Amma has abided by the promise she made to the thirunangai and she has changed her form. People who know this truth even say "paavn padti" to Angalamma. When I go to Malayanur, I say "paavn padti" to Amma" she said, referring to the words of respect and greeting that thirunangais utter when they address their elders, always making a gesture of genuflection in keeping with the utterance's meaning: "I touch your feet."[92]

Angalamman here appears as a tired and wandering woman who finds refuge in the home of a thirunangai. The thirunangai takes her in, feeds her, and restores her to health. When the goddess in her *ugra* or fierce form needs sacrifice, the thirunangai offers her own innards, asking in return that the goddess should take the form of a thirunangai. And Angalamman obliges. Here we have a narrative in which it is not the goddess who plays a role in the making or intensifying of thirunangai identity, it is the thirunangai who turns the goddess into a thirunangai by the force of her generosity

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[92] A Hindi term meaning 'I touch your feet.' Thirunangais say "paavn padti" to their elders.

and sacrifice. This is only one of the many instances where the thirunangai capacity for generosity and the imperative to give to another at the risk of undoing oneself finds expression.

Ragini Amma's narrative bears a striking resemblance to a story about goddess Yellamma in the northern Karnataka region. This is how Lucinda Ramberg captures a narration of that story, marking its centrality in the narrative world of the Yellamma devadasis:

> Yellamma was hungry. She was walking through a farmer's fields and she was hungry. Her stomach was empty and the fields were full. She was walking in the fields and she plucked some green onions and eggplant to eat, to fill her stomach. The landlord saw her eating from his fields and became angry. Her ran into the fields swinging his scythe and shouting. Shouting and shouting, swinging his arms and that scythe. Yellamma ran and ran to escape him. She ran into the Dalit quarter (*harijan keri*), she was running and running to get away from the landlord. Even into the *harijan keri* she ran to escape him. Yellamma ran into Matangi's house and Matangi said, "Here, hide under these skins," and Yellamma concealed herself in the tanning pits under an elephant hide. The landlord followed Yellamma into Matangi's house. Rushing into Matangi's house he demanded, "Where is she?" "Tell me where she is or I will cut you," he said, holding up his scythe. But Matangi did not say. She did not reveal Yellamma. "Who are you, what are you looking for?" she asked calmly. In anger, he cut off her nose and left. Yellamma came out of the tanning pits. Seeing what he had done, she restored Matangi's nose, saying: "Because of what you have done, you will always be my sister. When people come to worship on my hill, they will worship you first." (Ramberg 2014: 39-40)

In her analysis of this story for the social commentary it offers about "the violent enforcement of private property rights and upper-caste entitlement," Ramberg remarks, "Mathangi's bodily sacrifice becomes the occasion for inclusion in the family of Yellamma, restoration to wholeness and the privilege of being worshipped first" (Ramberg 2014: 42-43). In Ragini Amma's version, the person who offers the goddess refuge is a thirunangai. If we compare it to the narrative above, we can see that a thirunangai takes the place of the Dalit woman. Through this, a kind of poetic axis of marginality is suggested, whereby the figures who offer the goddess protection and nourishment in a time of need are, in both narratives, figures who are marginalized in their social worlds: a Dalit woman in one and a thirunangai in the other.[93] In the Yellamma-Mathangi story the two women become sister goddesses whose worship is at the center of the jogati and jogappa lifeworld. But in Ragini Amma's narrative, the thirunangai offers herself in sacrifice, and in return Angalamman presents herself as a thirunangai in Melmalayanur. The mythical thirunangai offers

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[93] This, of course, does not mean that the figure of the Dalit is simply replaced by the transgender figure. Nothing precludes the thirunangai from being a Dalit as well.

herself in sacrifice – a narrative move that indexes not only the social status of thirunangais but also hints at the thirunangai capacity for giving of themselves, a capacity for self-jeopardizing action, which we will revisit at length in Chapters 5.

My point here is not to essentialize sacrifice as a thirunangai trait, but only to show that certain thirunangai-maruladi narratives highlight that capacity as an ethical quality. It is possible to see such narratives as part of a larger network of moral stances made by communities within a society. For example, Eveline Meyer (1986) documents two stories in which we see upper castes and wealthy landowners fail to offer help either to the goddess or to her devotees in need. In one story, a *zamindar,* a wealthy landlord, refuses to offer the goddess some land even after she asks him directly and later through her priest several times. The only way Angalamman is able to secure land for a temple is by appearing in front of the landlord in the most terrifying appearance and threatening him with downfall for his lack of generosity: "… Isvari went to the zamindar's house with her trident, sat on his chest and said, choking him with his hand, 'If you don't donate any land, I will open your stomach, take out your intestines and wear them as garlands'" (253). Meyer records another story where the person who refuses to come to the aid of a devotee and even insults the goddess is a wealthy brahmin man (253-254).[94] The actions of these two men from upper castes and landowning classes can be compared to that of the farmer in the Yellamma story Lucinda Ramberg has offered us above: "The landlord saw her eating from his fields and became angry. Her ran into the fields swinging his scythe and shouting. Shouting and shouting, swinging his arms and that scythe" (Ramberg 2014: 39-40). These figures occupy the same paradigmatic location in the narrative: those who failed to help the goddess even when asked.

In contrast to this, in Ragini Amma's narrative and in the Yellamma-Mathangi story recorded by Lucinda Ramberg, a thirunangai and a Dalit woman, respectively, emerge as people who are ready to put their own lives at risk in order to protect the goddess. These narratives' assertion of the capacity of the most marginalized to act in the most selfless ways need not be seen as essentialist moves. Instead, by placing these narratives alongside each other, we can see that the plot offers some interesting paradigmatic positions for different local groups to occupy. As part of

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[94] In another narrative detailing Angalamman's meanderings in the Tamil country, the goddess approaches a toddy-tapper for some nourishment for her children. But the toddy-tapper refuses, saying the harvest has been poor on account of drought and he has no toddy to give away. In yet another story, fishermen express their willingness to help the goddess but ask in exchange that they should be blessed with plentiful catch. See Meyer (1986), pp. 28-30.

these discursive emplacements, we see the selflessness of the most oppressed within these worlds highlighted against the meanness of the wealthy and the powerful. In this impulse, these narratives seem to partake of a tendency in different religions to emphasize the entrapments of wealth. Jesus' statement to his disciples in the Gospels, "…it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19: 23-26) and "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5) come to mind.

4.5.3 Angalamman and Thirunangai – In Each Other's Image

Radhika's interpretation of iconography and the myth that Ragini Amma offers are both examples of creative engagement with divine images to account for the likeness, mutual correspondence, and attachment between the human and the divine. In response to my question as to why there is a special relationship between Angalamman and thirunangais, they say, *we are in each other's image.* John Wall (2005) explains the significance of such reciprocity of imaging between the human and the divine using, as illustration, Michaelangelo's fresco 'The Creation of Adam.' He draws attention not only to the idea that the human is created in the image of God, but God too is created by humans in our image.[95] In the painting, God and Adam gaze into each other's eyes as if they are looking into their own reflection in the other's eyes. Wall adds that, at another level of creativity, it is the artist who imagines this likeness between the divine and the human, for the painting is an act of creative representation, a poetic rendition of the human desire to find likeness between ourselves and our gods. Ragini Amma's story offers a meta-view of this process of image-making, much like how Michaelangelo's fresco does in John Wall's reading. In her story, we are actually shown a thirunangai's desire to render the divine in her image. It is a world where the goddess accepts human refuge and protection and, in return, presents herself as a thirunangai. Thus, what the thirunangai-maruladis articulate is not only a relationship of fondness but also one of likeness: the goddess and the thirunangai are both articulated as being in the image of one another. However, this mutuality comes at a cost. According to the narrative, the goddess turns

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[95] Wall (2005) says: "Michelangelo is of course depicting the line from Genesis 1:27: 'God created humankind [Adam] in his image, in the image of God he created them.' This line itself, through its internal repetition, also has a mirrored structure. God appears twice: as the subject who creates humankind, and then as the object in the image of which he does so." (p.3)

herself into a thirunangai after an incredible act of self-sacrifice on the part of the thirunangai, which hints at the kind of sacrifice the goddess might demand from her devotees.

4.6 Sex, Sex Work, and the Body that holds the Goddess

In her ethnography on the lives of hijras in Hyderabad, Gayatri Reddy (2005) discusses the importance given to sexual renunciation in that life-world. Sex contributes to the articulation of a moral hierarchy among hijras, with those who have renounced sex and sex work claiming moral superiority and ritual purity over those who engaged in sex work. In the hijra world that Reddy portrays, "the hierarchy of the roles of (asexual) ritual performer and (sexual) prostitute" and "the idealization of asexuality" are important elements (79). Reddy contextualizes this cultural emphasis on asexuality and asceticism through a discussion of Hindu philosophical views on sexual renunciation and the place the householder/ascetic dichotomy has come to hold in the anthropology of Hindu India, especially in the work of Louis Dumont. As per an earlier model, the householder who is engaged in the reproduction and sustenance of social life is a figure distinct from the renouncer; their roles, duties, and characteristics are constructed in mutual opposition to the other. However, as Reddy has argued, in the later development of the model of four *varnasramas*, the stages-of-life model, renunciation was incorporated into the life-course of a single individual (male, of course) as the last stage of his life, after all his worldly duties have been performed. Reddy also shows how in Hindu mythology, the ascetic and the erotic are, however, never far from each other, often converging in the same figure. Siva, the god, is an important example, featuring as the ultimate ascetic-erotic. The hijras in Reddy's ethnography emphasize the ascetic aspect of Siva and other Hindu mythological characters, and they speak of themselves in terms of those figures. Through this claim to culturally valorized asexuality and the figure of the ascetic, Reddy's hijra interlocutors emphasize the importance of cultivating "izzat" or respect, which allows them to look down upon those who engage in sex work.

My thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors in Chennai, however, do not speak of sex and sex work in those terms at all. They do not construct a moral hierarchy based on sex. Being attached to the goddess and engaging in sex work does not, in itself, produce a moral contradiction for them. They are, however, aware of critiques of sex work, and they address those concerns. These articulations are complex, and they involve a number of considerations on the part of thirunangais:

moral reflection on sex work, accounting for their being vehicles for the goddess and also being sexual persons, social critique about the marginality of thirunangai life in Tamil society, etc.

My very first ethnographic encounter with the goddess occurred at Vasanthi's little apartment in the Tsunami Rehabilitation Quarters in Tondaiyarpet in north Chennai.[96] I had gone there to meet her thirunangai mother/guru to learn about thirunangai kin groups in the Chennai area. But the discussion turned very soon to be about goddess Angalamman and her centrality to their lives. In the course of that conversation, Vasanthi told me about the small temple for Angalamman she maintained in an adjacent neighborhood, and she also showed me a photo album from the most recent festival she had organized for the goddess at her temple. Showing me the professionally taken photographs from the festival, Vasanthi remarked that she spent at least 2 lakh rupees for the Aadi month festivities at her temple. And before I could ask her how she managed to raise such a large sum of money, she said, "How do you think I raise that amount? By printing donation receipts and flyers and asking people for contributions? I do that for sure. But I'd get something like 10,000 rupees from that. Where does the rest of it come from? It is the money I earn from sex work (*paaliyal thozhil*). It is wrong (*thappu*), yes. But Angalamma has no problems with that. She accepts that money, because I earn it honestly. I don't steal from anyone, I don't lie, I don't cheat people. I earn it honestly and offer it to my Amma."

Why should Vasanthi feel the need to bring up sex work and, more importantly, why should she feel the need to frame it in moral terms, setting up a moral frame and then deeming it irrelevant in the context of her relationship with the goddess? In other words, what served as the incitement for her to offer such moral reasoning and explanation? What, or who, called her to account for her engagement in sex work in moral terms?[97] Vasanthi's remarks point to at least three moral terrains. **First**, it is possible that Vasanthi felt the need to pre-empt any moral judgment on my part vis-a-vis sex work. Having read me as a brahmin already, she might have thought that the moral-religious world I came from could not hold together sex work, devotion, and trance-embodiment of the goddess in one frame, let alone one body. My sheer presence, signaling class-caste-gender differences and thus indexing the possibility of a different moral frame from hers, could have

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[96] I have offered a detailed account of this encounter in the Introduction to this dissertation.

[97] See Butler (2005) for her discussion of Nietzsche's argument in *The Genealogy of Morals* that the act of giving an account of ourselves, explaining ourselves, occurs because we are called to do so by someone whom we have injured. Butler critiques this claim and suggests that while Nietzsche was correct in setting up the scene, whereby I feel the need to account for myself only in the face of another's prompting or incitement, this relation need not only be one based on fear and punishment.

served as the incitement for Vasanthi to speak about sex work. **Secondly**, she makes the question of sex work an object of explicit moral reflection, because she is aware of certain moral discourses about sex work that circulate within the thirunangai community too. For instance, some thirunangai activists speak of sex work as an impediment to respectable thirunangai life. At the same time, they explain thirunangai sex work to a wider public, whose understanding they seek, in terms of economic hardships, interrupted schooling, family violence and estrangement, lack of social support for alternate sources of employment, etc.[98] However, it is not always possible to tease out the moral respectability argument from socioeconomic critique in many of these positions against sex work.[99] The idea that engagement in sex work is an impediment to the thirunangai march towards rights, respect, and full citizenship is voiced by different thirunangai leaders from time to time, and it is either met with resistance or ignored by a vast number of thirunangais. The **third** moral position Vasanthi might be addressing is the legal-punitive one: she is well aware not only of the legal risks involved in sex work but also the fact that thirunangai sex workers are routinely targeted by the police, which results in violence and harassment.[100]

Vasanthi's choice of the word *thappu* (wrong) to characterize sex work is important. I suggest that she characterized sex work as "thappu" not necessarily out of an internalized sense of im/morality, but because she was indexing her awareness of sex work's "thappu" status in the lager social-cultural-legal moral framework. Her ethical reasoning appears to be a dialectical movement between her knowledge of widely accepted morality and her awareness of the exigencies of her own life in which goddess Angalamman occupies a central place. We can see Vasanthi's remark about sex work and its "thappu" (wrongness) status as an act of morally accounting for herself. Judith Butler (2005) has shown that, while norms are involved "in the very constitution of the subject" – what she calls "the force of morality in the production of the subject" – the subject can also address herself to the norms as if she stands external to them (Butler 2005: 10). It is possible for the subject to be "not at one with moral norms," i.e., to be in discord with it. In which case she

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[98] For such an explication, see Kalki Subramaniam's video entitled, "Why do some transgender people do sex work and begging?" at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaY-WFrpb48, accessed at 4.00 pm on January 27, 2019.
[99] See "The need of the hour for trans sex workers: jobs and social inclusion," The Times of India, July 18, 2016. URL: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/The-need-of-the-hour-for-trans-sex-workers-Jobs-and-social-inclusion/articleshow/53252074.cms, accessed at 4.00 pm on January 27, 2019.
[100] Discussing the debates on voluntariness and coercion, and consent and exploitation is beyond the scope of this project. What I wish to highlight here is that engaging in sex work is not seen by any of my thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors as a moral problem within the matrix of their attachment to goddess Angalamman.

"must deliberate upon these norms, and that part of deliberation will entail a critical understanding of their social genesis and meaning. In this sense, ethical deliberation is bound up with the operation of critique" (8). Vasanthi's remark addresses itself preemptively to moral norms it is "not one with." Thus, even in its pithiness, her remark evinces an awareness of normative morality and its violent erasures (its claim to universalism and its refusal to particularize). In giving an account of her engagement in sex work in terms of a morality she stands outside of – i.e., normative social and legal forms of morality – Vasanthi comes through as a social theorist: "… when the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist" (Butler 2005: 8).

Mala and Radhika's views on sex work add another dimension to the discussion. They say not only that sex work is not a moral issue for Angalamman, but that she, in fact, willingly shows up on sex workers, both women and thirunangais. Their remarks suggest a positive link between the goddess and marginalized sexual subjects. Findings from other goddess traditions bear out this point. For instance, Bradford (1983) has discussed the sexual aspect of the lives of jogappas, the transgender devotees of Yellamma. He details the importance of sexual banter and teasing in jogappa social life and also refers to the section of women devotees of the goddess, who also engage in sex work. In Ramberg's (2014) analysis, too, it is the untamed and non-marital sexuality of the Yellamma devadasis that provokes great anxiety among reformist and punitive state and non-state actors. The devadasis' relations with patrons outside the institution of marriage, their receiving material benefits from these relationships, and their begetting children who fall outside the legitimacy of marriage as well as their mothers' status as people wedded to the deity – these are some key aspects of this life-world that Ramberg shows unsettle normative social order, gender expression, and sexual relations. Will Roscoe (1996) has shown in his discussion on the transgender priests of the pagan goddess Cybele, the hijras of South Asia, and the Gala of ancient Sumeria, that sexual expressions and relations, including sex work, were part of transgender goddess cults across a range of cultures. This brings us back to my earlier point that the valorization of ascetic asexuality and the denigration of sex work Reddy (2005) has documented among hijras in Hyderabad appears to be absent in the thirunangai lifeworld in north Chennai. While my interlocutors are aware of the morally fraught nature of the sex work question, they do not find it in any way contradictory to their attachment to Angalamman and to their role as maruladis who embody the goddess in trance.

Kamini, another thirunangai devoted to Angalamman, offers an interesting and provocative explanation as to why sex work is not a moral issue here. She says:

> We were not born as maruladis, were we? There is no rule that people who dance the deity cannot do this or that. Even Sankaracharya dragged someone into the temple and did his deeds. Nithyananda too has acted atrociously. These are people who have taken a vow of celibacy. If they can do… We have not taken any such vows. That Amma's grace reigns over us and we dance. When she comes over us, she stays only for a few moments. After that, whatever we speak comes from her love and affection for us and our devotion to her. My being able to say what is in your mind, my words of blessing, divination, these are things that Amma creates for us… On days that are special for her, at particular times when we have to attend to her, we act accordingly. At other times… we also have our desires and affections. Just because the saami comes to us does not mean we ourselves have turned into saami. When we have to attend to saami, we must do that. When it is time for other feelings, we pay attention to those.

Not only does Kamini succinctly capture the question of sexual morality, she also hints at how maruladis navigate their sexuality in the context of their relationship with the goddess. They are devoted to her, they embody her, they serve as her vehicles, and they draw upon her power to do the work of healing, divination, exorcism, purification, etc. And other devotees of the goddess see thirunangais as endowed with the power and grace of the goddess. But the goddess does not ask of them to become ascetics. Interestingly, Kamini explains the sexual morality that animates thirunangai-maruladi life by contrasting it with the sexual morality of dominant forms of Hindu asceticism. She mentions "Sankaracharya," referring to the chief pontiff of one of the most influential monastic traditions in south Indian Brahmanical Hinduism, the Kanchi Mutt, who was embroiled in allegations of sexual misconduct.[101] Kamini also mentions Nithyananda, an influential god-man, whose sex life became the center of a media expose.[102] She thus points out

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[101] Anuradha Ramanan, a well-known Tamil writer, has accused Jayendra Saraswati of the Kanchi Mutt of sexual misconduct. See: https://www.outlookindia.com/newswire/story/tamil-writer-makes-in-camera-statement-in-court/265890 (Accessed on March 1, 2020).

[102] Nithyananda was also accused of rape by a former inmate of his ashram. There are several court cases pending that involve him. See: https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/rape-case-against-nithyananda-trial-finally-begins-after-8-years-legal-hurdles-86233 (Accessed on March 1, 2020) and https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/nithyananda-case-hc-stays-all-proceedings/articleshow/72497928.cms (Accessed on March 1, 2020).

that "high" Hinduism, with its claim to superior morality, has been incredibly fallible, even downright criminal at times. So while she presents maruladi attachment to the goddess as a significant commitment, her discussion of sex within that life is a pragmatic one: "Just because the saami comes to us does not mean we ourselves have turned into saami. When we have to attend to saami, we must do that. When it is time for other feelings, we pay attention to those."

4.7 Conclusion

The contours of the connection between thirunangais and goddess Angalamman are complex. According to my thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors, Angalamma can play an important role in legibilizing and legitimizing transfeminine identity within their cultural worlds, but it does not mean a consistently elevated or respected position within these worlds. On the part of the people around them, including their natal families, there can be an acceptance of thirunangais that is nevertheless shot through with some ambivalence. As for Angalamma's relationship with thirunangais, there can be a certain choicelessness and surprise in the way she chooses to "arrive on" a person, but the subsequent relationship does not proceed as a mere giving up of human agency. Instead, it involves a dialogic relationship with the goddess, setting some boundaries to her arrival on one's being, but it also entails a never-ending reciprocity of giving and taking. At the same time, Angalamman can also be conceived of as a transgender deity, a framing that my interlocutors substantiate through sacred narratives and iconographic interpretations. Sexuality does not pose a threat to this sacred relationship. Sex work, which often poses a moral challenge both to religious as well as liberal discourses, is not an impediment to a thirunangai's devotion to Angalamman.

Thangam Amma offers a way to tie together some of these seemingly disparate, if not paradoxical, aspects of the Thirunangai-Angalamman attachment.

> The reason Angalamman is an important deity for thirunangais is, if you want to know, thirunangais are Shakti and Isan together in Ardhanari[103] form. That is Angalamman. Everything is accommodated in a thirunangai.[104] Let's say the goddess comes on a woman. If the woman does something wrong, they will call her a prostitute. Won't they? If Angalamma comes to a thirunangai, mistakes (*thappu*) will definitely happen. It happens

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[103] The half-female and half-male form of Shiva.
[104] "Ellaame avalukkulla adangum"

inevitably. Even if it doesn't, Angalamma will get you that reputation (as a prostitute). Why? What happens to this Amma (Angalamma)? She takes on the *kapalam* from Sivan, and she becomes mad. She goes through a degraded state (*asingappattu pora*). Only after that does she comes to grace us all as Angalamma. She stomps on Bramman's severed head, which climbs down from Sivan's hand. That is why she goes through a degraded state before she becomes the Angalamman we see. Similarly, no matter how much pottais dance the goddess, no matter how long I sit here in this temple and give *arul vakku*[105], what do you think goes on in the minds of people who are, there, walking by on the road? They think, "This is a pottai's temple. There are pottais inside there." The same person might come to me and ask for *arul vaakku*, and what I tell him would come true. Despite all that, he might still think, "This is a pottai." In his mind, he might think of the other things about us. See, I have been conducting the Kollai ritual for over forty years now. People come and fall at my feet and take my blessings. I have these boys who have come to me and become my sons. I have taken them on as my sons.[106] They all address me as "amma." But do you think people out there understand that? They would say, "Amma?! Right!"

Thangam Amma's suggestion here is that people "out there," who don't understand her life as a thirunangai-maruladi, are likely to mistake her sons to be her many lovers instead. Thangam Amma's way of explaining the connection between Angalamman and thirunangais is striking. In her view, both Angalamman and thirunangais are figures who are simultaneously elevated and disgraced, the former as an all-powerful goddess as well as one who lost her mind and wandered the cremation grounds, hungry and insatiable, and the latter, the thirunangais, she says, are seen both as spiritually significant for their sacred status and as morally questionable for their sexuality. The correspondence between the goddess and thirunangais, then, is one of sympathetic likeness. They both know what it is to occupy an ambivalent place. Thangam Amma's speculations about how others could or might think of her and other thirunangais brings to mind the idea of the "double consciousness" that W.E.B. DuBois (2012) made pertinent with reference to the status of African Americans in post-emancipation United States. One of the dynamics of self-consciousness

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[105] Words of grace, divine speech, prophecy, divination
[106] Men who wish to ritually become sons to older thirunangais can do so. The procedure is known by the same name as when a younger thirunangai becomes someone's daughter: *madi kattudhal* – literally, to take another on one's lap.

that he sought to capture with that term was the sense in which African Americans had to be concerned not only about who they were but also be constantly cognizant of and to preempt white Americans' perception of them. Double consciousness also refers to the labor African Americans have to perform constantly to view themselves not only as individual actors but also as representatives of a racial group. Thangam Amma's remarks too allude to the work she is constantly doing in thinking, anticipating, and worrying about what others "out there" might be thinking about her – not considering her as a particular individual with her own lifecourse, work, and relationships, but taking her as a token of a type, a thirunangai. Her connection to Angalamman is not really a straightforwardly positive one here in securing social regard. As Thangam Amma explains, Angalamman can inspire awe, fear, and revulsion. Being connected to her can also make one an object of fear, awe, and revulsion – which are not emotions conducive to social relationships and solidarity. In other words, the attachment to the goddess may not serve to mitigate social marginalization. What it does, however, is to offer a cultural poetics of identity and ethical relationality to a marginalized social location.

Chapter 5

Anger and Frenzy

The Ethicality of Embodied Emotions

5.1 Introduction

Because she has lots of āvēcam [being in a state of frenzy or of being possessed], she is strong, angry; like that, tirunaṅkais get āvēcam. The anger (kōpam) is too much with a tirunaṅkai. If anyone knocks into us on the road, the tirunaṅkai will ask, why did you hit and kick me? Like that Aṅkāḷammaṉ has so much āvēcam, like us, that's why we worship her. Tirunaṅkais worship Kālī and Aṅkāḷammaṉ only.

> - Devi, a thirunangai-maruladi interviewed by Elaine Craddock (forthcoming)

They (thirunangais) may not know the goddess is in them. But when there is an injustice, when something goes wrong, they become Angalamman in their aavesam (frenzy). In such situations, they don't know how to control themselves.

> - Radhika, one of my thirunangai-maruladi friends

In this chapter, I delve into anger's place as a moral emotion in thirunangai social life. The quotes I have used as epigraphs above attest to the fact that thirunangais devoted to Angalamman see anger, frenzy, and outrage as embodied moral states connected to the goddess. How do my thirunangai interlocutors connect Angalamman with this sense of anger and outrage? What role does anger play in thirunangai social life? Does it come to matter as a personal emotional response or a collective one? These are some of the questions I will explore in this chapter. In both of the quotes I have presented above, anger comes up as a response to experiences of unfairness and injustice. There is a righteousness to the anger that the two thirunangais have highlighted here as connected to Angalamman. I hope to provide an ethnographic account of the complex place my thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors accord to righteous anger. As hinted at by the quotes above, while embodying righteous anger is seen as a desirable moral quality, it is also suggested that learning to control that anger is important. What, then, marks the limit of acceptable expression of anger for thirunangai-maruladis?

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5.2 Worldly Scenes of Crisis

Radhika articulated this connection between anger and Angalamman (quote above) in a particular context while commenting on a specific set of occurrences. Priya, a young thirunangai-maruladi, had died under the most tragic circumstances. She had committed self-immolation in front of a city police station late one night in 2016. In the days that followed, the thirunangai community in Chennai tried to make sense of what had happened. They had to deal with the immensity of their grief along with the anger they felt at the police. Here, I piece together a narrative about Priya's death and the thirunangai protests that followed from the account provided by my thirunangai interlocutors over three conversations.

Priya had been out that evening, with a few friends, doing the usual rounds of asking/begging for money at state-run liquor stores in a particular neighborhood.[107] She had been on her scooter (vespa), when the police stopped her and told her that some thirunangai threw a stone at their police car and they demanded that she identify that thirunangai for them. Priya told them she had no way of knowing who it could be. At this point, the police confiscated her scooter and told her to bring the thirunangai in question to the police station and then claim her scooter. A video that one of the policemen had shot using his cellphone camera was circulated through WhatsApp by many thirunangais. Priya stood outside the police station and demanded they give back her scooter they had confiscated. She told them she had no idea whom the police wanted to question. Based on the video, my thirunangai friends felt that Priya was perhaps a little drunk that night. She repeatedly pleaded with the police to let her reclaim her scooter. Then she threatened to set herself on fire right there in front of them. At some point, she grew weary and walked across the road and sat down on the side-walk right opposite the police station. All of this occurred in the very late hours of an early December night in 2016. The police did not circulate a second video that was captured by the CC TV camera at the station, but some thirunangai leaders were later allowed to watch the recording. It appeared that Priya then went to the nearest petrol bunk, purchased some petrol in a bottle, brought it back with her to the police station, poured it on herself, and set herself

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[107] Going to bars attached to state-run liquor stores to ask for money from the customers gathered there has been an important source of income for several Thirunangais, including some of my key interlocutors for several years now, particularly after the Tamil Nadu state government, under the AIADMK rule, brought liquor sales under state monopoly in the year 2003.

ablaze. She suffered life-threatening burns and was admitted into the Kilpauk Medical College Hospital by the police.

Priya's friends struggled to make sense of this sequence of events that seemed to have escalated so rapidly. They struggled to square together the police's callousness, their calm filming of Priya's heart-wrenching appeals, their refusal to take her seriously when she threatens to kill herself in front of the police station, and their addressing her using the male pronoun. They could not understand why the police could not stop her from setting herself on fire or provide quick first aid. A whole lot of pieces of the puzzle were missing, but one thing was clear: the police had exacerbated the situation, treated her badly for a crime she had not committed, and failed to take her seriously. One thirunangai elder remarked later, "Alright, they need not have given her back her scooter, because she was drunk. But all these police stations know other thirunangais in the area. They could have called one of them and said, 'Here is one of yours, at our police station. Please come and take them with you.' Such things have happened before. Why didn't they do it this time?"

About fifty to sixty thirunangais gathered outside the hospital block where Priya had been brought. When Priya was declared dead at the hospital later that day, many of them erupted in outrage. Some walked over to the local police station, sobbing, shouting abuses, cursing the officers, some even physically assaulting them. Many others marched to the Assistant Police Commissioner's Office, which was nearby, and staged a similar protest. Several thirunangais blocked the traffic on the road outside the Commissioner's office and sat down in protest. Some thirunangai leaders tried to get the situation under control. The police resorted to lathi charge, beating the protestors with sticks and chasing them away. Distraught and in immense grief at the unjust and inexplicable death of one of their own, a group of thirunangais stormed into the Office. They physically pushed aside junior police officers and demanded to be shown into the office of the commissioner. When they found themselves in the presence of a higher police official, a woman, they vented their anger and grief by demanding justice. They hurled abuses at the police force in general, recognizing it for the structural, oppressive force it was. Then they cursed her, an individual officer they saw as representing that oppressive state apparatus and hence partaking of its responsibilities and failings. They cursed her with unhappiness and ruin.

While, until then, the officer had stayed composed and had attempted to calm down the crowd, when she heard the curses, she broke down into sobs. This, my thirunangai interlocutors

said, was the key moment of reckoning for many. Seeing her breakdown, they said, gave them a sense that something had gone wrong and they needed to step back and consider what they wished to achieve. But in real time, they had little opportunity to do any of that. The cops unleashed lathi charge on them, beating them with clubs and attempting to round them up. All they could do was to run away from there as fast as they could, trying to escape the beatings and from getting arrested.

Later that night, and over the following few days, WhatsApp groups were filled with messages of dread and panic. Thirunangais from different neighborhoods in Chennai posted messages saying they had heard that the police were planning to retaliate by rounding up as many thirunangais as they could. It was a known, deplorable police practice: in any given instance, instead of apprehending the specific thirunangai(s) they are looking for, they would arrest or round up any thirunangai(s) in the area, hoping that it would reverberate across the community networks and somehow lead them to the specific suspects. This time, thirunangais felt, the police would be looking for a large number of them – all those who engaged in protests at the police stations. And it was no mere rumor. Thirunangai activists Nisha and Vijaya could vouch for the fact that the police were angry and wanted to take some action. "When we begged them not to arrest anyone and not to beat anyone with lathi, they told us that they would soon take action. They were very angry," Nisha said to me, recalling the moment when she and Vijaya had intervened on behalf of the protestors. So it was understandable that many thirunangais messaging the WhatsApp groups said they were going to leave town for a few days or until the dust settled on this matter. My own dear friends chose not to go away from their homes in Chennai, but they were nevertheless terrified that cops might show up at their doorstep.

The dreaded police actions did not occur, and after some days, those thirunangais who had left town to protect themselves slowly returned and resumed life in the city. But there was still much worry and fear as to what might happen. It was in the context of these uncertainties that a community meeting was called for. Over fifty members of the community and some allies gathered at a conference room of a Christian non-profit organization to discuss how to proceed. Thirunangai community members playing diverse roles in that lifeworld participated in this gathering: elders whose opinions were respectfully sought; thirunangai activists who played an active role in representing the community's issues to the society, the state, and other entities; thirunangais working in community-based organizations (CBO) that offered various services to the community;

thirunangais earning their livelihood primarily through sex work and/or begging; and thirunangai-maruladis whose primary commitment was to the goddess.[108]

At this meeting, one sentiment that was expressed with absolute consensus was that the form the protests took could not be justified in their entirety. The particular moment that thirunangais recounted as the one that drove home that realization was the instance when the woman police officer broke down when faced with the curses of the protesting thirunangais. "adhai endha vidhatthulayum nyaayapadutha mudiyadhu. adhai naama othukkanum," an elder said – "There is no way we can justify that. We have to accept that." Everyone agreed with that sentiment. Somehow, they were able to tease apart the validity of their grief and outrage that day from what they agreed was the questionability of some of the directions their protests took. A younger thirunangai-maruladi added to the elder's comment and shared her interpretation: the woman police officer broke down because she believed in the power of "pottais' curse," *pottaingaloda saabam,* she said. "ivunga saami pottainga. saabam kodukkuraaga. balicchidum apdinnu nenaikkira naaran avunga. apdipattavangala naama sabicchuttom. thappu." – *She is a woman who thinks, 'These are saami pottais. They are cursing me. It will come true.' It is such a person that we ended up cursing. It was wrong*. The other thirunangai-maruladis present at the meeting agreed with this sentiment.

Another view that was strongly expressed at the meeting was that those who spearheaded the particularly intense protest moments were thirunangais who did not fully understand the realities of sex work and begging. The argument was that thirunangais who engaged in sex work and begging needed the police to overlook their livelihood practices, but those thirunangais who, in their activist zeal, chose to mount an aggressive protest against the police failed to recognize that fact. A thirunangai elder agreed, "Yes. Over the years we have built some cordial relationship with the police. So many police trainings, advocacy trainings. I myself have conducted many such trainings. That goodwill and respect we had created with the police, we have lost it all in one moment." After talking about the events, it was collectively agreed that a condolence event in memory of Priya needed to be organized at a public venue such as the Valluvar Kottam (a standard venue for public events, especially protests). It was also decided thirunangai presence and behavior

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[108] There is considerable fluidity between these categories I have laid out. For instance, an elder could also be a maruladi and an activist; and a thirunangai who works at a CBO could also supplement her income through sex work; and so on. The categorization I have provided above is simply based on the relevant aspects of themselves they foregrounded at the meeting.

at this meeting should communicate goodwill towards the police. Since the event needed a police permit to be organized and since there would be police presence to guarantee protection as per law, thirunangais felt that it was important to be on the most cordial behavior during the event.

Before I start contextualizing these concerns, let me tease out the various stances that come out of these views. While it was unanimously felt that the form the protests at the police station took were unfortunate and unjustifiable even though the circumstances were one of grief and just outrage, that assessment was based on multiple reasonings on the part of my thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors:

- Thirunangais had personally attacked an individual (the female police officer) who could not have had a direct connection to the police negligence and callousness that led to Priya's death
- They had cursed someone who truly believed (in their view) in the power of the thirunangai curse
- Those who spearheaded the particularly intense moments of the protest had not adequately taken into consideration the extent to which the lives of thirunangai sex workers and those engaged in begging depended on a basic cordiality with the police

While these are overlapping ethical concerns – ethical because they are concerned with the appropriateness of an action – they draw upon different ethical trajectories that animate the thirunangai world, and it is worthwhile explicating those connections, or rather *entanglements*, better. Here I use the term "entanglements" as a way to capture the fact that an ethical reading of a particular situation or social encounter is not exhausted simply by the things that occur then and there. Other aspects – such as background discourses, past experiences, personal morality, assumptions about others involved in the encounter, etc. – come to bear on how "ethical affordances" (Keane 2016) are seized, interpretations are made, and subsequent actions taken. The notion of "ethical entanglement" has been forwarded by Michael Lempert (2013) as a way to push back against the idea of "ethical immanence" (Lambek 2010, Das 2010). Lempert's argument, which I find useful, is that the notion of immanence can keep us from seeing aspects pertinent to an ethical moment that do not inhere in the moment itself; actors involved perform the labor of "ferrying in" what they find are relevant contextualizing frames: "Even when interlocutors pause and inspect what 'just happened' – a norm of conduct breached, a fraught ethical choice made, a

virtue or non-virtue enacted – such apparent discoveries ferry in as much as they find in situ" (Lempert 2013: 379). In seeking to make sense of the events that occurred since Priya's death, my thirunangai interlocutors drew on various ethical experiences and stances.

It is also important to note that my thirunangai interlocutors were marshalling various ethical stances and interpretations as part of various contexts of conversational reflection. The fact that ethicality emerges in narrative form is important. It is through narrativizing a set of occurrences, dramatizing certain moments, detailing actions, and offering interpretations that thirunangais here made certain ethical orientations emerge. As Leela Prasad (2004) has argued, "conversational narratives" are not "verbatim transcripts of social norms." Instead, "conversational narratives and narrations interpret, (re)create, sustain, or overturn moral worldviews" (160). In other words, it often takes some kind of semiotic labor to clarify, even produce, ethical stances. It is important not to forget the "labor and methods through which actors strain to make the ethical not just effective but intersubjectively relevant" (Lempert 2013: 371). Here, at community meetings and small group conversations, thirunangais were offering particular ethical view-points through acts of narration, which were already acts of interpretation.

5.3 Ethical Entanglements - Beyond Instrumentality

At first, I had assumed that the concern expressed at the meeting about maintaining cordiality with the police was governed primarily by instrumental concerns. I took it to mean that the thirunangais at the meeting were primarily upset that the protest had jeopardized a functional social relationship that had been forged in the city between the police and the thirunangai community over the years, a cordiality thirunangais needed because many of them relied on sex work and begging – both activities that come under varying levels of scrutiny under law – for their livelihood. I was not wrong in my interpretation; an instrumental concern about risking their relationship with the police was, indeed, part of their articulations. After all, the events did produce panic and even made several thirunangais leave town to keep away from any police action.

Consider this remark by thirunangai elder Azhagamma: "Why incite your people, when you don't know what the consequences will be, or who will have to face those consequences?" I was sitting with her outside her temple for the goddess, drinking tea, and just hanging out. She was calling attention to the different stakes that existed for the various kinds of thirunangais who lived in the city. Some thirunangais, she said, bore the brunt: those thirunangais who had to navigate the

violences that were always threatening to erupt in their engagement in sex work and begging. Neither of these activities is legally protected, so the thirunangais who engage in either put themselves at great risk of exposure to violence. "We are in the wrong professions ("thavaraana thozhil"). What do you say? We can't be arrogant about it." Azhagamma's critique of this specific thirunangai encounter with the police struck me, initially, as rooted in an investment in forms of thirunangai respectability and as an older jamaat leader's impatience at how younger thirunangais ("chinna pottainga") handled things, both of which were familiar articulations in the community. But I suspected that there was more to what Azhagamma was saying.

She said to me, "We have an SP[109] here who has always been friendly. He even takes my blessings whenever he sees me. He also comes to the temple now and then. Yesterday, he sent for me. When I went to see him, he said, 'I have lost all respect for your people. Do you know how your people have behaved at the Commissioner's office? We have been asked not to be lenient to you all from now on. So you all better behave yourselves.'" Azhagamma was upset that the police in her area were responding to something that had happened elsewhere and for which neither she nor her chelas (disciples/daughters) were responsible. She added that later the SP sent a constable to advise her to ask her chelas to lie low for a while. "If he did not care for us, would he let us know? I have told all my chelas to just stay at home and keep quiet." Azhagamma emphasized that, for those thirunangais who were engaged in sex work and begging, it was important to have a smooth relationship with the police in their localities. "Have the police been asking us not to stand [for solicitation] for sex work? No. In this area, when they see you standing, they go, 'Okay, okay. Carry on, just be quiet, don't create any problems.' Don't we have to respect that? The law is not on our side, but they still work with us. We should not forget that. Now that you have upset the police, where are you going to stand?" she said.

In their encounters with the state, thirunangais do not always (get to) establish their footing and legitimacy primarily as citizens demanding democratic civic participation and redress. Their orientation is often a mix of that of a welfare subject appealing to the goodwill of the state, of tactical partisan allegiances with whichever political party is in power, and activism towards gaining full citizenship rights and protections. In other words, it is useful to think of thirunangai relationship with the state as one of what Partha Chatterjee terms "political society" – people who are too much in the margins to be part of civil society and its terms of engagement with the state

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[109] Superintendent of Police

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through the logic of citizenship claims (Chatterjee, 2004: 27-51). On the contrary, those who fall within the category of "political society" have to rely on a personal appeal and informal relationships towards the state, depending as much on its attention and largesse as on its willingness to overlook some illegalities that characterize their lives. Chatterjee offers us the example of slum dwellers in Kolkata who have to rely on squatting and illegal tapping of electricity for their subsistence. Svati Shah has pushed the concept further by arguing that the state finds it easier to overlook some illegalities more than others. In her ethnography on street-based sex work in Mumbai, Shah has shown that illegalities of sexual nature, sex work in particular, are not overlooked so readily by the state or even people who would condone other illegal means of eking out a life in a city (Shah, 2014: 143). Thirunangais too find the need to negotiate structures of state power carefully, even when many of their engagements with state agencies are built on terms of personal relationship and cordiality with particular officials in the various government departments. Seen with this context in view, the pitch and intensity of thirunangais' protest against the police appears all the more remarkable. They had much to lose by expressing their outrage the way they did.

Azhagamma's point is that the consequences of such gestures of outrage, especially when directed at institutions such as the police, are not distributed equally even among thirunangais. Far from advocating a simple politics of respectability as I had initially suspected, Azhagamma manages to draw together a range of realities to articulate a very sophisticated critique. For one, while she emphasizes the need for a certain functional cordiality with the police, she understands how precarious any such relationship with structures of power can be. It is not cordiality between social equals. We are reminded of Foucault's recommendation, in "Society must be defended," to cultivate a suspicion of peaceful appearances when it comes to operations of power.[110] Azhagamma's point is that, under the current arrangements of law and power, an instrumental approach to not antagonizing the police is important. At the same time, she also hints at the importance of a local, urban spatial dynamic: the domain of an area or locality within which cultivating particular kinds of relationships with agents of power is, according to her, both

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[110] Foucault argues that for a robust understanding of the operations of power, what we need are not just analyses of instances of power's most visible abuses and violences but also its ability to maintain appearances of peace, what Foucault stunningly calls "the dried blood in the codes." He calls for a "historico-political discourse that would make "war the permanent basis of all political power" (Foucault 1994: 61)

necessary and possible. She sees some element of care in the way the local police official informed her of the prevailing sentiment in his department vis-à-vis thirunangais.

Here, an instrumental concern with ethics that grows out of a clear-eyed recognition of power's tyranny coexists with certain everyday relationships of urban life, where engagements with powerful agents of the state can take forms that go beyond those that can be apprehended in abstracted critiques of the state. The police officer comes to Azhagamma's temple, stops his car when he spots her on the road to take her blessings, keeps her informed of potential trouble. She has to keep these local dynamics in view alongside her general suspicion of the police as an agent of violence. Azhagamma drew a comparison between her local SP and the police officer whom she had heard broke down when cursed by thirunangais. Referring to her as "that poor woman" (*paavam andha naaran*), Azhagamma added, "They are not acting. They are people, too. This SP? He needn't have called me and warned me, no? He doesn't want to round up any of us. So he wants to make sure we keep quiet for a while and don't attract attention." She marshalled these complex realities of thirunangai life to argue that within the thirunangai lifeworld in Chennai, members have different things at stake depending on what they did for a living. So she called for an increased sense of responsibility on the part of those who lead public debates or protests before they put at risk certain relationships that exist between thirunangais and the police, no matter how problematic these relationships might appear to an activist critique of power.

5.4 Whither Anger?

Where is the ethicality of anger in all this? If anything, in the accounts I have provided above, thirunangai attachment to Angalamman seems to require a tempered and caring recognition of the humanity of the person in front of them. It appears that being associated with *saami* (deity) means that thirunangai-maruladis have to be mindful of the words they speak and the gestures they make. If anything, far from insisting that anger was categorically ethical, some of my interlocutors were arguing that their expression of anger in front of the woman police officer was regrettable. How do we reconcile this moral sentiment with Radhika's words about righteous anger as the ethical force connected to the goddess herself?— "They (thirunangais) may not know the goddess is in them. But when there is an injustice, when something goes wrong, they become Angalamman in their *aavesam* (frenzy). In such situations, they don't know how to control themselves."

My thirunangai interlocutors locate Angalamman's capacity for anger in a particular sacred narrative of the goddess. Whenever I asked them, "What do you mean by Angalamma's aavesam (frenzy, rage, anger)?" they pointed to a narrative which they take to be the most important story of goddess Angalamman.

5.4.1 Scene of Cosmic Action- the Angalamman Narrative

Central to Angalamman worship among thirunangai transgender women in Chennai is a specific myth of the goddess.[111] According to this myth, at the request of the gods, Goddess Angalamman, resident in Melmalayanur (about 100 km south of Chennai), intervened in a cosmic crisis. Here is how it was narrated to me by a few thirunangai-maruladis committed to Angalamman worship, trance embodiment, and healing. What I provide here is a composite of the versions of the myth given to me by different thirunangai-maruladis. The sequence of actions remained the same across the different instances of narration, with variations in the details provided to flesh out each stage of the narrative.

> In those times, both Bramman, the Creator God, and Sivan, the Destroyer God, had five heads. Sivan's wife was Parvati. Bramman always had his eye on her. One day, Sivan went from Mount Kailaayam as usual to feed all living things (*"padiyalakka ponaar"*[112]*)*. When he was gone, Bramman arrived there, hoping to fool Parvati. Usually, when Sivan returned after taking care of the creatures of the world, Parvati welcomed him back by doing *paadha poojai,* a ritual ablution of his feet. That day too, looking at the person with five heads entering Kailaayam, she thought it was Sivan who had returned. She went and fetched water on a plate. Then, without looking at his face, she knelt down in front of him and set out to do wash his feet with the water. But in the reflection she saw the face and realized it was not her husband but Bramman. She was shocked. At that time, Sivan arrived there, and she told him what had happened. He got angry and wanted to teach Bramman a lesson ("paadam pugattanum"). In anger, he plucked off ("killi") the fifth head of Bramman.

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[111] This myth appears to be one among many myths about Angalamman. Eveline Meyer (1986) has documented up to 12 myths, some interlocking and some independent ones, about the goddess in vogue in different parts of Tamil Nadu. She has also shown that different myths function as predominant ones in different regions. In Chennai too, while I got to hear some of the other myths from thirunangais, it was this particular myth that took the place of the central one in their understanding of the goddess. Even when they evinced an awareness of the other myths, there was a great degree of tentativeness in their knowledge and recollection of them.

[112] Literally, "he went to measure out (grains)"

That skull (*bramma kapalam*) got stuck to Sivan's hand and refused to leave. It then started sucking away all his strength and vitality. Whatever he ate, the head usurped the energy of it all. So no matter how much he ate, Sivan lost all his strength and energy and grew gaunt and emaciated. He became so bony that his ribs started showing on the outside. His hair became matted with dirt and he became a mad man. The head stuck to his hand was perpetually hungry and it demanded food. So he started wandering the earth in search of food. He walked in cremation grounds, consuming half-burnt corpses and sucking at the bones. Looking at all this, the gods grew very anxious. They went to Perumal (Vishnu, the Protector God) and asked what could be done to save Sivan from this condition. And he told them that the only person who could save Sivan was Angalamman who resided ("kudi kondirukkum") in Melmalayanur right next to a cremation ground. Then he went to Melmalayanur and told Angalamma what she needed to do to help redeem Sivan from his predicament. Perumal is her brother, so she told him she would do as he advised.

Vishnu then told her that when Sivan came to the cremation grounds in Melmalayanur, she should offer unimaginable quantities of food and produce. Seeing all that, and feeling greedy, the skull that was stuck to Sivan's hand would climb down hoping to eat it all. At that moment, Angalamma should stomp on it with her foot and kill it.

Angalamma does as told. When Sivan comes to Melmalayanur looking for food and wandering in the cremation grounds, she offers vast quantities of food. When the head detaches itself from Sivan's hand and comes down to eat all the food, she stomps on it with her right foot. This is why, in Melmalayanur, if you see Angalamman, she has her right foot on Bramman's head.

Now Bramman's wife Sarasvati comes and curses Angalamma for killing her husband's head. She says that Angalamma too should become a mad woman, eat the dead, and wander wearing tatters. So Angalamma becomes a mad woman ("pitthu pidicchu"), wraps herself in tatters, lets her hair loose, holds the Brammakapaalam in her hand and wanders in search of food. She eats whatever she can lay her hands on, consumes corpses.

Everyone runs to Perumal and asks how Angalamma could be brought back to her earlier state ("pazhaya nilai"). Perumal says that the vast quantities of food and produce should be piled up and then thrown into the air so that the food falls everywhere ("vaari

iraikkanum"). Only that can quench Amma's great appetite and bring her back to her older state[113]. That is why we do Mayana Kollai every year and offer a lot of food for Amman.

I found various iterations of this myth from different sources: the officially printed temple hagiography from the Melmalayanur temple[114], Eveline Meyer's (1986) study of Angalamman worship, and from thirunangais and thirunangai-maruladis. What stays constant throughout these renditions are the core elements of the story: Angalamman's help is sought in a time of cosmic crisis, to redeem Sivan from his fallen state and to restore cosmic balance. And the process of intervening in the crisis involves risking her own self and sanity. But she can be, and is, reclaimed and restored to equilibrium by the offerings of her devotees. In her study of the Angalamman cult, Eveline Meyer (1986) documents this myth as one among the many sacred narratives about the goddess. But, with the exception of the creation story that I discussed in Chapter 4 and allusions to the story of Angalamman's slaying of demon king Vallalakantan, this was the most popular Angalamman narrative among my thirunangai interlocutors.

This narrative does not seem to be about anger. When Angalamman intervenes to help extricate Sivan from the clutches of the brammakapalam, she does not seem to do so animated by anger. But there are three crucial things here. The first is that Amma's gesture of help has to be a grand one; she needs to offer incredible quantities of food in order to entice the head/skull away from Sivan's hand. My thirunangai interlocutors used various expressions to refer to the grandness of this gesture: "unimaginable" (*karpanai kooda senju paarka mudiyaadha alavu*), "immeasurable" (*alavillaadha*), and "excessive" (*thevaikku adhigamana alavu*). What is emphasized here is that the act of intervention in another's crisis has to be marked by an immensity of giving. The second important aspect of the narrative is that in the process of acting to help restore Sivan to his state of equilibrium, not only does Amman enact a grand act of giving (of not sparing any resources at her disposal), she also takes on Sivan's suffering and, in the process, loses her own equilibrium. She loses her sanity (*pitthu piditha nilai*) and acquires a mad frenzy and fury (*aavesam*). The third important aspect of the story is that restoring the goddess to her state of

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[113] I have translated "pazhaya nilai" literally as "earlier state." But rather than suggesting a reversal in time, it is meaningful to understand it as a state of equilibrium, a state once had and lost.

[114] The Angala Parameswari Temple in Melmalayanur is considered the central shrine for goddess Angalamman, her "head office" as Malamma, a Thirunangai Maruladi put it, the geographical point of the goddess' concentrated power.

equilibrium requires a similar act of giving – to satiate the goddess and to keep her from being enervated by the curse laid on her by Bramman's wife Sarasvati. And this grand offering is done annually by Angalamma's devotees during the Mayana Kollai ritual in late February.

What animates this narrative powerfully is the stress on the immensity of giving and the fact that actions and their consequences do not stay confined to the putative agents of those acts. They are passed on, distributed, and shared. It sweeps up an inexhaustive series of actors into a tumble of further actions. What starts with Sivan and Bramman soon comes to involve Vishnu and Angalamman and ends with the non-ending of the annual ritual of Mayana Kollai, where devotees continue to offer massive quantities of food, imitating the gesture Amman made, but this time for her own sake as well as theirs. This is a scene of ethical entanglement where the key ethical imperatives seem to be the willingness to give of oneself, to be vulnerable to the troubles of another, and so to be implicated in the lives of others.

So where is anger here, the emotion that Radhika and others say is associated with the goddess and which shows up in thirunangai expressions of outrage? My thirunangai interlocutors rarely used the word *kobam* to speak of the sentiment they were referring to. The word they used was *aavesam*, which both Craddock and I have translated as "frenzy." The University of Madras Tamil Lexicon offers a cluster of meanings for *aavesam*: "possession by a deity, a spirit, or a demon" and "anger, wrath, fury."[115] The J.P. Fabricius dictionary offers "the paroxysm of religious frenzy that comes upon a person."[116] What thirunangai-maruladis are pointing to is not a cognitive experience, a righteous moral emotion, but an embodied experience of frenzy, an overflowing intensity that makes one's actions uncalculated and unmeasured and which can affect others and pull them into its orbit. To be pliable to the force of such affective intensity is what thirunangai-maruladis recognize as the quality associated with Angalamman. By virtue of their intimacy with Angalamman, thirunangais, they say, are particularly disposed to intense expressions of outrage. My goal here is not to essentialize thirunangai expressions of righteous anger. Nor do I think that outrage at the injustices of the world requires such a theological scaffolding and justification. What I have attempted to show is that thirunangai-maruladis (which is to say, not all thirunangais) see *aavesam* in complex ways. As an embodied ethical experience, they link it to Angalamman and find value in it. But they also say that it cannot be unleashed indiscriminately. Thangam Amma

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[115] See https://agarathi.com/word/ஆவேசம் - Accessed on March 5, 2020.
[116] Ibid.

said, "[We must] learn to control it" (*kattuppadutha therinjukkanum*). She pointed to the initial anger that caused the entire narrative to unfold: "Everything starts with Sivan getting angry and plucking off Bramman's head, doesn't it?" Thangam Amma emphasized the fact that, in the narrative, while Angalamma does go into a frenzy, she is also "cooled down" (*kulumai paduthi*), "satiated" (*pasiyaari*), and "calmed down" (*saanthappaduthi*) by the offerings at the Mayana Kollai ritual. Her point was that the narrative does not end with anger, it ends with the unending promise of offerings and the dynamic equilibrium in which Angalamma rests. "You went to the Malayanur temple, no? How does Amma appear there? Does she look like a mad woman? Is she sitting with her clothes in tatters? No! She sits majestically, with the brammakapalam under her foot."

Kamini added to Radhika's and Thagam Amma's points about learning to control anger. She helped me understand it using an analogy:

> When Angalamma first comes on someone, what do we do? We take satya vaakku (a promise). We make her give vaakku that she won't just show up on that person whenever she pleases. She agrees to come only when called. Otherwise, you might be going on a bus and suddenly if saami comes over you? So we take satya vaakku from her. Those pottais who dance the saami know how to call Angalamma, when to call Angalamma. Other thirunangais don't know these things.

What we see in all of this is a complex understanding of the embodied ethicality of anger and frenzy. They are positive and valuable in the sense that they come from one's vulnerability to injustices experienced by oneself as well as others. But they have their drawbacks. As the first part of my discussion shows, the realities of thirunangai life in the city today and its vulnerabilities to violence need to be taken into account. Elders like Azhagamma draw attention precisely to those conditions of thirunangai life that make it necessary to calibrate their expressions of anger at institutions and figures of authority. But in addition to that, as their interpretation of the woman police officer's reaction suggests, my thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors care in particular ways about their relationship to the person in front of them. It is important to understand this encounter-driven aspect of thirunangai ethical life. Before I proceed to a discussion of ethics in everyday encounters in thirunangai social life, a broader discussion of the ethicality of anger is in order.

5.5 Anger – in Traditions of Ethical and Political Philosophy and Practice

In this section, I draw upon a limited theoretical archive of anger in order to suggest some useful frames with which to understand the ethnographic accounts I have offered above. Traditions of ethical and political philosophy and practice do not share a consensus on the value of anger. Martha Nussbaum (2016) has argued that a long Western philosophical tradition from the ancient Greeks to modern liberal philosophers has considered anger to be detrimental to human social life:

> …the idea that anger is a central threat to decent human interactions runs through the Western philosophical tradition—including the political thought of Aeschylus' time, Socrates and Plato, the Greek and Roman Stoics, the eighteenth- century philosophers Joseph Butler and Adam Smith, and numerous more recent contributors. (2016: 14)

Nussbaum also reminds us that non-Western traditions like Buddhism and certain forms of Hinduism have also highlighted the "idea of anger's destructiveness" (14). In Aristotle's view, anger is dangerous because it is an impediment to human flourishing, *eudaimonia*, the sense of wellbeing one seeks to achieve through processes of self-cultivation. But, for Aristotle, anger is also dangerous because the kind of justice it seeks is retributive; it is not amenable to reasoned argumentation and consideration of just courses of action. It seeks to cause injury. Nussbaum draws attention to Aeschylus' play *Oresteia* as a dramatization of the taming of "dark vindictive passions" and cycles of blood vengeance in the new era of civilization in the city of Athens. Goddess Athena sets up legal institutions and forms of reasoned justice and she asks the Furies, the goddesses of revenge to submit themselves to these new regimes. Nussbaum points out that the Furies, representative of vengeful forms of justice, are not simply accommodated in the new polis with their "retributive passions" unchanged. They undergo a fundamental transformation in their orientation. In place of their earlier tendency for rage and fury, they adopt a "gentle-temper" (3). They also submit themselves to the argumentative logics of persuasion. In return for Athena's promise that they would always have a place beneath the earth and reverence from the citizens of Athens, the Furies dispose themselves kindly and benevolently towards the city. Nussbaum highlights this transformation in the Furies' fundamental character as symbolic of the transformation in public emotions that is called for in civilized society. Drawing on this ancient tradition, Nussbaum shows that Western liberal political philosophy too has considered anger as an unsound basis for matters of justice. Nussbaum's project is partly a normative one: she is

concerned with delineating what appropriate political emotions are in contemporary liberal democratic polity. Anger, for her, is an unstable ground on which to build practices of justice.

As Amia Srinivasan (2017) has argued, liberal political philosophy's characterization of anger as unsuitable for public life is not without challenges. Srinivasan draws on Black and feminist thought to argue that anger can be an "apt" response to the conditions of the world. She cites Audre Lorde's "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" (1984) to argue against the claim made by Nussbaum and others in the liberal tradition that anger is "counterproductive," that it only worsens the situation and ends up causing harm to those who wield it. Lorde foregrounds anger as the most appropriate and agentive emotion she can feel as a black woman when faced with racism, especially when she is expected to tread softly on white women's vulnerabilities: "I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white woman says, 'Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I cannot hear you.' But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?" (1984: 131). Lorde's argument, which Srinivasan highlights in her work, is that expressions of just(ified) anger can turn counterproductive or ineffective only because those addressed by that anger do not allow themselves to be transformed by that encounter. She also explains why expressing anger is useful for anti-racist white women too: "I have seen situations where white women hear a racist remark, resent what has been said, become filled with fury, and remain silent because they are afraid. That unexpressed anger lies within them like an undetonated device, usually to be hurled at the first woman of Color who talks about racism" (ibid.,134). Expressing morally justified anger is, in Lorde's formulation, a way for women to protect themselves from self-destruction. At the same time, she also explicitly points out what she thinks is the productive possibility of anger in a relational sense:

> My anger is a response to racist attitudes and to the actions and presumptions that arise out of those attitudes. If your dealings with other women reflect those attitudes, then my anger and your attendant fears are spotlights that can be used for growth in the same way I have used learning to express anger for my growth. But for corrective surgery, not guilt. Guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we all flounder; they serve none of our futures. (1984: 131)

Here, Audre Lorde is drawing attention to what Srinivasan has called "apt" anger – when anger can be morally justified as a response to moral violence. Racism here is the moral and political

violence that Lorde argues can be met with apt, just anger: "Anger is an appropriate reaction to racist attitudes, as is fury when the actions arising from those attitudes do not change" (136). Lorde also addresses critiques of anger's danger or counterproductivity:

> It is not the anger of Black women which is dripping down over this globe like a diseased liquid. It is not my anger that launches rockets, spends over sixty thousand dollars a second on missiles and other agents of war and death, slaughters children in cities, stockpiles nerve gas and chemical bombs, sodomizes our daughters and our earth. It is not the anger of Black women which corrodes into blind, dehumanizing power, bent upon the annihilation of us all unless we meet it with what we have, our power to examine and to redefine the terms upon which we will live and work; our power to envision and to reconstruct, anger by painful anger, stone upon heavy stone, a future of pollinating difference and the earth to support our choices. (141)

For Lorde, the counterproductivity argument does not trump the aptness argument. Instead of a consequentialist approach to anger, Srinivasan foregrounds the "intrinsic value of apt anger," where aptness is determined by the consideration of whether a moral violation or failing is involved, whether one is morally justified in being angry (2017: 13). Srinivasan also reminds us that Aristotle's project of ethical self-cultivation was concerned only with the free men of ancient Greek society, not with women and slaves. When socially and politically marginalized people's emotional expression do come into view later in political discourse, they are told that their anger is unproductive or, worse, counterproductive. Srinivasan argues that it is not by some unavoidably natural course of things that marginalized people's anger becomes unproductive. Instead, it is the existing order of things that makes it so. Those addressed by the anger refuse to be transformed in the light of it and demand instead that their addresser not be angry. Srinivasan terms this condition "affective injustice."

We can already begin to see how this impinges on my discussion of thirunangai expression of anger in public life. While their anger at the police is morally justified, it puts them at risk for further discrimination and violence. To use Srinivasan's terms, it is rendered "counterproductive" by existing distributions of power not by some intrinsic wrongness about anger as an emotion. But righteous anger – including anger that turns into destructive fury -- has a longstanding place in Tamil moral discourse too. *Silappadikaram (The Tale of an Anklet),* the ancient Tamil epic, is one of the ur-texts of modern Tamil public consciousness. Recovered in the eighteenth century along with several other ancient Tamil textual and commentarial traditions, *Silappadikaram* became a marker of the antiquity and sophisticated public morality of Tamil culture. Movements

foregrounding Dravidian (i.e., non-Aryan, non-Brahmanical) Tamil identity and self-consciousness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries drew on *Silappadikaram* and a few other texts to foreground certain features as highlights of Tamil public and political culture. Two core driving moral forces in the text -- the power of women's chastity as a force that goes beyond the private realm and the rule of righteousness and law in matters political -- became symbols of Tamil cultural values and were celebrated in public speeches, movie and theatrical adaptations, and public monuments.

The narrative's apotheosis is the protagonist Kannagi's anger at the Pandya king for dealing a death sentence to her husband Kovalan without proper enquiry and due process. Kovalan is apprehended as a thief when he attempts to sell Kannagi's anklet to a jeweler in the city of Madurai, hoping to get some money with which he and Kannagi could start their new life in the city. After years of misfortune, some owing to Kovalan's own indiscretions, the couple have arrived in Madurai to begin life anew. The Pandya king's men are looking for the thief who has stolen the queen's anklet that is filled with gems. They think Kovalan is the thief who is now attempting to sell the stolen goods. In his urge to please the queen, the king orders Kovalan to be killed, without conducting proper enquiries into the matter. Hearing of Kovalan's murder by royal decree, Kannagi comes, grief-stricken and angry, to the court of the Pandya king, where she speaks truth to power, as it were. She breaks her one remaining anklet and shows that it is filled with pearls (and not gems, as the queen's). Realizing the injustice he has meted out, the king drops down dead, and the queen follows him. Her rage mounting at the unjust treatment they have been dealt in the new city they believed would be their new hope, Kannagi commands the force of her chastity to set fire to the city, killing all but the righteous and the frail. She wrenches away her breast and throws it at the city. The city of Madurai burns, powerless in the face of a chaste woman's righteous anger and grief. At this point, a goddess, the embodiment of the city itself, appears before Kannagi and reasons with her to quench her anger and to save the city. The goddess speaks to Kannagi about the drama of crisscrossing destinies and the accretions of the actions of the past that have brought all actors – Kannagi herself, her husband Kovalan, and the Pandya king – to that particular, fateful encounter. She speaks of forces beyond individual control and also about the importance

of righteousness in human action. Kannagi lets go of her anger and ascends to heaven with her husband in a chariot. She is immortalized on earth as goddess Pattini, the goddess of chastity.[117]

What is sufficient for the purposes of our discussion is the fact that the epic valorizes the power of righteous anger in the face of injustice by powers of the ruling classes. The text also asserts that one of the core values it emphasizes is that righteousness will and should always be a check to the actions of the politically powerful. Scholars have, however, also remarked on the limitations of Kannagi as a character defined largely by patriarchal relations and sexual moralities exclusive to women.[118] Kannagi's anger is both morally justified and destructive. It is the force of righteousness that calls attention to political injustice, but the narrative ends not with the unleashing of the anger but with sort of a reasoned taming of it that can allow the city (the world) to live. My short discussion of this important Tamil epic is to show that anger and fury of the politically powerless has a place in Tamil moral discourse. We also have a more recent illustration of this from early twentieth century Tamil poetry. Subramanya Bharathi, the great Tamil poet and anti-colonial agitator, presents anger as a valuable trait. In *Pudiya Aathichoodi*, a poetic composition which lists moral exhortations in long alphabetical sequences, Bharathi includes "rouddhiram pazhagu," *cultivate anger*. Or *practice anger*. It is important to note the emphasis not just on the emotion but the cultivation of it. One could argue that Bharathi is exhorting us not to dismiss anger or to unleash it indiscriminately, but to bring it within the purview of our ethical self-cultivation, to develop an ethical relationship with anger as a way to respond to the injustices of the world. The same Bharathi also wrote: "Even if a single person were to go hungry, we shall destroy this world." In this worldview, we are accountable to one another.

Scholars have also focused on the place of anger in Dalit activism and art. In her study of Hindu and Christian theologies of emotion, Michelle Voss Roberts (2014) has looked at Dalit performance art as a principled incorporation of anger and fury at social injustices. Writing about the use of the *parai* drum by Dalit performance artists, Roberts says:

> The drum is especially suited to the expression of anger. As one drum maker claims, 'The sound of the drum in its final form should be like the roar of an angry lion.' The very act of drumming serves as a release for emotion. [Dalit Philosopher] M. C. Raj believes that

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[117] Anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere analyzes Kannagi's story as it appears in Silappadikaram as one of the textual traditions behind the cult of Goddess Pattini in Sri Lanka. See Obeyesekere (1984).

[118] In his introduction to his translation of the epic, R. Parthasarathy has argued that Kannagi is both limited and heroic at the same time. She is limited by patriarchy and her own self-understanding, but she is also heroic in the face of larger injustice. See Parthasarathy (2004).

the dominant order, which suppresses anger, deems it vulgar and postpones its resolution to a later divine justice, results in an "unresolved load of anger" that becomes "unmanageable" and leads to extreme violence. By contrast, the "cosmic order" demands that anger be dealt with "here and now." People need a "comfort zone," in which it is safe to vent anger without fear of punishment. According to Raj, the Dalit community provides this "comfort zone." (Roberts 2014: 145)

What emerges in Black, Dalit, and certain lines of Tamil moral thought is a complex engagement with anger as a moral emotion. From the perspectives of the politically marginalized, anger cannot be dismissed as a categorically negative emotion with no place in public life. They recommend a hermeneutics of suspicion towards such exhortations to abandon anger – to view them as ways to secure the status quo. As Amia Srinivasan (2017) highlights in her critique of Nussbaum's work on anger, even those who are largely sympathetic to the causes of those who express righteous anger argue that it is, nevertheless, counterproductive. Drawing on Black and feminist thought, Srinivasan argues that such counterproductivity is not inevitable. She goes even further to argue that even when the anger of the oppressed is counterproductive, it can still retain its "aptness" as a response to the situation at hand.

What we see in Dalit expressions of anger is a similar emphasis on its appropriateness as a moral emotion. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the great leader of the Dalits and the chief force behind India's Constitution, foregrounded *Dalit* (meaning "ground down" in Marathi) as a marker of collective identity and politics and as a response to Gandhi's formulation of the "untouchables" as *harijans,* "children of god." Ambedkar critiqued Gandhi's framing of the oppressed minority as sort of a domesticated accommodation within the same caste-ridden Hinduism which marked them as "untouchables" and slave labor in the first place. Ambedkar's politics of resistance, which is uncompromising in its assertion of Dalit identity and its position against attempts to be folded into Hindu or liberal forms of respectability, has been compared to that of Malcom X's (Maitland 2019). The Dalit Panthers, founded in 1972, drew inspiration from the Black Panthers and advocated for "radical and sometimes violent approaches to change," even as they merged "Buddhist imagery with ideological influences from the Black Panther party" (2019: 185). In this context, Padma Maitland discusses a poem by Namdeo Dhasal, "who was in many ways the voice of the Dalit Panther Movement." In one of his poems, " Dhasal describes Ambedkar as plucking the "banyan tree"—the famous site of the Buddha's enlightenment—by the roots, transforming it

into weapons against global forms of injustice. Through this image, Dhasal converts the peaceful trans- formation of the Buddha into an image of collective revolution" (185).

In this way, the Dalit Panthers resisted any conception of Buddhism as a turning away from the realities of the world's injustices, an interpretation that aligns in many ways with Ambedkar's own re-interpretation of Buddhism as *navayana*, "the new vehicle." In *The Buddha and His Dhamma,* Ambedkar reads Buddha not as a figure who sees the suffering of the world as originary and grounded in fundamental human ignorance, but as a figure who apprehends human suffering as socially rooted and hence to be encountered and remedied socially and politically.[119] Dalit activism finds a valued place for anger and outrage in reckoning with continuing caste oppression. In his analysis of Dalit responses to the Khailanji massacre of 2006, where members of a Dalit family were raped and murdered by members of a locally dominant Kunbi caste, Nicolas Jaoul (2008) shows that it was only through sustaining anger and outrage that Dalit groups were able to draw national attention to the incident. Jaoul shows that "righteous anger" serves as the propelling force for Dalits' struggle even to legitimize and visibilize the violences they face.[120]

My rationale for the above discussion is to lay out the complex place anger holds in various traditions of moral and philosophical thought, so that we might begin to understand my thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors' articulation of anger as at once goddess-inspired and righteous but also potentially counterproductive and to be channeled cautiously. In the Black, feminist, and Dalit counter traditions (counter to liberal thought) I discussed above, anger has a valued place as a moral emotion. However, it also appears that, within those traditions, people have also sought to find a way to highlight what has to come after anger. For instance, Ambedkar concerned himself with the question of what kind of world we might want to have after the moment of revolutionary violence has passed (Skaria 2015). Ambedkar reminds us that while emperor Ashoka wielded violence against the Kalingas, he then renounced it completely and embraced Buddhism. Ambedkar turns to Buddhism not as a new religious identity for the Dalits leaving their degrading place in the Hindu fold, but as a site of ethical praxis. In this ethical life, which Ambedkar

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[119] See Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957), where Ambedkar presents his detailed exposition of Buddhism as an appropriate path for Dalits to embrace. But a Buddhism that is reinterpreted as a principled engagement with the injustices of this world, not as a site of renunciation of the world, as it is often interpreted.
[120] Jaoul acknowledges that he borrows the term from the work of sociologist William Gamson. I have used the term "righteous anger" or "justified anger" as the direct translation of the Tamil expression "nyaayamaana kobam."

articulates in one of his last works, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, anger comes in the way of *maitri*, fraternity and fellowship.[121]

In the history of African-American civil rights activism, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is sometimes seen as a figure more acceptable than Malcolm X to the whites of his era on account his embrace of the principle of non-violence. Srinivasan (2017) reminds us of Dr. King's own criticism of Malcolm X for "articulating the despair of the Negro without offering any positive, creative alternative."[122] What we see in these articulations is a complex grappling with the aptness and usefulness of anger as a moral emotion and a force of ethical action in the world. While the liberal tradition, drawing on ancient Greek thought, marks anger as irredeemably negative and fundamentally unsuitable for social life, other traditions coming from historically marginalized peoples find value in the morality of anger but qualify it with both pragmatic as well as ethical (in the sense of being non-instrumental and other-oriented) considerations.

5.6 Anger, Ethics, and Multiple Modes of Reasoning

In trying to make sense of the things that occurred since Priya's death, my thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors grappled with the question of the uses of anger. No singular explanation emerged. Instead, they looked at anger from various angles. As we saw, one of the questions that animates Azhagamma's concerns with the fallout of expressions of anger towards the powerful is: *who bears the consequences?* She does not dismiss anger's validity outright, but raises a point about unequal distribution of vulnerabilities within the thirunangai community; those involved in sex work and begging are more prone to bear the brunt of violence, whether from the police or others. But then she also provides a complex account of locally grounded relationships with the police and suggests that such local dynamics are erased in activist abstractions of power. Activists, however, wonder if such local dynamics are ultimately to the wellbeing of thirunangais. One activist I spoke to said, "They [the police] may be nice to you in your area. But if they decide to

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[121] Ambedkar's Buddha says: "Love is not enough; what is required is Maitri. It is wider than love. It means fellowship not merely with human beings but with all living beings. It is not confined to human beings. Is not such Maitri necessary? What else can give to all living beings the same happiness which one seeks for one's own self, to keep the mind impartial, open to all, with affection for every one and hatred for none?"

[122] Cited in Srinivasan (2017), p. 3.

behave differently, they can. They don't have to be accountable to you. They may have to act on orders that come to them from above. So you are at their mercy at the end of the day."

Azhagamma, however, points out that the police officer in her locality did care enough to warn her in advance of possible police actions. And she sees this concern as rooted, at least partly, in the fact that he sees her as a maruladi whose temple he visits. Here, scales of local forms of ethical relationality seem to be at some discordance with the scale of larger political transformation of institutions of power. Are concerns about ethical stances towards definite others (the police officer who breaks down, the police officer who alerts thirunangais to possible actions) potentially blunting the force of political questions about changing institutional structures? In other words, in understanding their own anger as counterproductive and requiring controlled expression, are my thirunangai interlocutors foregrounding a kind of normative ethics that is to the disadvantage of any radical political transformation they might seek? I confess I do not have clear answers to these questions, but what I understand from my work with thirunangai-maruladis is that nor do they.

What I would like to draw attention to is the fact that my thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors' views on the question of anger do not organize themselves neatly into a coherent moral theory of anger. Radhika and several other thirunangai-maruladis view *aavesam* or fury as an ethical mode exemplified by Angalamman when she acts to save Sivan from the life-draining clutch of the severed head of Bramman. They see thirunangai expressions of anger and outrage at the police after Priya's death as drawing their embers from this grounding in the goddess. At the same time, they emphasize that such expressions need to be brought within a practice of control, just as a thirunangai-maruladi would learn to control the goddess's "arrival" on her being. So, within this logic, anger is a divine impulse for justice, but it needs to be controlled. Here, they offer two reasons as to why anger needs to be controlled. One reason is that Angalamman's *aavesam* is manifestly dangerous and should not be allowed to be a permanent condition. That is why, they say, we conduct Mayana Kollai every year, making massive offerings to the goddess, bringing her back to her state of equilibrium and benevolence. The second reason is that expressing anger has consequences, especially when vulnerable people like thirunangais express anger at powerful state institutions. Beyond all these considerations, they express the idea that certain kinds of actions are not justifiable no matter what. Speaking of the instance where the woman police officer broke down in the face of thirunangai expressions of anger, they said, "There is no way we can justify that. We have to accept that." Their way of making sense of that encounter was that

while they had gone to the police station as thirunangais who were in untold grief and anger at the tragic death of one of their own, the police officer had responded to them as thirunangai-maruladis with the power of the goddess in their angry speech and curse.

In Azhagamma's local world, the thing around which relationships cohere, including the relationship with local police, is her temple to the goddess. It is her spiritual identity as a thirunangai-maruladi that anchors the regard and goodwill she experiences in that community. I spent several afternoons and evenings at Azhagamma's temple. Community meetings were held there right in front of the sanctum. Meals were cooked for birthdays and other celebrations and distributed to people right at the entrance to the temple. In the evenings, Azhagamma, some of her chelas, and women from the neighborhood hung out at the temple doorstep, sitting on little stools or on the concrete floor, drinking tea, chatting about this and that. Therefore, her attachment to the goddess and how she is seen by the people around her on account of that attachment inform the ethical stances that obtain in Azhagamma's world. And this is the case for all my thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors. Being a saami-pottai and being seen as a saami-pottai have ethical entailments. Some assumptions about spiritual power, some expectations of kindness in demeanor enter the equation.

Lakshmi Nani explained it to me one day. She is a maruladi and also a vegetable vendor in a wholesale market in north Chennai. Grocery stores and restaurants buy produce from this market in the wee hours of the morning. Accounts are kept. Payments are made once a month. A particular restaurant had failed to settle its account with Nani for over three months. She had indulged them, because she did not want to lose them as a client. But after three months, she decided to get matters settled. So she went to the restaurant, which was in a different part of the city, and asked to see the owner or the manager. They kept her waiting for over an hour only to tell her that neither the owner nor the manager would be coming in that day. "I got very angry. Don't I have anything better to do? I took two buses and went all the way there to ask for the money they owed me. And they treated me like this. I have to pay rent for my stall at the market, no? So I called them all sorts of names. Whatever came to my lips, I uttered. That man, he must have been working under the manager or something like that, he was shocked. He said, 'What is this, aiya? You look like saami aalu (a godly person), but you speak such foul language?' I felt bad for a moment. Then I told him that it did not matter if I was a saami aalu. If they act unjustly (*aniyaayamaa*), even I can lose my patience."

It was not the case that maruladis were expected to behave in a saintly manner. All my maruladi interlocutors swore, used expletives and sexual innuendos, and lost their tempers. But nearly always someone brought up their maruladi identity as a kind of criterion of evaluation. "Saami pottai nee, ippadi pesalama?" (*Being a saami pottai, can you speak like this?*), "Saami pottai namma. paatthu nadandhukkanum." (*We are saami pottais, we have to act accordingly.*) – These were expressions I heard regularly, which suggests that some criteria for evaluation exist for saami pottais in the realm of practical reasoning. So even when conduct does not constantly reflect an ethical ideal, we see the evaluative criteria as they come up in interactions. It allows chances for what interactionalists call *repair*.

As I have highlighted throughout the dissertation, not all thirunangais are devoted to Angalamman. Moreover, in its collective self-representation to society and the state, the thirunangai community refrains from emphasizing connections to any particular religion or world of piety.[123] So when thirunangai-maruladis encounter people outside that face-to-face everyday world where perceptions and footings are relatively stable and their maruladi identity is always in the forefront, they tend to foreground a broadly non-religious thirunangai identity shaped by its marginality, collective injury, and vulnerability to violence.

We don't know if the policewoman broke down because she recognized the power of the thirunangai curse and because she saw them as maruladis. But that was how my thirunangai-maruladi friends interpreted the moment. It intimated to them that some aspect of their identity had come into play in that moment other than the one they thought they were foregrounding in the protest. They were not gathered in protest as devotees or channels of the goddess. They were assembled as thirunangais in grief. They were angry at the police for allowing a tragic loss of thirunangai life to occur. Their outrage and grief were suddenly met with a reaction that suddenly made, in their view, their spiritual identity relevant to the interaction. Their interlocutor, whom they had cast as a representative of a violent state apparatus suddenly showed a crack in that role – she broke character, as it were – and revealed something else about herself: her vulnerability. Are thirunangai ethical stances impacted by the vulnerability shown by others?

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[123] As a juridical identity, and even as a collective social identity that addresses the Tamil public in order to educate the latter about itself, the thirunangai identity is grounded in secular demands for recognition, rights, protections, and remedial policies for their lives as transgender persons (a struggle that now includes trans men).

5.7 Surprises and Vulnerabilities in Social Encounters

My thirunangai friends and I undertook several trips to various goddess shrines. Sometimes we went by buses, but more often, giving in to exhaustion or dreading the heat of the day, we rented a cab or a mini-bus for the trips. The Angalamman temple in Melmalayanur is particularly close to our hearts. Melmalayanur is believed to be the shrine where the scene in the myth I detailed earlier in the chapter unfolded. Mala Amma once referred to the Melmalayanur Angalamman temple as the "head office" of the goddess, with all other shrines, big and small, in the region drawing upon the aura of this main shrine. But we also went to some other Amman temples in the region. Periyapalayatthamman temple in Periyapalayam, Kaattu Selliyamman temple that was not far from there, and the Angalamman temple in Erumaivettipalayam were close to our hearts, and we undertook trips to these shrines whenever we felt like it. It only took someone saying, "Remember that time when we went to Selliyamman kovil? We had so much fun by the side of the pond!" A remark like that would kindle desire in all of us for another trip to one or more of these temples. We'd look at the calendar, agree on a date, figure out how many people were free to go, and book a cab. Since these places were outside Chennai city limits, we had to take the highways and stop at the toll stations along the way.

My thirunangai friends had a consistent attitude towards these toll booths and the toll that was charged for the use of the highways beyond city limits. They thought it was unfair that they, people struggling to eke out a living in the city, should have to pay toll to get around, especially when they undertook these short pilgrimages. But they got out of paying toll not by arguing that point. Instead, as I have discussed in Chapter 3, at every toll plaza, a highly entertaining performance would unfold: Just as the vehicle approached a toll area, someone in the van would call out, "Hey, toll booth!" just in case people were distracted or sleeping. Then as we approached the booth, we'd all rolled down our windows, and my thirunangai friends would immediately notch up their voice, language, and demeanor to a highly performative pitch. 'Hey! We are hijras. How can you ask money from us? We are going to a temple. Let us go. God will bless you.' Usually, the people at the toll both reacted in one of two ways: they either got acutely self-conscious and embarrassed at being confronted with this intense, collective display, and they waved us way just to be done with the encounter; or they stopped to enjoy the performance, engaging in some casual banter with thirunangais. Either way, my thirunangai friends thoroughly enjoyed these moments and they looked forward to them.

Let me offer two examples to show how important this practice was to my thirunangai friends. Once, I hired a cab driver known to me for a trip to Melmalayanur. Having known Kumar for some years, I was aware of his utter straightforwardness in all transactions, and I remembered well his impassioned remarks against corruption in public life. All of this made me anxious about how Kumar might respond to my thirunangai friends' refusal to pay highway toll. I broached the subject tentatively with Nisha before we set on the trip. "I have to tell you something. This driver may have problems with not paying toll." And she said, "Oh really? We will see about that." This only made me even more anxious.

Once we set out and approached the first toll plaza, Nisha leaned over from the middle seat and said to Kumar, "Anna (brother), do you pay toll?" He was confused. He didn't know there was any other option. He looked at her in the rear view mirror, and said, "Yes… You don't?" She said, "No, we don't pay toll." He considered it quietly for a few seconds. Then Nisha said, "What shall we do now?" And he replied, "Whatever you prefer." Satisfied with this, Nisha said, "Alright, then just roll down the window at the toll booth. We will take care of the rest." That day, Kumar got to witness for the first time how thirunangais navigate highway toll booths. To my relief, he seemed amused and delighted at how things unfolded. Later that day, he remarked to me, "Life is a struggle for them. The toll places themselves should exempt them [thirunangais] from the fee."

In another instance, I was sitting at the back of a mini-bus with Karuna as some ten to twelve us were on our way to the Periyapalayathamman temple. She sat next to me, slouching on the seat, taking a million selfies, picking a few of them, and sending them to her boyfriend through WhatsApp. She included me in a bunch of the selfies. As we both sat sorting through the selfies to pick the ones we approved suddenly Keerthi, who was sitting in the front seat next to the driver, called out: "Hey! Toll booth, toll booth!" And, without a moment's hesitation, Karuna raised her voice to the requisite volume and uttered the customary things: "Hey! We are hijras…." But her eyes stayed fixed to the camera, and she didn't even look up. Nisha shouted, "Wait, wait! Not yet!" because we had not yet come anywhere close to the toll booth; we had only pulled up behind a long line of vehicles. Karuna looked up, and we all laughed. Keerthi said, "*indha kothi ushaar ma! 'Toll booth'-nu sonna udane!*" – "This kothi is alert! I just said, 'Toll booth,' and she started…" It was an incredible moment that showed how ritualized that form had become – ritualized not in the sense of habitual alone, but in the way the form itself had acquired its potency and illocutionary force, so much so that as soon as one of its key utterances were invoked ("Hey! Toll booth") under

the right circumstances (travel on the highway), it immediately elicited the next step from one of the participants even without their fully deliberate involvement. The form, as a genre of action, had a force and pull of its own.

However, on one occasion, things did not go smoothly. This time, when my thirunangai friends clapped their hands and said their piece, the young man at the tool booth looked dumbstruck at first and then seemed to be in the verge of a breakdown. He did not know what to do. He said that his supervisor would be cross with him if he let a vehicle go without collecting toll. He was new on the job, and he was afraid of the consequences. Looking at his predicament, Nisha, who was sitting at the window closest to the man, turned around and shushed everyone. She asked the man not to worry, and then she pulled out cash from her handbag and paid him the toll. She then said to him in her broken Hindi, "Don't worry, *beta.* We are hijras. We bless you." As the cab moved away from the toll booth, she just remarked, "*paavam. azhudhuduvaan pola irundhuchu"* – "Poor fellow. It looked like he'd start crying." It turned out to be an instance when the form (this particular genre of event) did not get to play out to its completion. My thirunangai friends encountered a surprise in the form of a toll collector who was neither relaxed enough to find the moment amusing, nor uptight enough to wish to wave us away in embarrassment. Instead, he exhibited a kind of vulnerability in the way he worried about his own ethical duty as a toll collector who was new on the job. When faced with such vulnerability, Nisha chose to retract from the flow of practice and instead act in a manner that brought him comfort.

In some ways, this moment is qualitatively alike to the one where the policewoman broke down in the face of thirunangais cursing her. In both these instances, a particular flow of practice – expressions of outrage in the former and a sort of weapons-of-the-weak tactic in the latter – was interrupted when the addressees revealed themselves to be somewhat different from the ones they were taken to be. In the former, a police officer did not play out her appointed role as a powerful agent of state, and in the latter, the toll booth collector ceased to be merely someone who was part of an exploitative structure. They both emerged as flesh-and-blood individuals not fully given to their assumed roles, and they revealed their vulnerabilities. And thirunangais appear to respond differently to actors who bring vulnerability to the interaction. This is partly because thirunangais have learned to expect stances of hostility or, at the least, unfriendliness in their encounters with strangers. And much of the abrasive demeanor they have cultivated is in the service of preempting such hostility and rudeness. It is their way of suggesting that they are not invested in "face work"

since they have little at stake in terms of social respectability. In a way, it affirms Goffman's inference that it requires mutual cooperation for "face work" to be successful.[124] Thirunangai demeanor that puts others at discomfort indexes their low expectations from their social interactants – they preempt disrespect and unequal treatment, and therefore they signal their willingness to play that game better. My thirunangai friends themselves offer this explanation when asked in workshops and training programs (i.e., in safe learning environments) why members of their community often present themselves as loud and abrasive in public encounters. They explain that they have learned not to expect friendliness from the world, so they have cultivated a hardened mask ("face") with which to encounter it.

The ethnographic account I have offered above appears not to be directly pertinent to the question of the ethicality of anger I have been discussing in this chapter. My rationale for this apparent digression is to suggest that my thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors' considerations of anger cannot be separated from their larger considerations about the ethics of relationality in everyday social life. Since they navigate everyday social world not only as people attached to a deity, but also simply as trans women, the stereotypes attached to that identity often come into play. My thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors cannot know for sure how they are likely to be treated by the persons they encounter beyond their intimate worlds. Whether they will meet with friendliness, hostility, violence, indifference, or vulnerability cannot always be known or even surmised in advance. It involves in-the-moment work to understand the nature of the situations at hand and the relationships that obtain within them.

The goddess is not a singular, top-down moral force acting on them. Instead, she becomes a source of ethical impulses, reflection, and action. Anger and outrage are not accorded any permanent or universal validity in this ethical world. While *aavesam,* the fury and frenzy that come from being affected by the wrongs of the world, certainly has divine impulse behind it, it is also subject to ethical evaluation based on what it does in the world that presents itself in front of my thirunangai friends. However, what is emphasized as deeply ethical is one's capacity and readiness to show up for others, no matter what consequences it has for one's own wellbeing. Much like how Angalamman is periodically restored to equilibrium through acts of giving and caring, there seems to be an implicit faith that the world, in the form of community, will involve itself in the collective work of recovery and resumption of life. At the public gathering that the thirunangai

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[124] See Goffman (1967 [1955]): "On Face-Work"

community organized at Valluvar Kottam to honor Priya's memory, they took particular care not to offend the police through speech or action. Some thirunangai activists, some of whom were maruladis, had already met with the police several times to smoothe the relationship between the community and the police. They wanted to make sure Priya's natal family received some financial compensation for their loss. At the gathering, thirunangais spoke about Priya, sang songs, and wept. There was not a dry eye in the vicinity when my friend Nisha sang: "nalladhor veenai seyde, adhai nalamkeda puzhidhiyil erivadhundo, solladi sivasakthi…" *Having crafted a fine musical instrument, why would you cast it in the dust, tell me, Oh goddess Sivasakthi...* On the way home from the event, I asked Nisha if the entire set of occurrences meant that thirunangais would have to be careful about their public expressions from then on. She said, "For a while. These things don't stay constant. Soon something is bound to happen. And we might react in similar ways. This is how it is, isn't it?"

5.8 Myth, Ritual, and Corporeal Intensities

5.8.1 Ritual – Linking Myth, Body, and the World

The annual Mayana Kollai ritual involves a performative enactment of the Angalamman myth. However, it is not the entire myth that is enacted. Only the goddess' madness, after she has done her part to release Sivan from the clutches of Bramman's severed head, is enacted by numerous devotees dressed as the goddess gone mad – wearing tatters, carrying a ritually purified piece of skull, surrounded by priests and drummers, entering states of trance, and walking the streets of north Chennai.[125] [126] The next day, in their own little temples or the public ones they usually go to, devotees fill up large vats and pots full of grains, cereals, fruits, and vegetables, and do their part in restoring the goddess to equilibrium by plunging their hands into the pots and throwing the offering in the air, symbolically marking their willingness to satiate her appetite, which is now also the appetite of the severed head of Bramman.

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[125] A stunning sacred geography of north Madras, the old colonial city/ Black Town, emerges when we look closely at which temples are involved in the Mayana Kollai festival, to which larger temple complexes the devotees go before returning to their personal or neighborhood shrines, and how the domains of the living and the dead are symbolically marked through these ritual walks.

[126] Thus the enactment does not occur in one fixed spot or stage. It is spread over a few neighborhoods and temples across north Chennai. This gathering up of a sacred geography in ritual performance is important in understanding how people make sense of places, connections, and boundaries.

This is how Eveline Meyer (1986) describes the relationship between the goddess' state of madness and what occurs to the person who impersonates the goddess during the rituals:

> The goddess' state during the core rituals is one of madness… She is overcome with madness (*pittu*) when she eats the dead bodies. In this state of madness, she dances; she dances possessed by the terrible frenzy. This frenzied dance of the goddess, her intoxication and madness reflect the devotee's possession by the goddess. (259)

> This state of madness may well have been experienced by the heroic warrior… on the battle field. This same state may be brought about by an excess of emotion (e.g. anger). It is a state in which extraordinary powers may become unleashed; a state in which the normal boundaries are destroyed or transcended; in which the impossible becomes possible. (262)

This ritual enactment of the last few moments from the myth serves as the embodied and performative link between the myth itself and the lives of those, like thirunangais, for whom it holds immense significance. That is, it is not a story that is only told and sung, but mainly acted out as part of a religious ritual. The annual enactment of an extracted moment from the myth functions as a powerful refrain, a reinscription of the ethical orientations playing out in the myth. These ethical orientations, I suggest, also find expression in how thirunangais intervene in worldly scenes of crises.

5.8.2 Corporeal Intensities and Worldly Refrains

Myth here is not merely a fixed structural archetype, a function of psychic interiority and *depth*.[127] It is not a causal psychic script one is simply doomed to repeat. In their engagement with it, people shape the myth, too. As Malinowski has reminded us, a myth that is alive among a people is never an atemporal psychic plot. On the contrary, it is a textured site of a people's constant engagement with it. Histories of reinterpretation, shifts in emphases, additions, subtractions, etc.

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[127] Here, I am primarily referring to structuralist and psychoanalytical approaches to myths. Structuralist analysis is interested primarily in abstracting the oppositions and hierarchical encompassment of values that the internal movements of a myth's narrative might reveal. The key objective is to arrive at the underlying principles and narrative movements that constitute it (Levi-Strauss, 1981). Besides, the narrative sequence of a myth matters insofar as it can lead to the extraction of fundamental oppositions, which Levi-Strauss likens to the basic phonemic oppositions grounding meaningful sound difference in Saussurean linguistics. Further, the focus in this approach is not on historically contingent instantiations or invocations of the myth, whether as narrations or performances or everyday actions in the world. Shrouded in metaphor, allegory, and symbolic reference, myths end up being associated with depth, from where a careful analysis brings them to the light of consciousness. The actors who are themselves animated by the moral forces of a myth ought to be unconscious of its acting through them. Bringing it to the surface, making it conscious is part of the process of rationalization, what Latour (2010) would call *purification* – the extraction of the rational human from the allegedly false agencies of fetishes, but also the process of psychotherapy, of healing from drives and hauntings that curtail functioning.

have gone into even a single instance of its narration or invocation. Myth, as Malinowski (1984) puts it, is both a "hard-working" and a "hard-worked active" force. Malinowski suggests that a myth enters into social and cultural life of a people in "diffuse, complex ways," which can be got at only by looking at the social organization and cultural practices of a particular time.

Far from being a function of collective psychic *depth*, I suggest it is useful to see myth and ritual here as inhabiting the *surface* as corporeal intensities that can pull bodies towards particular lines of action. By *surface* here, I invoke Elizabeth Grosz's (1994) call to consider "the primacy of corporeality" (p.vii) in conceiving of subjectivity, as different from "the primacy of psychical interiority" (p.xii) which she argues has characterized much of Western philosophical thought on the subject. The body, in her analysis, is "a site for the circulation of energetic intensities" (138).[128] This approach to corporeality offers a way to think of body, by virtue of its sheer animated materiality, as possessing the capacity to affect and be affected. It draws attention to the speed with which bodies can spring to action and recognize when, as Kathleen Stewart (2007) puts it, "*something* throws itself together in a moment as an event and a sensation, a something both animated and inhabitable" (1).

Here, in the ethnographic discussion we are in the middle of, I would suggest that it is useful to see that the recognition of a crisis is, for thirunangais, the "something" that "throws itself together." It involves sensations that are familiar, and the contours of the event shimmer with intimations of what thirunangais already know are the ways in which the world produces crises for them. And it is inhabitable, in the sense that it offers possibilities of temporary occupation of familiar roles and gestures. This "something" is a refrain, it is a line that has been heard before, an impulse that has been felt before.

Refrains are what help connect "everyday infinities of virtual potentials and *the real (that is, not just theorized) operations of power"* (Bertelsen & Murphie 2010:145, emphasis authors'). A refrain is "a scoring over a world's repetitions…a rutting by scoring over" (Stewart 2010: 339). The rutting gives a kind of consistency to the affective recognition of something as crisis for

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[128] While Grosz (1994) derives the notion of the body as an "inscribed surface" from Foucault, especially from his 1977 essay on Nietzsche and the genealogical method, she critiques his model for the passivity it accords the body (146). She finds the possibility of recuperation of the body "as a series of processes of becoming, rather than as a fixed state of becoming" (12) in her reading of Deleuze and Guattari. Approaching their work with some feminist reservations that are to do with a suspicion of their anti-representational stance and what it might spell for feminism and other identity-centric movements, Grosz nevertheless finds in their work "a rare, affirmative understanding of the body" (165).

thirunangais – "Here, affect is a gathering place of accumulated dispositions" (Stewart, 2010: 340). This gathering, this accumulation of dispositions is not quite a congealment into something like a habitus.[129] Instead, it simply marks bodies' proclivities to take some directions more readily than others, but it does not preclude some kind of awareness and reflection on the part of the actors. As I detailed in my ethnographic descriptions, some thirunangais were aware of the way things were likely to play out. They have, like Radhika who said that thirunangais become Angalamman when they see injustice in the world, a meta-awareness of the potentialities their relationship with Angalamman contains for them. They evince both an awareness of the refrains and an acknowledgement that the playing out of the refrain cannot be fully anticipated, or avoided, or controlled.

Myth is part of the thirunangai-maruladi encounter with the world. It provides for an affective ethical orientation, which is assembled when certain elements of crisis and the need for intervention are recognized in a worldly scene – a question of intensities gathering and pressing upon the actors, even when there is vagueness and tentativeness. This vagueness is what Bertelsen and Murphie (2010) call "a powerful indetermination," whose chaotic force "soon begins to press upon a context – calls for refrains to fold the chaos into the beginnings of a structure, to bring a little order" (139). I suggest that "order" here is the patterned way in which thirunangais present themselves in action – an uncalculated, unmeasured giving of oneself. And precisely because it is an ethic that appears to devalue measured and strategized action, the action can double up on itself, even be detrimental to the actors, or make them encounter surprises in the scene of intervention. Kathleen Stewart (2007) speaks of agency not as a unidirectional force emerging from the single source of subjective interiority, but as something that emerges from the relation between things: bodies, discourses, desires.

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[129] The concept allows Bourdieu to draw attention to particular, historically contingent configurations of social practices, ideas, thoughts, codes of conduct, norms, desires, etc., what he calls "structured structures" shaped by even larger forces such as class. These "structured structures" in turn function as "structuring structures" and engender certain "durable, transposable *dispositions*" which function as "principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations." These sets of dispositions, which Bourdieu calls *habitus,* bring regularity and order to social practice within particular class formations in such a way that the order does not present itself as an outside force and hence is not dependent on any conscious obedience or ratification on the part of the actors: "orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor" (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). Body here becomes the site where these dispositions are inscribed and through which they find perpetuation in their repetition.

5.8.3 Crisis as Composition

Myth here is not an objectified expression of practices or an object of knowledge that can be reflected upon independent of immersive practice in the world (i.e. living itself). It is an "art of speaking" that is not separable from practice, the practice of "dwelling" in the world, as Michel de Certeau (1984) puts it. The field of practice that is signaled by the myth serves as "memory-knowledge," which carries the force and directions of previous actions and hence, when an opportunity arises, it allows the inhabitants of its practice to take certain courses of actions more quickly and effectively than others (1984:83). The thirunangai articulation of the Angalamman myth can be seen as such a "memory-knowledge" that is part of a practice of living, where it stores the potentiality for particular orientations and actions to ensue in times of crisis. But it does not determine action, nor does it simply become a ready-made algorithm according to which actions play out: "In its practical form, memory has no ready-made organization that it could settle there. It is mobilized relative to what happens… It inserts itself into something encountered by chance, on the other's ground" (de Certeau 1984: 86). That is, the world in all its externality becomes important here. Their attachment to Angalamman might furnish thirunangais with a form of "memory-knowledge" that is a practice of living, but it is the world that precipitates crisis. It is a world with its specific arrangements of gender and class-caste relations that render the thirunangai life precarious, which, from time to time, brings them crises.

"Something throws itself together" is a form that is recognizable to my thirunangai interlocutors as crisis. A crisis, then, is a composition, a type of social scene that is recognized as familiar. The recognition itself has something of habit to it, but a scene of crisis is not fully known in advance for what it is. It has a singularity that reveals itself only as one moves through the encounter. Seeing the myth as part of practice itself and not as an objectified expression of practice brings into simultaneous view the world, the actors, the story, and the actions that get assembled in response to the event or composition that is a crisis. In thirunangai parlance, they have an expression for when things go wrong: "beeli aayiduchu," or "beeli has happened." In their coded *Kavudi bhashai* or dialect, "beeli" refers to a scene (in the sense of "it became such a scene"), an eruption, some spike in the social graph, a rupture in the composition of the ordinary; that is, a crisis. Interestingly, when thirunangais set out to respond to such moments, they call that action "beeli panradhu," or "to make beeli." In other words, if a crisis is a rupture in the composition of the ordinary, the response is also a composition, a beeli in response to a beeli*,* to make crisis in

response to a crisis that is dealt to them. What the myth offers are some key elements of this composition: righteous anger, the angry ones, the ones on whom anger is directed, the ones on whose behalf the anger is expressed, and the persistent possibility of threat of retaliation and exhaustion, but also of renewal and recuperation.

As we saw in the thirunangai encounter with the police, although some elements of the crisis – the unjust loss of a life, the seeming dispensability of thirunangai life it communicated, and their own expressions of outrage and grief -- were all sadly familiar to thirunangais, thirunangais themselves thrown off by the forms these familiar elements took in this particular case. They were surprised by their own actions, and they said as much in the community debriefing. What the myth offers is an impulse and orientation towards crisis, but it is the world that supplies the crisis. Not a mythical world of erring gods, but one of oppressive gender and sexual norms, class divisions, and unequal vulnerability to social and state violence.

Conclusion

When I first came to see Angalamman's importance to the thirunangai lifeworld, I suspected that it was an interesting regional cultural and religious practice that would be useful to understand and document. I thought that Angalamman was perhaps a local/regional counterpoint to Bahuchara Mata, the goddess worshipped by hijras and other transfeminine communities in many parts of India. I knew that thirunangais too worshipped goddesses Bahuchara Mata (and Santhoshi Mata), especially in the context of the castration procedure or sex reassignment surgeries that many undergo (Craddock 2012, Reddy 2005, Nanda 1999, Tom & Menon - forthcoming). And Angalamman, I thought, offered a more regionally grounded Tamil devotional anchor to the thirunangai lifeworld. So, initially, I approached thirunangai devotion to Angalamman as a cultural practice that enables them to world themselves as people who belong in the Tamil cultural space, drawing on locally salient forms of devotion and ritual practice. However, as I explored further, I got to understand the important role Angalamman played in narratives of thirunangai identity itself. My thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors offered fascinating accounts detailing Angalamman's centrality to thirunangai identity. In these accounts, which I have discussed in the dissertation, both the goddess as well as the Thirunangai are seen as made in each other's image.

I also came to see that in addition to offering a sacred force to transfeminine identity, Angalamman also played another important role. A whole world of relationships seemed to be woven around her. Angalamman was directly and persistently relevant to some of these relationships. For instance, as I discussed in Chapter 2, Mala's sense of self is heavily dependent on her role as a maruladi, as someone who mediates between the goddess and the world and who brings about healing and resolution for life crises for the people who seek her help. Being ritually efficacious in channeling Angalamman's powers for the benefit of others is of great importance to Mala. So when she found her ritual interventions falling short of their efficacy, when she saw that she could not produce healing and resolution for the people who trusted her, she saw that as an estrangement from the goddess. And this estrangement, she believed, had been caused by some lack of integrity on her part. Here, Angalamman was squarely part of Mala's ethical life and her practice of moral reflection.

The goddess, however, did not always occupy such a clear and direct place in all aspects of thirunangai ethical life I got to witness and experience. For instance, thirunangai elder Lakshmi Nani's everyday life and her intimacies with her non-thirunangai neighbors and coworkers in

North Chennai are informed by shared class and caste backgrounds and forms of devotion, especially devotion to Angalamman. In this web of relationships, Angalamman is sometimes deliberately foregrounded – say, during rituals, festivals and pilgrimages. At other times, she is in the background, and her place in holding these relationships together can only be apprehended by paying sustained attention to Nani's everyday life and by understanding her life history and the stories of her intimacy with her neighbors. As a thirunangai who settled in that part of Chennai several decades ago and as a maruladi devoted to Angalamman, she gravitated towards others who also expressed an intense devotion to the goddess. Some of them were thirunangais while others were not. So her longstanding intimacies and significant relationships were formed both with other thirunangais as well as duniyadhars (non-trans people). Foregrounding either identity or identity-based community as the primary optics of recognition would not have allowed me to see these relationships and Nani's concern to attend to these relationships in particular ways – helping them out with their daily tasks, coming to their rescue when one of them is in debt, taking on tasks at the neighborhood temple, etc. It is only by focusing on Angalamman and the world of human relationships that seems to expand around her that I was able to recognize these relationships and the ethics of care that keep them going.

In addition to the above, I also saw Angalamman playing another important role in the lives of my thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors. There were ways in which she would suddenly enter a setting and play a key role in sorting out relationships. For instance, in the descriptions I offered in Chapter 5 of the protests at the police station, what we see in the accounts offered by my thirunangai interlocutors is that neither Angalamman nor their own sense of themselves as maruladis had played any directly recognizable role in the grief and anger they felt at Priya's death. But they felt that their sacred-spiritual identity became relevant at some point, leading to the ethical scrutiny of their own actions and anger. In this concluding section of my dissertation, I will offer another ethnographic account where the goddess entered a scene of human relationships in disequilibrium -- or I could perhaps say the goddess was brought into that scene -- to offer some softening of orientations, to allow some healing to occur.

The goddess also seemed to emerge during my thirunangai friends' social encounters with strangers. Many times, in everyday social contexts where they did not approach the world thinking of their connection to the goddess, others would make that aspect of thirunangai identity relevant – by approaching my thirunangai friends for blessings. Such encounters always had the effect of

softening my thirunangai interlocutors' approach to social interactions with strangers. As I detailed at various points in the dissertation, thirunangais do not take for granted that people outside their immediate worlds of intimacy, kinship, and friendship would treat them with respect, kindness, or just basic goodwill and cordiality. They often preempt hostility, indifference, and disrespect from strangers. Time and again, my thirunangai interlocutors gave this as the reason for what is often perceived as thirunangais' confrontational or abrasive demeanor in public. Scholars who have written about hijras have analyzed this as a kind of deliberate cultivation of shamelessness (Reddy 2005, Hall 1997). As I have suggested, it can be seen as their way of not honoring the face-saving aspects of implicit codes of social interactions. It is as if they make it clear that they cannot be bothered to play that social game of mutual regard and cordiality in a world that often fails to extend to them those courtesies. But occasions where people approached them -- in non-religious settings like shops, out on the street, at toll booths, etc. – seeking their blessings, my thirunangai friends experienced palpable joy at these encounters. In many of these contexts, Angalamman, or any other deity, was not explicitly evoked. But people's belief that thirunangais were spiritually potent persons on account of their place in goddess worship could be discerned in their demeanor and their requests. And my thirunangai interlocutors responded to such gestures with great generosity of spirit.

In this dissertation, I have attempted to describe the nature of thirunangai attachment to goddess Angalamman. My primary objective has been to show that thirunangais' devotion to Angalamman cannot be understood only at the level of cultural practice and identity. I have sought to understand the work it takes to *world* that attachment into being. Much of that labor is the work of ethical relationality – an evaluative orientation towards one's relationship with the world, animated by a concern with *how to be.* Not in an abstracted spiritual sense, but with a constant attunement to the relationships one always seems to be in the middle of and the ones that seem to emerge constantly. Whether it is their relationship with Angalamman, each other, institutions, intimate others, or strangers, my thirunangai-maruladi interlocutors are not merely actors in a world that comes completed with fully etched meanings and orientations. Nor are they simply doing what they can to get by in the world. There seems to be some mid-level grappling with life, with some conception of what matters, what is desirable, and how to go about realizing them. This attention to "projects and practices that instantiate some vision of the world in formation," as Aihwa Ong (2011: 11) puts it, is what I understand to be the content of *worlding.* It is not "world-

making" -- not a march towards a world as an end goal one has envisioned clearly and committed to. Instead, it is an attention to how we sift through some attachments that currently matter to us, our responses to what emerges in life, accounting for them in some ways, trying to make sense of things even as we move along, sometimes feeling a sense of plenitude in our relationships, sometimes a lack, but always hoping there will be time to set things right or that things will sort themselves out. For my thirunangai friends, Angalamman seems to be an important point of orientation in all this work of, well, living.

I have not attempted to offer an historical account of the Thirunangai-Angalamman attachment. As I have argued (Chapter 1), it is not easy to do. Recent, current, and emergent intensities of this attachment have to be taken into account, not only the archives of the past. What we see is that it takes much creative labor on the part of thirunangais to give body and weight to this attachment. They do so through narrative moves, through embodied experience of the goddess in themselves, and through the labor of ritual practice (Chapters 2 & 4). These are not merely practices that flow forth from religion as a secure cultural source, a done deal. To borrow Kathleen Stewart's words, these are "not just dead social constructions that we can track back to a simple origin, but forms of contagion, persuasion, and social worlding" (2007: 66). I have attended to the Thirunangai-Angalamman connection not as a cultural artefact but as a locus of worlding – as a place where I can train my focus in order to see how my thirunangai friends go about the business of living. From what I could feel, experience, and understand, Angalamman seems to be at the crossroads of intense traffic in relationships, emotions, and evaluative dispositions. She seems to inform happiness and anger in equal measure. She appears to make both balance and madness valid responses to the world (Chapter 5). It seems she can surprise but can also be surprised. She gives immensely and takes immensely. She can make life somewhat easier by offering a kind of sacred legitimacy to transfeminine identity, but a life with her has its own entailments. She seems to be a gathering place of things that matter to my thirunangai friends.

I do not want to sum it all up. For one, that does not seem to be how Angalamman works. She is too much. I am reminded of the offerings during the Mayana Kollai ritual. At first, they are placed rather neatly in large tubs. But when it comes to the moment of offering, people plunge their hands into them and scatter them everywhere. That's the way to do it. Only then can the goddess' hunger be sated. Only then can she be recovered from the madness she has taken on from Sivan when she released him from the clutches of Bramman's severed head.

I do not want to offer a summary also because I think I can offer an ethnographic description instead, as a provisional closure for this project.

One evening, Nisha and Shoba set out on their everyday work of kadai-kettal – going to the bars attached to the state-run liquor stores and asking for money from the men who drink there. They were on Nisha's scooter, with Shoba as the pillion rider. As they drove past the Koyambedu bus terminus on Poonamalee High Road, an empty bus that had just turned on to the road after dropping off passengers at the terminus came way too close to them, pushing their scooter against the concrete median running along the middle of the road. Nisha lost balance and they fell off from the scooter. Shoba fell right under the bus. One of its large rear wheels ran over her right thigh.

I received a phone call from Karuna, Nisha's housemate, who was travelling on work and was away from Chennai. She asked me if I could speak to Nisha and go be with her if possible. I called Nisha right away. She sounded very rattled, just as Karuna had described. She said, "Ani, we are at Kilpauk Medical College. Don't come now. We will be moving to a different hospital. Come in the morning. Ani, this is going to cost a lot. We need to raise money," and she faded into a quiet sob. Karuna relied on me to comfort Nisha and to keep telling her that the accident was not her fault. I would have done it anyway, but I was also doing it for Karuna now, who was caught up at work. Nisha asked me if I could help do a fundraiser for Shoba's medical expenses. She was very agitated, and she did not leave from the hospital for a week. She and Shoba's older sister took turns staying by Shoba's bedside at the hospital. "Special Ward – Ladies" in Kumaran Hospital housed eight to ten beds separated by curtains that were drawn only during the doctors' rounds and when a patient was getting her robes changed. At all other times, they stayed open, and patients and the caretakers spoke to each other across the room. The nurses and the floor managers overlooked the stream of visitors who came throughout the day, in complete violation of the 5-7pm visiting hours, except when doctors were visiting the ward. Then they shooed us away. The security guard at the foot of the stairs on the ground floor had his own system: if we arrived outside of visiting hours, he allowed us in two persons at a time to go see Shoba.

Only one person was allowed to spend the night with Shoba, sleeping on a mat on the floor next to the patient bed. Shoba's sister took up this task. But Nisha refused to go home for the nights. She slept in the hospital parking lot, like a few other friends of some other patients also did. They just had to wake up and clear any evidence of their nightly stay at the parking lot before the doctors started arriving. The security guards had some real, meaningful power over these

situations. Many of us, including Shoba herself, tried telling Nisha that she should go home for the night, but she refused.

Meanwhile, some friends and I started fundraising for Shoba's medical expenses. Every day, Nisha anxiously wanted to know how much money we had managed to raise by then. Every day, she and I sat and wrote out meticulous accounts. For there were expenses every day: pharmacy bills that had to be settled right away, a little cash given to Shoba's mother to catch a cab home, some little tip given to the woman who gave Shoba sponge baths, etc. Nisha was wracked with guilt – that she had been the one driving the scooter, that it was her scooter, that she escaped with minor scratches while Shoba suffered multiple fractures. This was about "allocation of responsibility," as James Laidlaw puts it in his discussion of agency and ethicality (2014: 197). It is about one's having been in the causal pathway to something. Less about agency (whether one is, in fact, the author of an act), and more about responsibility. Within a few days after the accident, the police told Nisha that she could retrieve her scooter from the Koyambedu police station. But Nisha did not go and collect it for weeks after Shoba had been discharged from the hospital. She did not want to look at the scooter so soon after the accident. The scooter too seemed to suffer the burden of some kind of responsibility, some culpability if not displaced agency.[130]

During our conversations at the hospital, Nisha tried to think through how the forthcoming months would be. "Once Shoba goes home, I will go in the mornings to help give her a bath, help her relieve herself, clean up and all that. Then I will go to the shops in the evening," she would say. Once I asked her, "Are you worried that some people might hold you responsible for this?" She replied, "Someone will definitely say that. Don't we know about people's tongues? But I also have my responsibility, Ani. I have to do this." This "have to" was an embodied imperative. She made sure she was constantly available for Shoba. Even after the discharge, she was present at each of Shoba's physiotherapy sessions at home, took her to the hospital periodically for check-ups, etc. She also insisted that some third party go through the fundraising and expenditure accounts and know that Nisha did not take a penny from it. Nisha was in the throes of acting on

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[130] See Laidlaw (2014), especially Chapter 5: Taking Responsibility Seriously for his critique of the concept of agency in social scientific literature. While he critiques the highly atomistic sense of agency that pits individuals against *structures*, Laidlaw also critiques other formulations of agency, such as the Actor Network Theory's focus on non-human and inanimate participants in social networks as also agents participating in and provoking action. Laidlaw argues that questions of blame and responsibility have a different way of framing matters.

what she felt were her responsibilities and also making sure she did not give cause for anyone to find her less than upright and honest.

Throughout this time, several of us, from elders like Lakshmi Nani and Vimala Aaya to friends like me, kept telling Nisha she did not have to extend herself so much. But we also admired her for the same. Vimala Aaya said to me, "She feels she must do this. She feels this is the right thing to do. This is why I like going to her house in Porur and staying in her house for a week or two now and then. She knows how to take care." Nisha's intense guilt and responsibility were validating her image in people's minds as someone who knew how to care for others, but it was also setting the bar high: "I don't if I would be able to do this much if I was in her situation," Vijaya, another thirunangai said to me, as we sat drinking tea in the hospital parking lot.

Some weeks later, after Shoba had had her surgeries and had been discharged, Nisha told me that we were going to Nellore to observe a ritual that would involve trance and divination. This was in the first week of August, just two weeks before my return to Austin. Kanakamma, a female devotee of Angalamman and a friend of several thirunangai-maruladis, now lived in Nellore, and through her people approached thirunangais to perform rituals for them. All my thirunangais were immensely fond of Kanakamma. I had not met her yet, but I had heard my thirunangai friends sing praises of her culinary skills.

Shakthi Amma, a well-known thirunangai-maruladi from Tondaiyarpet (North Chennai) was to conduct the ritual. Lakshmi Nani and Nisha were to function as helpers. I had research as an excuse to tag along. Karuna and Preeti decided to come along just to eat Kanakamma's cooking. "Truth be told, that is why we are all going," Nisha laughed. So we all set off one morning to Nellore. It would be a two-and-a -half hour train ride from Chennai Central. We all gathered outside Chennai Central and bought tickets valid for travel in an "unreserved" compartment in any of the north-bound express trains. We pushed and shoved against the crowd and found seats for all of us in one of the trains. It was a very fun journey. Lakshmi Nani advised us not to buy and eat from any of the vendors who boarded the compartment in the various stops. She asked us not to fill up our stomachs, because Kanakamma's food was waiting for us. Karuna and I spent our time commenting among ourselves about all the men who walked past us in the train compartment. Men always slowed down once they saw the thirunangais. Some stood and stared. Karuna shooed some away, but when they still lingered, she took out her phone and made as if she was taking photos of them. That made them walk away.

Once we reached Kanakamma's place in Nellore, we ate to our heart's content, which is to say we totally overate and felt like a lie-down. But the man for whom this entire thing had been arranged, and who needed to consult the goddess about some mishaps in his business venture, was waiting outside. So the ritual had to begin soon. Shakthi Amma undid her head-knot and let her hair down. Like many thirunangai-maruladis, Shakthi Amma was not in a stereotypically female attire. She wore a yellow dhoti (wrap-around) and a buttoned-up shirt and a long yellow shawl over it. And a large vermilion mark on her forehead.

Lemons. Yellow fabric. Vermilion. Red patterns on yellow fabric. Camphor. Flame. Lemons marked with vermilion dots, a piece of camphor placed them and set aflame. Lemons that priestesses would hold in their hands as they moved their arms in clockwise and anticlockwise directions in front of us, drawing out the effect of evil eyes, and then they would drop the lemon on the ground and stomp on it, squeezing out the juice, crushing the negativity out of them. Oil lamps. Neem leaves and twigs. Neem leaf patterns on yellow saris with red designs, which goddess-smitten Thirunangais and women wore… These objects and colors thickly populate the goddess space. My photographs are full of them.

Shakthi Amma held some neem twigs in her left hand and a lemon-vermilion-camphor-flame assemblage in her right hand, and closed her eyes. She stood in front of the alcove of deities in Kanakamma's house, facing the various printed and framed images of goddesses and gods. Lakshmi Nani stood in front of her, invoking the goddess, asking her to come and take over Shakthi Amma, to come and be present in that space with us. Shakthi Amma swayed back and forth, entered trance state, and the goddess announced her presence with a loud grunt. Then Lakshmi Nani, with some help from Kanakamma, explained to the goddess what the gentleman's problem was and what he wanted to know. We all stood around, watching, listening.

The goddess' speech is never clear and straightforward during trance. It comes in little sputters. We heard short, meaningful phrases and sentences from Shakthi Amma, punctuated by words and sounds we could not make sense of, as if we were hearing the goddess' voice through and despite interference and static noise. It was coming to us from elsewhere, mediated by a human body and the noise of this world. Lakshmi Nani, herself a maruladi, was skillfully interpreting what the goddess was saying, and she communicated this to the man, who stood, head lowered and hands folded reverentially, anxiety on his face, and his eyes tear-filled.

Once that task was done, but before Shakthi Amma would come out of trance, Lakshmi Nani wanted all of us to take blessings from the goddess. Nisha went first. Lakshmi Nani started to explain to the goddess, "Amma, she has escaped an accident. Shoba was injured…" But the goddess cut her short and said, "Amma knows everything, do you understand?" She then went on to say that Nisha should take comfort in the fact that the accident was supposed to be much worse, that it would have been fatal for Shoba had the goddess not intervened. She said that Nisha just happened to be there. It was Shoba's bad time, which was averted by the goddess. Nisha was in tears, and she nodded when the goddess asked, "Do you understand?" We all were in tears. The goddess' words had a remarkable effect on Nisha. Some dark heaviness seemed to leave her. We were also grateful that Shoba had survived the accident.

Later, Nisha communicated to Shoba what the goddess said, and Shoba was visibly moved to learnt that she had been brought back from the brink of death. But she did not stop her routine of care. She just did it the way she would do for any of her friends who needed care. Out of love and without a nerve-wracking sense of guilt and responsibility. It showed in her body, on her face, in the creases on her forehead, in the speed of her movements, in the heaviness that lifted when she heard the goddess' words spoken by Shakthi Amma in trance.

One might argue that if Nisha had actually been responsible for the accident, if it had been her error of judgment while driving that had caused the accident, ethical orientations would have been more clear-cut. Perhaps. It is possible to argue that her sense of responsibility and guilt would have been somehow justified and hence less morally exemplary and impressive. Perhaps. She would still have done the ethical thing, of course. But the way the accident had happened made attribution of responsibility unclear. The bus driver could be held responsible for sure. But he was a distant, third party, whereas Nisha was here, now, she had been in the driver's seat then, it had been her scooter. She didn't cause it, there was nothing she could reasonably have done about it, but she and her scooter were in the causal route to the event. They were not agents, but they were doing something agentive in the situation, doing something important, something that mattered to the outcome. To not be the direct cause of something, but still feel that the right thing to do is to partake of a sense of responsibility – this seems to be an important dimension of ethics (Laidlaw 2014). A dimension that does not deal only with clear agents, intentions, actions, and causes, but with a distributed sense of causality and responsibility. We feel responsible not only for things we

have done, but for things whose causal orbit seemed to include us and ours (things like scooters) somehow.

What the goddess' words did was to bring some clarity to Nisha about her role in what had happened. But the goddess did so by taking responsibility away from the human actors altogether, including from the bus driver. It was about "a bad time," "something that was going to be much worse," which the goddess averted. It was now not a terrible thing that had happened, but something bad in the place of something much worse. And it happened not because this is a freak world with no gods or justice, but one in which gods pay attention and intervene. It called for a sense of relief and gratitude. The bus company's insurance would still pay compensation. The police case would not be withdrawn just because the goddess had exonerated all human actors from responsibility. But it softened everyone's orientation to the event, especially the ones directly affected. They were not caught anymore in tremendous guilt or anger. They could move on. It became manageable.

There may be nothing new about humans turning to gods to find meaning in life situations or to find resolutions for strained relationships or other such difficult life circumstances. My thirunangai friends' turning to Angalamman in the situation I have described above is, perhaps, not novel in and of itself. But, as I participated in these relationships and as I observed Nisha's anguish at Shoba's suffering and the toll that sense of responsibility took on her, I could not but be moved by the immensity of it. Nisha's sense of responsibility and her desire to care for Shoba and restore her to good health really took hold of her. Not only did she make sure Shoba's medical expenses were paid through a fundraising initiative, she stayed with her at the hospital until the day of discharge. Then, for several weeks, she arranged a taxi and took Shoba to a physiotherapist every week. When we went to Nellore to witness Angalamman ritual to be performed by Shakthi Amma, none of us expected it to have anything to do with Nisha or Shoba. But when Shakthi Amma channeled the goddess and offered some perspective on what occurred, it was as if the thirunangai community around Nisha had summoned the goddess in the interests of her wellbeing, as if Angalamman was an ethical device, a divine ethical principle, a potent (re)framing tool that could offer a narrative, a meaning that could be more conducive to the sustenance of the relationships of those involved.

The local businessman who came to consult the goddess, and who had, in fact, paid for the entire ritual and the trip from Chennai, seemed moved by what the goddess had to tell him about his predicament. Kanakamma was in tears after being told that she would get back the money that someone had cheated her out of. Lakshmi Nani then beckoned me to come closer. Placing a hand on my shoulder, Nani said to the goddess, "Say something good for this *payyan* (boy). He has to finish his studies. He is doing his research." And the goddess replied immediately, "He is a not a payyan. He is a part of us. He is one of us. I am taking care of everything. Everything will go well." Lakshmi Nani and Nisha looked at me with a twinkle in their eyes as I moved forward to have Shakthi Amma place her hand on my head and bless me. I felt shivers when the goddess corrected Lakshmi Nani and said that I was "not a payyan," not a boy, and that I was one of them. Was it a confirmation of a prior truth about me? Or were these words performative too – was I "not a payyan" from that moment on because the goddess had said so? What does this belonging mean?

Later, as we sat down on the grass in front Kanakamma's house, swatting away the buzzing throng of winged white ants and other flying insects that were drawn to the electric lamps around us, Nisha asked, "Did you hear what saami said?" referring to the goddess by the gender-neutral Tamil word 'saami.' I replied, "Yes! That I am not a boy." Nisha said, "Now it is confirmed, now that saami has said it!" And Karuna quipped, "As if we needed confirmation! Kai punna paakka kannaadi thevaiya?" *Does one need a mirror to see the wound on one's hand?* Perhaps Karuna was simply drawing on a well-known Tamil proverb about obviousness, so I do not want to read too much into it. But I think it is interesting that the proverb should emphasize a point about obviousness by reference to carrying a wound and being able to see the wound. The proverb is in the form of a question: *Does one need a mirror to see the wound on one's hand?* But it may not be a rhetorical question. Do we require help with seeing our vulnerabilities? Do we require others as mirrors to show our wounds to us? Perhaps we do. And others do shows us our "wounds." We bestow on each other a recognition of our humanity and mutual vulnerability. Angalamman seems to be a medium, a surface of intervention, and a vibrant reflective form that holds up mutual vulnerabilities for a clearer view and offers thirunangais some ways of honoring them and living with them. But being with her does not mean a spirituality of quietude and balance. Instead, it seems to mean an animated embrace of the fact of being with others in this world. The tug and pull and drama of giving and taking. Living.

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