

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: INDIA**

**Transcript of Mangai  
Interviewer: C.S. Lakshmi**

**Location: Chennai, Tamilnadu, India**

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**SPARROW**

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**Mangai** is the pseudonym of Padma (born in 1959) who is a theatre director and a Professor of English Literature in Stella Mary's College, Chennai. As a member of the All India Democratic Women's Association and Chennai Kalai Kuzhu, Mangai actively took up several issues relating to women and presented them in the form of street theatre and stage plays. Later she became the key person in a theatre group called *Voicing Silence* that is being supported by the M.S. Swaminathan Research Centre. This group has scripted and enacted a range of issues from female infanticide to recasting women characters from epics. Mangai has scripted and participated in some of the plays and has directed some of the plays presented by the Voicing Silence group. Her Tamil plays raise many issues on gender, theatre and language that belong to debates within feminism.

**C.S. Lakshmi** (the interviewer) is a researcher in Women's Studies and a Tamil writer who writes under the pseudonym Ambai. She is currently the Director of SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women).

## Mangai Transcript

Mangai: I lived with my grandparents in Nagapatnam<sup>1</sup>. Actually we were a big family. We were seven of us — three daughters and four sons. My mother was a single daughter so my grandparents were interested in taking care of us. The first three of us - my eldest brother (my *akka*), my sister and myself — three of us grew up and we were with grandparents. Now my parents lived in Chennai. We were in Nagapatnam. It was my grandmother who used to take me to all the temples, listen to *Kathakalatchepam*, *Harikatha*<sup>2</sup> anything that comes there. And my grandfather was a school headmaster, highly ambitious and bent on settling us big, in our lives. So he made us all write this merit scholarship exam and I passed it when I was in fifth standard and I had to join a residential school for that. So they put me in Besant Theosophical High School. That was in Adyar then, where the KFI (J. Krishna Murthy Foundation School) school is now. The hostel was in Thiruvanmiyur. So that was in... situated, within Kalakshetra campus. So right from my sixth standard to my eleventh standard, I was in Kalakshetra<sup>3</sup>. Kalakshetra, you know, gave us a great exposure. I don't remember enjoying many things but then we had to be there for all the arts festivals. Rukmini Devi<sup>4</sup> was alive then. And, you know generally the ambience was great. Every Friday, we were taken in a big procession to the Thiruvanmiyur Temple to do *bhajans*.<sup>5</sup> So you generally kind of kept listening to music and he also tried putting me in a dance class. That's like an hour and a half in the evening for three days in a week. The problem is I only learnt to do my *Aramandi*<sup>6</sup>. By that time, I think, I failed in my English exam in my seventh standard. So my mother said, "Put a full stop to dance. It's because of dance that you didn't score well in exams." You know, that was the connection. So she stopped me from dance. (...) Actually, my parents, both of them, I don't think they showed any interest even in watching any performances. Not even as much as my grandmother was interested in watching any of them. But my mom was interested in reading. I mean I still think that her interest in reading is something that I actually cherish today. (...) While in college I met Arasu<sup>7</sup>. Arasu was then a PG (Postgraduate) student and I was a UG (Undergraduate) student and we kept meeting in college meets and all that. And he was also not really particularly interested in performance but he would come you know, even in college plays. Whenever I acted he always made it a point to be there and later, actually I remember when we came to Madras, I used to make him accompany - you know take him with me to concerts, to see Bharatnatyam<sup>8</sup> dances and all that. (...) But then, he was very much interested in the traditional forms. Because he is a student of Tamil literature, he was very keen on the way...it's very literary in quality, the flexibility of the forms. And he was also from another community. So ours was an inter-caste marriage. So it's like a clean break from my family. So I usually say that after my '20s, it's absolutely with Arasu. In fact, I would say that is the only home I keep. Because I never really stayed with my parents ... till ten years and that was too young. And that was with my grandparents and then with

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<sup>1</sup> Coastal town in the eastern part of the state of Tamilnadu.

<sup>2</sup> *Kathakalatchepam*, *Harikatha*: Traditional Puranic and epic stories told with music.

<sup>3</sup> Elite international dance school in Madras.

<sup>4</sup> Member of theosophical society and a classical dancer who was a Brahmin who made this kind of dancing socially acceptable.

<sup>5</sup> Hymns.

<sup>6</sup> *Aramandi*: The half standing position with knees bent and feet facing opposite directions in Bharatnatyam (Indian classical dance).

<sup>7</sup> Mangai's husband who is a non-Brahmin professor of Tamil at Madras University.

<sup>8</sup> Traditional classical Indian dance.

Arasu. Of course, I have two children now a daughter and a son. And my daughter joined me in my group with *Pachcha Mannu*<sup>9</sup>. She was in eighth standard. And she was actually a kind of a stand-by performer. (...)

**Lakshmi: Mangai, in contemporary Tamil theatre, you are a very important person; you are a name to be reckoned with and you have written some very interesting articles on Tamil theatre. I think it would be interesting if you could tell us in general about what theatre in traditional Tamil culture has been? That would help us to understand your own work in the context in which you have been working.**

Mangai: Actually it's such a vast area and I think when we refer to something as theatre - unlike in the West, where ballet is different, opera is different and theatre is something more modern with a lot of prose in it or dialogues in it or whatever. In our case, I think - that's the case with most Asian cultures also, at least South Asian, we can be very confident - the whole of India and in Tamilnadu, all these are mixed. So, you have pure dance forms like *Devarattam* or *Oyilattam* or *Thapattam*, whatever. We also have narrative forms like *Villupattu*, it's a balladeering kind of thing. There's a lot of singing but there's no dance. And then there is what we can call total theatre — like it can be *Therukoothu* in Tamilnadu, it can be *Yakshagana* in Karnataka or *Jatra*<sup>10</sup> in Bengal, you know, all over the places, we can identify. Now I think all these forms have very different projections of women - by its absence basically. (...) And I think, actually in the theatre form, I don't know about *Yakshagana* but then *Koothu*<sup>11</sup> — even now I think *Koothu* is essentially a male domain. It's the male members who will play all the roles including the female roles, you know in the turn of the century, say 19<sup>th</sup> century end and 20<sup>th</sup> century beginning, where you had Parsi theatre influence and we started having regular drama, what you can call as musical dramas, with a scene, set and all that. You started having women. But interestingly, the *Chandramati*<sup>12</sup> will be done by a woman. But then, there will be a clown, no? They call them clown, actually. Clown will have a *jodi*, somebody to partner with him and these are dancers. And that dancer will be a male dressed as a female. So when it is a very dignified kind of character, it is okay for a woman. Only recently I think we have also started having female dancers. And most people who are in the profession, they don't want to do the dancer's bit. They would prefer a character role. So essentially I think theatre has been an area which is, you know, which is happy if women don't enter and meddle with it. That's the feeling I always keep getting, as a form. The genre itself resists you if you are a woman.

**Lakshmi: Mangai, what about women as viewers? Did they have the space and time to be viewers of this theatre?**

Mangai: I think right from ancient times, there has always been restrictions. Not just in our theatre, perhaps even in the Greek theatre space. At least for us, I think, we know, because

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<sup>9</sup> “Fresh soil” is a play that Mangai did to raise awareness about female infanticide.

<sup>10</sup> *Therukoothu*, *Yakshagana* and *Jatra*: Folk theatre forms of dance that were adopted by the leftist activists to interpret political issues. These dance forms were used in contrast to the traditional classical Bharatnatyan dance form.

<sup>11</sup> Abbreviated use of *Therukoothu*. The *Koothu* is a folk form of dance drama adopted by the leftist activists to interpret relevant issues. This dance form was used which is in contrast to the traditional classical Bharatnatyan dance form.

<sup>12</sup> *Chandramati*: *Chandramati* is the main female character in the *Puranic* story *Harishchandra* and *Chandramati*.

*Arthashastra*<sup>13</sup>, our age-old treatise tells us that, “If you go for this show with permission there is a fine and without permission there is a separate fine.” (...) If we can come to our own times, we know, when we had these touring theatres, where they come and camp outside the village and have shows, there was always specific areas allotted for women. So you know, ‘women-only’ spaces. (...) So, that made us form not only all-female groups as part of the women’s movement but also stage plays at different times. (...) So what we usually did if we wanted to really cater to the working women’s group, we went to their work place. So almost all major offices have a lunch space. Or as they have their lunch, that break, that was our time for performance. You know just like how they have these gate meetings, we performed I guess. Or, if it is going to be this slum clearance, you know where you have those slums in any housing board locality and all that. We had to choose a time in between the lunch break and before the children come. (...) I still remember in ’96 when we went to do *Pachcha Mannu*. In most places, the idea of a woman coming to watch something, you know, it’s something that is not the done thing. So I still remember, there will be men. There will be children first and then of course the men will be standing somewhere at a distance and they will come in only after you have finished your entry song or whatever. In one place they said *Ninga pannunga, nanga poi sollarom*: “you perform, we will go and tell them what you did.” So they did not want the women to come and watch. So we had to really make that effort to get the women to watch our performances. But I know I am very concerned about it, you know, just like how you say you want to have more women on stage, I think we also want to reach out to more women audiences. (...)

**Lakshmi: Mangai there has been a very strong Dravidian Movement<sup>14</sup> in Tamilnadu. And it has nurtured theatre in a particular way and with specific perspective about women. Can you tell us something about that?**

Mangai: I think it’s a very new heritage that Dravidian Movement; actually, it built it within the existing tradition. When I say existing tradition it’s not those traditions with dance, music and all that. It’s the other kind of tradition, which Pammal SambandaMudaliar<sup>15</sup> started. Pammal was a lawyer and he worked in Chennai and he started this concept of an urban-based theatre, where you have a play running for about three hours or so meant for a city audience kind of thing. Now, he did introduce a little bit of prose into whatever he tried. He tried to translate Shakespeare and all that, as all of us know. But that prose was not really the everyday prose. And I think what the Dravidian Movement did in its place, not just in place - actually I think I would say the Dravidian Movement has given birth to a completely new genre which has its own aesthetics called oratory. (...)

***Excerpt from “Voicing Silences”***

***Group of actors: Praise to the Mother Goddess! Hail Mother, thou Creator of the World!  
The world bows at your feet!***

**Actor: People of the Muthunayakapatti village, we come from Chennai!**

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<sup>13</sup> This treatise on government is said to have been written by the prime minister of India's first great emperor, *Chandragupta Maurya* (250 BCE).

<sup>14</sup> First Civil Rights movement of “backward” castes.

<sup>15</sup> Lawyer and playwright who was a founding member of the Dravidian Movement.

We belong to the theatre group “Voicing Silence”  
Shortly we will perform the play “Pahha Mannu” in this marketplace. “Pachha Mannu.”  
We invite all of you to stay and watch our performance.

**Actor:** Silence! Silence! Silence!

**Mangai:** We, of the Voicing Silence, have come from Chennai.  
People from disparate backgrounds have come together to form this group.  
Please feel free to intervene during the performance with your ideas and opinions.  
It will be of great help to us.  
Voicing Silence presents “Pachha Mannu.”

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*Group of actors to actress: Is it a boy? Or is it a girl? It is a boy! Glory be!  
Boy or girl? Alas, it's a girl...worthless!  
How sad! A girl!*

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*Male actor to actress: Why are you so upset? Did I drive you out of the house? Or threaten to  
take another wife? You know how difficult it is to bring up a child, especially a girl. Think of all  
the expenses! So, do the sex determination test.*

*Actress: Let us have the child, we'll see later.*

*Male actor: And what if it is a girl?*

*Actress: Then...we'll kill our newborn. I'll do it myself.*

**Lakshmi: Mangai, you've been telling us about the characterisation of women in plays, in the past. Some women-oriented plays have been written by men, isn't it? Can you tell us something about these plays?**

Mangai: Actually in Tamil, I think even character plays are very limited. You know, usually, they are all chorus plays and invariably chorus means men. You know, it's easier to have a group of men performing the chorus. Of the very few plays which have protagonists as women, I think the first reference should be made of Ramanujan's<sup>16</sup> *Veriattam*<sup>17</sup> – it's an adaptation of *Trojan Women* and I think early '80s – I'm not very sure. But in that, I think we actually had a very strong voice of women against war and all that. Of course, quite weepy and the whole play is set in an *oppari* – *oppari* is those funeral songs that we sing. What I remember very distinctly, because you know I can only talk about the '90s with more confidence. '95 – Sangeet Natak Academy<sup>18</sup> – they had this whole series of helping out the young directors. And then there was this comment that there are no new playwrights coming up. So they started this young playwrights programme. So we were asked to submit and all that and they chose, I think, three texts. Of the three texts which were chosen from Tamil, two of them had female protagonists. One is Malaichami's *Muni* (Evil spirit). The other one is Devi Bharati. Devi Bharati's

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<sup>16</sup> Modern early playwright, professor of Tamil at the National School of Drama.

<sup>17</sup> Dance when possessed as in the case with Kali dancing the final dance.

<sup>18</sup> National Academy of Music and Theater. It bestows awards and sponsors events related to the arts.

*Moondravathu Vila Elumbum Vizuthukalatra Alamaramum* (The Third Rib and the Banyan Tree With No Aerial Roots<sup>19</sup>). (...) And then, around the same time, we also had an NSD (National School of Drama) drama workshop. And Professor Ramanujan was the course director of the whole thing. He staged *Sempavalak Kali*<sup>20</sup> (TRANSLATION). And I know that's a theme which has been in his mind for long. So I think these three plays, which came sometime around '95 towards the end – September, October – kind of had... this whole space was provided for women, I should say. And that really set me thinking you know, about what are they trying to characterise? First of all, all three are based on some kind of a myth. *Muni* is based on a local deity down south, *Sempavalak Kali* is again a kind of a mythical story based on two women who were actually *dasis*<sup>21</sup> and then *Moondravathu Vila Elumbum Vizuthukalatra Alamaramum*, Devi Bharati's text is based on, what do you call them... oracle kind of thing? You know, you have a kind of, there is this banyan tree which doesn't have those aerial roots or whatever and it is supposed to predict whenever a new child is born in that village, it is supposed to predict. So once again it has something to do with, you know, orality, whatever that is, that little tradition that they talk about, which I found very interesting. (...) Malaichami's *Muni* was directed by Mu. Ramaswamy. Mu. Ramaswamy, is I think, one of our major directors, very sensitive to the stage space. He had already adapted *Antigone*. You know Shenbagam Ramaswamy<sup>22</sup>, she adapted it as a text and he directed it. It was called *Durgaravalam*<sup>23</sup> (...) He took Malaichami's *Muni*.

I think on stage, it was a very, very powerful presentation, in the sense this is about this little deity, who has been - this as usual like all kings - this Thopilan Raja also has his way with women. So he just takes any woman whom he finds interesting. And he takes this woman and after he has her, he usually brings them as maidservants. And this young woman, young virgin girl, curses him that he will always have still born children. So this wife, this queen mother, she keeps on bearing children and the children keep dying because of this curse and Thopilan Raja suffers. And that is how *muni* takes her revenge. So that's the whole story. (...) What I remember distinctly is that last scene where this young maid who is actually a deity who has got that – who has given a curse to this king, she takes her revenge. You know, she actually sits on the man like that (shows) and she has to do that. Now we had two *munis* in the course of the play. One is played by Jeeva (Jeeva is a theatre researcher and a director and an actor in her own right from Pondicherry School of Drama), and Palani. Palani, again, is very well versed in *Koothu* and all that. Now both of them played the *muni*'s role. When they played it right from the beginning as a young girl, you know, teasingly erotic and all those things, it didn't really matter. When it came to the last bit, on stage you have this Arjunan *tapas*<sup>24</sup> – that huge stick – I think you must know, it is taken from *Koothu* where you have this big palm... palmyra tree and it has these small steps. So as Arjuna goes up the *tapas*, he is supposed to sing a song to Lord Shiva<sup>25</sup> in each step. Now this was the structure, which was the centre stage, which to me was symbolic of the erect male order. And this Raja is there; he is lying flat, of course you can see the erection of the penis and the continuation of the Raja's thing (body). And *muni* goes and sits there on him. Now, I heard, I mean this is something offstage, I heard that when they rehearsed he kept trying out with both

<sup>19</sup> This metaphor implies vulnerability.

<sup>20</sup> "Red Ruby Kali" – angry goddess whose face is "red as a ruby."

<sup>21</sup> *Devdasis* - women dedicated to god who normally do not get married.

<sup>22</sup> Wife of Mu. Ramaswamy. She is a leftist feminist activist.

<sup>23</sup> Translation of *Antigone*.

<sup>24</sup> Arjunan *tapas* : Penance of Arjuna. Arjuna is one of the major character from the epic *Mahabharata*.

<sup>25</sup> God of annihilation, the destroyer. His wife is the goddess Kali.

these people – both Palani and Jeeva. But on stage, Ramaswamy himself was doing Thopilan Raja, and Ramaswamy is by nature very shy, you know, I have been with him in a workshop with Badal Sircar and I know how he relates to a female body – which comes out of a very feudal respect for the opposite sex actually; so he decided that Palani will do this last bit. But to me that was a major statement that you are making. You would rather have a man clad in a female cloth do this vengeful role – vengeful part, rather than have a real woman, you know, on stage. And there are also other hierarchies of age, this is about *Muni*. Devi Bharati's script as such doesn't - I was all for that because it talks about this curse that befalls somebody saying that your wife would be a prostitute. So he is very scared and so he lives his life with that fear in him and then everybody in that village has some... something to wreak vengeance on: that tree. So ultimately, the whole play ends up with the tree being cut. And it was '95 and I remember Devi

Bharati saying that it was his reaction to Babri Masjid<sup>26</sup> – you know about how religion, superstition, all this builds up and it actually shows how a female discourse or discourses connected to sexuality and progeny and procreation all that actually affect and they are reified by religion and all that. So theoretically perhaps it sounds really fine and Raju directed it. Raju from Pondicherry School of Drama. Once again, a very major director, from NSD and all that. So he, when, in his play we had lot of women on stage. I mean, this is something that I think only theatre will face, you know, I mean there are times when we say, there are no women, female bodies on stage. But then here was a play where we had so many female bodies but not a single female soul – S-O-U-L (she spells). You know, I mean you never had the female voice. (...) *Sempavalak Kali* again has two *dasis*, we must realise that Ramanujan Sir is our guru, you know, it is to him that we all look up to with a lot of respect and I have directly worked with him in *Mouna Kuram*<sup>27</sup>. He has directed me in *Veriattam* in one of his shows. So I still continue to relate to him with lot of awe and respect and all that. But in this, it's a very dicey argument. You know, about whether there is this *dasi* who actually likes to lead a very pure life, you know, we will put 'pure' in quotes. So there is this sage who is very curious to know what her philosophy is. And her deal is that in one night, she takes a husband, she takes a man as a husband and is loyal to him. So it so happens that when that *sanyasi*<sup>28</sup> comes, that day he dies in her house, you know. And therefore she is left with the option of either living the life of a widow or committing *sati*<sup>29</sup>. And she chooses to commit *sati*, you know. And it is a very crooked way of supporting *sati* in some way, you know, and the other one is *Sempavalak Kali*, this god, all these are actually local myths that we have Manikkavalli... *Sempavalak Kali*, is again born a *dasi* but doesn't want to lead the life of a *dasi*. But then the king wouldn't allow her. I mean the king, it's traditional that she stays with him one night even if she wants to move into her business, so-called business. So, she is taken but then she tries to wreak vengeance. In the process, actually dying, she dies. But that particular part actually exposes how the king, the brahminic order, how they all actually conspire together against this one single woman. (...)

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<sup>26</sup> Mosque in Delhi that was demolished by right-wing Hindu militants on December 6, 1992; massive violence between Hindus and Muslims followed all over the country.

<sup>27</sup> Translation – “Silent voices.”

<sup>28</sup> Holy person who denounces material things.

<sup>29</sup> Suicide of a widow at the time of husband's funeral.

**Lakshmi: Mangai, I am curious to know how the performers, the women performers were linked to the performance itself. Actually what I want to know is was there a community of performers who acted in plays in the past, not the modern plays but the plays in history.**

Mangai: Any one specific community you mean?

**Lakshmi: Ya.**

Mangai: No. But Ambai<sup>30</sup>, you know too well. I mean it's connected more with dance, you know, where we call them Isaivelalar and they have a particular tradition. As far as I know, not really, at least not now. I think that much can be safely said. (...) So I don't think that there is any one specific community. But it must have existed. Because people do talk about Dalit *Koothu* companies<sup>31</sup> and all that. But that's also more in Northern part of Tamilnadu. Southern part of Tamilnadu, I think communities are mixed. I mean performing community itself may be seen as a community, that's it. So I don't think it has any relationship to caste.

**Lakshmi: This background of the historical participation of women in theatre, has it been recorded properly so that so many questions arise you know as to how they participated and what kind of participation they did and what were their background? Has it been recorded?**

Mangai: I don't think so. I don't think there is a single documentation of when women actually started coming into theatre. For example, T.K Shanmugam<sup>32</sup> says that when they wanted to do *Avvaiyar*<sup>33</sup>, they had one woman in their company and that was Draupadi and she was five years old. And therefore he had to do the *Avvaiyar* role – the older woman's role. But you know Balamani Ammal<sup>34</sup>, (...) all our early film actresses are all from the theatre field, from drama but we don't have. I am also curious because K.P. Janaki<sup>35</sup> who was, who died, as president of All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), Tamilnadu, comes from that family. They used to say that she had three houses in Madurai in that street where she lived. Ultimately when she died, she lived in a not even ten by ten room you know, where she had a small stove in a corner and she died like that and she, of course, lost her voice in prison<sup>36</sup>. We tried to document some of AIDWA leaders' histories earlier. And I still remember talking about K.P. Janakiammal, K.P.Janakiammal's involvement in *Isai natakam*<sup>37</sup> and all that of which people said that she herself doesn't want to talk about it. In fact CPM (Communist Party – Marxist) has published *Amma*<sup>38</sup>, the title is called *Amma*. They have published her life story very vaguely talking about how she was an actress and she fell in love with this congress person who was the harmonist<sup>39</sup> in

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<sup>30</sup> Lakshmi's pen name. Ambai is a male-to-female character in *Mahabharata* (the Great Indian Epic).

<sup>31</sup> Dance is more caste bound whereas theatre mixes caste.

<sup>32</sup> Founder of one of India's famous early professional theatre group.

<sup>33</sup> *Avvaiyar*: A major Tamil film based on the life of the bardic woman poet Avvai of the ancient Tamil Sangam period.

<sup>34</sup> Early film actress.

<sup>35</sup> Later referred to as "Janakiammal." The addition of "ammal" to the end of a woman's name is a show of respect.

<sup>36</sup> Many members of the AIDWA were imprisoned by the communist party during this time.

<sup>37</sup> *Isai natakam*: Musical theatre.

<sup>38</sup> "Mother."

<sup>39</sup> Harmonist: person playing a musical instrument called *harmonium*.

that company and, you know, both of them were performers but once she joined the movement, she left her arts. You know, I mean even that is not really spelt out. I don't think even as women's movement... I should own it up myself, we never saw that as our heritage. But I still remember when I came in, when I came in early '80s, when I came into acting and all that, Janakiammal was always fond of people who will sing in the conferences and do some dancing and all that. (...) But, nobody talks about her involvement in the arts today. We would rather project her as a patriotic person who joined the socialist movement and all that and not talk about the art which actually brought her into this. (...) So, somewhere, I think (a) there is not enough study (b) there is not enough perspective for us to hail a heritage. (...)

**Lakshmi: Mangai, there was this phenomenon called the Boys' company in Tamil theatre. Can you tell us something about it?**

Mangai: I think it is just an ironic one. No, I shouldn't be saying that. This was Swamigal's, Shankardas Swamigal's<sup>40</sup> venture. The last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century he formed these boys' companies where these children were almost adopted by the company and mainly to counter these accusations that artists are leading a very bohemian life and they are very amoral or immoral or whatever, so just to avoid that. Highly codified, militaristic kind of training, you know, that they should get up in the morning, do these work, have a singing class and then the dance class and learn their lessons. So it's supposed to have been a very - one way of tackling poverty also - because most of these young boys who were recruited into these were from very poor families. So it started in southern Tamilnadu but it actually spread to... We know that the T.K. Shanmugam<sup>41</sup> and all his brothers, four of them, stayed together in one company from which they separated and formed their own group later. Or I think till about the '40s, or even late '40s, we had Nawab Rajamanikkam<sup>42</sup>'s group, you know there is a huge group photograph where you have about 50 odd people who belong to that company and that's actually their home you know, not even a second home, a home where they were fed, given some clothing. All their requirements were taken care of by the Boys' Companies. But I think it was called "Boys' Companies," always used within inverted commas, but there were lots of young girls who were also recruited into that. (...)

**Lakshmi: It will be nice if you could tell us something about this all-women company of Balamani Ammal.**

Mangai: It's Balamani Ammal and her sister. Both of them who were proprietors of that company. Actually, I mean we don't know for sure. Even the dating is kind of very mixed up, of the records. But we know they have been performing till about early 1920s. Till then, we have references to Balamani Ammal's performances. But then they say that she died completely in absolute, abject poverty with no place to stay and all that you know, that is what we learn about them. But then it was an all-female group where *rajapart*<sup>43</sup> was taken by Balamani Ammal herself. And you still have lot of women who take *rajapart* roles. (...) I mean. I saw that happening, happen even now like three years back when I went to Pudukottai to watch. And this

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<sup>40</sup> Father of modern Tamil theatre.

<sup>41</sup> Famous theatre group that originally included only boys.

<sup>42</sup> Top feminist theatre group.

<sup>43</sup> *rajapart*: Male lead roles.

was Vallikalyanam (The marriage of Valli). And this woman was Valli. Jayalatha was Valli. And actually, the village head had to come and tell her *kalyanam panni vaikkanum* (marriage has to be performed). They are talking to Valli. So please oblige, you know, let the *tarkam*<sup>44</sup> come to an end. Because if the *tarkam* doesn't end, the marriage will not take place. And they have arranged this and it still has a ritualistic content. So therefore I think there were these women who were... and this *tarkam* brings together, I mean we talk about intertextuality in literature as if it's a big theoretical concept but they bring in Saiva Siddha<sup>45</sup> tradition – all those songs are part of their repertoire you know. No they don't keep it in the mythological time. So it's very interesting to see how they transcend time and the context of their performances bringing in all this logic about philosophy or about everyday life or about male-female...of course, they comply with the regular, feudal, patriarchal order of thinking. You can't go against it. People don't like it. In fact, Jayalatha says she started getting into *rajapart* mainly because she was excelling so much as *streepart*<sup>46</sup> that *rajapart* people could not you know win her in their arguments. So the only way she could survive in theatre was to be the *rajapart* herself. So she learnt Harichandra, Muruga<sup>47</sup> everything afterwards though she started off as Chandramati or Valli in special dramas, so it's amazing the way women negotiate and survive, you know, in these fields.

**Lakshmi: Very interesting.... They say that special trains were run when Balamani Ammal staged a play. Is it true?**

Mangai: They say that, no? Those trains were called Balamani Ammal specials. And they are supposed to reach Kumbakonam around 11 o'clock and then start again early morning at 5 o'clock. And there are people who were supposed to have travelled. (...)

**Lakshmi: Actors like K.P. Sundarambal<sup>48</sup>, they contributed a great deal to the nationalist movement by the kind of roles and the songs they sang in the theatre. Can you tell us something about that?**

Mangai: Very little, from what I have gleaned from small references that we have got. K. P. Sundarambal, especially, you know, without any formal education and she was noted mainly for her singing. And right from nine or ten-years old, she has been in these companies and she also had both *streepart* as well as *rajapart*, you know, she also donned that. And a very staunch member of not only Congress movement but also later any kind of social reform, she is supposed to have stood in the forefront. And it didn't matter what story it was. I mean all of us know about *Vallikalyanam* where Theodore Bhaskaran actually documents it in *Message Bearers*<sup>49</sup> where they come singing, driving away the white storks, you know *Vellai Kokku* – or about Viswanadha Das. I mean these are all popular references. But then K.P. Sundarambal has also talked about *Khadarkodi* (The *Khadar* Flag), you know, that whole propagation on *Khadar* and

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<sup>44</sup> *tarkam*: Argumentative dialogues.

<sup>45</sup> One of the oldest philosophical traditions in South India, influence by goddess Shiva.

<sup>46</sup> *streepart*: Female lead role.

<sup>47</sup> Male roles.

<sup>48</sup> First woman to become a member of legislative council ("MLC"), formerly an actress.

<sup>49</sup> *Message Bearers*: R.T.Bhaskaran, Message Bearers.

sale of *Khadar*<sup>50</sup>, which K. P. Sundarambal is supposed to have taken a great lead in that category. (...)

**Lakshmi: Mangai, there have been playwrights in other languages whose plays have had very great impact on language theatre. I am actually referring to Vijay Tendulkar<sup>51</sup>. His plays *Shanthata Court Chalu Aahe* (Silence, the court is in session), *Sakharam Binder*<sup>52</sup> and *Kamala*<sup>53</sup> were kind of turning points in Marathi theatre. Do you think these plays which have been translated into various languages had an impact on Tamil theatre? Because these plays are women-oriented.**

Mangai: Very. Very, very. Actually not *Sakharam Binder* you know, for all the power and energy that it has, we haven't yet got it in Tamil. But then, *Shanthata Court Chalu Aahe* as well as *Kamala*, both of which I think have been very powerful statements in modern Tamil theatre, both of which directed by Pariksha<sup>54</sup> and acted by Pritam. You know I still remember Padukalam – battle field both as *Kamala* and as that middle class wife's role. In fact that's where I saw her first. These plays were very powerful on stage and I know, I still remember Gnani<sup>55</sup> talking about the censorship problems that he had, especially when he had to stage *Kamala* and in that film chamber near that auditorium there. So those plays, yes. And most of Badal Sircar. But Badal Sircar of course nothing much to do with women but as a style and all that other Indian languages playwrights, I can't recall much of their influence as far as Tamil theatre goes.

**Lakshmi: Mangai, what about playwright like Girish Karnad<sup>56</sup> who writes in Kannada? Did his plays have any impact on the Tamil Theatre?**

Mangai: Unfortunately, in the Madras-based English-theatre, [Girish] Karnad is a big name. I mean you must have known that Madras players was the first to stage *Hayavadana*<sup>57</sup> and you know they were the first to stage *Tipu* also, *Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. So, but in Tamil we still haven't, we don't even have a translation of *Hayavadana* first of all, which I think is, no I think it's like a dream play you know that one would like to go back to. But *Nagamandala*<sup>58</sup>, we have the text translated by Pavannan. And we have also had a performance in Tirunelveli, Palayamkottai. (...) Aruna directed that play in Palayamkottai with the folklore department and all that, *Nagamandala*. (...)

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<sup>50</sup> *Khadar*: Tamil usage of hand-woven homespun rough fabric (*Khadi*) that Mahatma Gandhi popularised during the National movement.

<sup>51</sup> Marathi playwright.

<sup>52</sup> Translation is "bookbinder." It is a famous play by Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar. The play is about various dimensions of power relations between a man and two women. The lead male character is Sakhram Binder. The play has been translated in English and performed off-Broadway.

<sup>53</sup> Name of the play.

<sup>54</sup> Experimental theatre group.

<sup>55</sup> Playwright.

<sup>56</sup> Important playwright in Kannada (another state and language).

<sup>57</sup> Play about head transplants. A lower-caste man who is handsome and an upper-caste man who is smart cross paths. English translation of the play: Karnad, G. (1975). *Hayavadana*. Calcutta, India: Oxford University Press. The play was based on Thomas Mann's novel: Mann, T.(1941). *The transposed heads: A legend of India*. New York: Alfred Knopf.

<sup>58</sup> Land of snakes.

**Lakshmi: What about Tamil playwrights? Which of the plays you think are women - oriented? We talked about some women-oriented plays earlier. But there have been others. Can you tell us about them?**

Mangai: Yeah. When you talk about playwrights in Tamil, invariably I think they are male-playwrights – people who sit down and write plays. In that sense, I mean since Muthuswami's name is recognised at the national level as a Tamil playwright. I think of his plays *Kattiangaran*,<sup>59</sup> you know *Kattiangaran* is a major text, which is a comment on women and media. You know it's about how there is this bank, which sells masks to enhance the sexual virility in each family. It's called a *Makkal Vangi* — people's bank. So the whole debate about, do women actually want their male members, their husbands or lovers to have masks of the actors? You know, I mean you must have known – you know where you hear about a woman who slept on the poster of MGR<sup>60</sup>, you know, so I mean, we can go to crazy limits to do that and how media really affects that. And then, but then in that a woman's voice is really powerful. You know she says she doesn't accept her own husband when he comes in with his own face. She says how do I differentiate between a face and a mask? (...) The rest of the plays, except of late, you know, Muthuswami's recent play called *Padukalam*<sup>61</sup>, which really focuses on the relationship between war and women, especially, again set within a mythical as well as an everyday kind of role. (...) His recent *Padukalam* somehow gives me that feeling that there is a lot more gender-based discourse that's evolving. Otherwise, *Narkalikarar* (The Chair People) or *Chuvarottikal* (Posters) — his major plays have very little of the presence of women. I am not talking about character as women, which anyway he doesn't have. I mean, he doesn't work on the traditional notion of characterisation. But then Indira Parthasarathy<sup>62</sup> does. I mean, at least the early plays of Indira Parthasarathy. I mean everybody talks about *Ramanujan*<sup>63</sup> and *Nanadan Kadai*<sup>64</sup> and *Porvai Porthiya Utalkal* (bodies covered in blankets)<sup>65</sup> and all that at the national level. But then his early plays are *Mazai*, (*The Rain*); *Kalayandram* is a little later. You have *Kongai Thee*. All these are Indira Parthasarathy's plays, especially *Mazai* and *Porvai Porthiya Utalgal* are all psychological and the protagonists are mainly women. And *Porvai Porthiya Utalkal* especially between the mother and the daughter, you know the very uneasy relationship that's there between them. And somehow I find it very puerile in terms of gender psychology as well as feminist psychology, you know they are really.... But unfortunately except *Mazai* of which we have had a reading. In Tamil, these plays haven't been performed. (...)

**Lakshmi: Mangai what about plays which have been directed by women like Mu. Jeeva? Do you think that when they direct a play, the perspective is different?**

Mangai: With Mu. Jeeva, she definitely wanted to do something different. Mainly you know she did her own translation of *Antigone*, *Medea* and she also did her own scripts – you know one

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<sup>59</sup> Name of character; is a “fool” or “joker” type character.

<sup>60</sup> M.G.Ramachandran: A very popular hero of Tamil films who later become the Chief Minister of Tamilnadu.

<sup>61</sup> Battlefield.

<sup>62</sup> Male playwright who took his wife's name in marriage.

<sup>63</sup> Playwright.

<sup>64</sup> Story of Nanada.

<sup>65</sup> Based on actual incident in which Dalits were burned for trying to enter an upper-caste community. It is a Tamil play (meaning: bodies covered by blankets) by Indira Parthasarathy a well known Tamil playwright.

*Setiyin Thalattu*<sup>66</sup>. After this Tamrabarani massacre<sup>67</sup>, she did a play called *Tamrabarani* which really caused her a lot of problem because Krishnaswamy<sup>68</sup> was standing for election there and there were other kinds of political issues which came with that. And I also thought she was trying something different; you know she also plays them. Unlike Ramanujan sir who tried to adapt Greek texts, or I think even Shenbagam Ramaswamy to some extent adapted *Antigone* when she got it into *Durgaraval*. But Jeeva tried to keep to the original and she retained the Greek names. She also tried to have the some choric action, you know, tried to kind of get a Greek flavour. I am not sure whether it was different because it was Jeeva or because Jeeva was a woman. But it was certainly a very different experience, you know, there was no effort to push one woman's tale. Somehow it became very multiple, even *Medea*. Her chorus was a very powerful chorus. We haven't really discussed Jeeva's plays in great detail in Tamil context, but I always felt there was a restlessness in her which made her come back to these texts with a lot of intensity.<sup>69</sup> But unfortunately for the past two-three years, we haven't seen Jeeva at work, you know, because of domestic reasons and she is living in Trivandrum now quite cut off from the Tamil scene. But I would like to believe that she would come back to theatre. Yeah, that's it about Jeeva.

**Lakshmi: Mangai, as a part of raising awareness regarding women's issues, many street theatres were performed like *Mulgi Zaali Ho (A Girl is Born)*, *Om Swaha (A chant spoken during rituals with holy fire when offerings are made to the fire)* in different parts of India like Maharashtra, Delhi and so on. How would you view these plays and what is your own concept of a feminist theatre?**

Mangai: I think it's a really difficult question to – we can just think about it perhaps, you know, I mean it's very interesting because around the time when *Mulgi Zaali Ho* was there in Maharashtra, we had *Om Swaha* in Delhi and without knowing anything about those things, somewhere I mean we also started either performing Hashmi's *Aurat* in Tamil or even the first play – Chennai Kalai Kuzhu (Chennai Art Group) was formed in '84. And there were already other smaller groups of various women's organisations and all that. So some way in the beginning of the '80s, all of us have started something which we realised much later. I mean its only in the '90s that our exchanges have shown us that 'Okay, we all started together almost without knowing that we are doing almost similar things.' But I don't know. There are people who refrain from using the word, feminist theatre. I am conscious that women's theatre or gendered theatre and feminist theatre are all different terminologies. Actually, they also mean different things. The moment we use the word feminist theatre, to me it becomes a question of one's ideology – both about the form as well as the content. (...) I feel we can't justify our means by using the word that my content is very radical. I can talk about, for example... we had this Shakti Cultural - we called ourselves Shakti Cultural Group of AIDWA. So, we had to do this play.

There was that military rape in Tripura. I am talking about '85, '86 and when we did that play, one major concern that we had was that we are talking about rape. But we don't want to show the violence of rape in a physical sense because I don't think rape is just violence. I mean much later

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<sup>66</sup> "Lullaby of a plant."

<sup>67</sup> Massacre of Dalits.

<sup>68</sup> Dr. Krishnaswamy is a political leader who represents Dalit politics in Tamilnadu.

<sup>69</sup> Jeeva was very thematic in her work, producing work in response to social and political events .

we also tried to enact *Black Horse Square* – your story – which we tried to enact. So I think we also wanted to raise this question of how are we going to portray or represent rape on stage? So if I remember right, we never showed the rapist, you know, we only showed initially the terror you know – *Enna Sollarathu* (What does one say) where your whole body becomes alien to you and you just don't want to belong to this body as an offshoot of that and all that. So somewhere I think feminist theatre to me should not stop with just the content question. That's my, you know, — because I saw *Mulgi Zaali Ho* in '96 in *Kulavai*<sup>70</sup> though I have heard about it right from '83. I saw it and for me it was '83, '80s stuff, where you directly talk, ask women – come, organise, let us give a clarion call to that. But I think street theatre has come a long way; I mean, even if you call that street theatre or protest theatre or poster theatre, agitprop, use whatever name — even that has come a long way, (...) We also did that ...I mean when the Dadar Express<sup>71</sup> incident took place, you know, three young Kerala women were raped in broad daylight. Dadar Express starts from here in the morning. So before it reached Arakonam this incident took place. Immediately after that we had a picketing in front of Southern Railway office and we...we can't call it a play, but we did have a presentation of sorts as part of the picketing and that has its own say. But I think feminist theatre should take into account the perspective, the whole aesthetics behind what is the life point of view, or you know, what does it say about life itself? (...)

**Lakshmi: Mangai where would you place a play like *The Vagina Monologues*<sup>72</sup> by Eve Ensler. How do you look at it?**

Mangai: Actually in terms of context, it's also like those *Om Swaha*, *Mulgi Zaali Ho*, kind of plays in the sense that it was a project. It based itself on fieldwork and study and it was done completely on an activist forum, you know, letting women talk about their body, their sexual experience, and things which are considered as taboo generally. So in that sense I think it definitely has a masterful place you know, in the whole thing. Also there are sections in that which I, if I remember right - there is one on Bosnian women's rape where they talk about my vagina was a countryside or something. I still remember there were two of my own students as part of basic theatre skills - they just did it using cowbells, one which gives you that high pitched 'oh' – that countryside bit, and the other one very base. Now it is torn, its hanging, so the very voice quality along with those bell sounds...it was such a moving, intense experience, when the girls did it. About 10 to 11, not even 12 minutes, you know it was within that. (...)

**Lakshmi: There have been many women directors in other languages and also in Tamil who have been trying to attempt a kind of a theatre which has the aesthetic quality and it also has what they want to convey like Anuradha Kapoor, Anamika Haksar and in Tamil I would say Prasanna Ramaswami<sup>73</sup>. How would you view their plays?**

Mangai: Anuradha to a large extent has been somebody to whom I have looked up to. I think she, in fact, raised a lot of questions which set me thinking, otherwise I might not have consciously

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<sup>70</sup> Name of a Theatre Festival.

<sup>71</sup> A devastating fire gutted a compartment of the Guwahati-bound Dadar Express, disrupting rail traffic for eight hours. No one was injured in this incident.

<sup>72</sup> *The Vagina Monologues* was written by Eve Ensler and is based on interviews with over 200 women about their memories and experiences of sexuality. It is now translated into 24 languages.

<sup>73</sup> Well known female playwrights.

thought of them. And Anamika's work, I am an absolute fan of Anamika's work. (...) And if you really look at Anuradha's range of work you know whether beginning from *Nayika Bhed* which talks about re-interpreting myths and all that to her *Sundari – An Actor Prepares* which is about Jayashankar Sundari. Also the different styles - each of her performances is a major research. And I absolutely enjoyed the way how she connected Brecht's *Antigone* to Gujarat riots<sup>74</sup>. (...) And also it's Keerti Jain again from Delhi who tried to enact *The Other Side of Silence* — Urvashi Butalia's<sup>75</sup> partition stories. There is that one story of this village full of Sikh women who commit suicide by jumping into the well. I am sure you will remember that story. You know on stage, it was those, you know, nursery play-school slide, those short ones-metal slide. That was there on stage. So initially there are all children playing on the slide, that's it. And then suddenly it shifts to becoming a well and towards the end when this woman tries to fall, you know, the pit is so full that she can't really fall down. (...)

**Lakshmi: You were talking about directors elsewhere. What about Tamilnadu itself?**

Mangai: Actually in Chennai, recently, as I was talking about Gujarat riots, during the Kargil war<sup>76</sup>, the war was on and we had this big state machinery projecting all military people as saviours of our country and all that, and patriotism whipped up. And it's around the time that Prasanna Ramaswami did her *Meendum-Meendum*<sup>77</sup>. *Meendum-Meendum* is actually a collage of texts drawn from different sources. We started with *Trojan Women* and then moved to Sri Lankan Tamil poetry, especially by women and Gandhari's *Oppari*<sup>78</sup> in Therukoothu where she mourns the death of all her children and a text called *Body Count* which talks about the *Vietnam war* and there is a sole survivor who talks about what happened to her village. (...)

**Lakshmi: Mangai, what do you think should be done to evolve a strong and powerful and meaningful feminist theatre? (...)**

Mangai: I can only think of what we shouldn't be doing. Because that's actually, most people I think including me, we are sensing that it is happening. Because if you remember way back in '90 when Madhusree and Flavia<sup>79</sup> organised Expressions.<sup>80</sup> I mean for me that was the first time that you really met women from different arts. And then of course everybody talks about the '83

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<sup>74</sup> Also called Godhra riots in 2002; a series of riots and mob violence between Hindus and Muslims triggered on February 22, 2002 by a fire in a train carrying Hindu women and children returning from Ayodhya, the site of the demolished Babri Masjid mosque. Hindu right-wing factions believed the fire to have been started by Muslims – a disputed claim. As a result, many Muslims were killed and the right-wing Hindu government refused to allow charges to be filed against the rioters.

<sup>75</sup> Founder of *Kali for Women*, India's first women's publishing house. She was also interviewed for the GF project. She has been active in the women's movement in India, in international citizen's exchange conferences, and in researching the modern history of India.

<sup>76</sup> Kargil is located in Kashmir. Kashmir has been disputed between India and Pakistan ever since independence in 1947. After some fighting at that time, there has been a cease-fire line - which Kargil is near – but also charges of infiltration, guerrilla activity, and terrorism. In 1999, India and Pakistan came very close to a war when Pakistani troops infiltrated Kargil.

<sup>77</sup> “again and again and again and again...”

<sup>78</sup> A mourning song sung by women.

<sup>79</sup> Flavia Agnes, also interviewed for the Global Feminisms project.

<sup>80</sup> A women's festival and theatre workshop.

conference in Delhi where different people came and Chandralekha<sup>81</sup> designed the Kali poster, Kali publication house came up and all that. But then '96, from '90 to '96, I don't think anything happened. '96 we organised *Kulavai* here and if I just take from that period to say, 2000 or 2001. In fact, I remember Usha Ganguly<sup>82</sup> saying within a span of two years, she has attended like 17 Women's Theatre Festivals, you know. And most of them government-sponsored from all regions. So somewhere just like everything else, I think feminism as a discourse is also a rich ground for people to appropriate. The first person to do that obviously would be the establishment and theatre unfortunately does not have many men who actually understand what these feminists are doing in theatre. (...)

**Lakshmi: Mangai, I would like to know how you conceived the image of this Kurathi, this gypsy woman in one of your plays. Was there any literary background to this Kurathi image<sup>83</sup>?**

Mangai: Yeah, I think Tamil is replete with Kurathi<sup>84</sup>, no? Right from *Sangam age* to *Kuravanji*. We have a whole genre of gypsy literature if I may call it so. You know its called *Kuravanji*. 18<sup>th</sup> century was it? Around 18<sup>th</sup> century one of those *sitrillakiyam*<sup>85</sup>, minor literary genres. And, well, I think she is a very powerful image. Someone who can roam around and earn, has medicinal knowledge. And at least *Sangam kurathi* is a woman who can prophecy. And she is always the kind of a person who will reveal to the world what is in the *talaivi's*<sup>86</sup> mind. So, somewhere I think gypsy has been a very, strong literary trope. (...)

**Lakshmi: Did this *kurathi*<sup>87</sup> image evolve out of a workshop or something that you attended?**

Mangai: No. I think *kurathi* image was already there. That was the starting point and professor Ramanujan Sir was approached on behalf of Voicing Silence [group] to have that as a focal point and do a workshop around it. (...)

**Lakshmi: Did the *Mouna Kuram* play come out of this workshop?**

Mangai: Yeah. Actually it was very interesting the way Ramanujan Sir structured the whole thing. He literally reversed the whole order in which it's usually presented, you know. Usually, in a *Kuravanji* play, you have the *talaivi* first; the protagonist... the woman is actually the woman who is in love and the gypsy woman just comes into prophecy and all that. But what he did here was to introduce the *kurathi* first. The gypsy woman is the one who comes in first and all her meetings with those other women actually comes as flashbacks that she is narrating to her partner, who actually comes in search of her and all that. So it's a very interesting way by which he actually made her the central figure. (...) So it was a very interesting mix of the classical and

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<sup>81</sup> A legendary Indian dancer known for reinterpreting classical traditions in Indian dance and for her activism in the women's movement in India.

<sup>82</sup> Feminist writer.

<sup>83</sup> *kurathi*: Nomadic tribal woman character.

<sup>84</sup> Gypsies.

<sup>85</sup> Genre for writing about gypsy women.

<sup>86</sup> *Talaivi* : The female protagonist.

<sup>87</sup> *kurathi*: Nomadic tribal woman character; gypsy women.

the folk which he gave, you know, and that's how *Mouna Kuram* was formed. In that sense, it is *mouna kuram*, you know, I usually translate it as silenced prophecies. So this *Kuravanji* is not about the prophecies that were spoken but only those that were silenced, you know, that's why I think *Mouna Kuram* is a very interesting way in which it evolved. (...)

**Lakshmi: Mangai, I want to know about your play *Avvai*<sup>88</sup>. In the popular image *Avvai* is a wise old woman, you know. And this whole thing was transformed in your play. So I am very much interested in knowing about this play. Can you tell us something about it?**

Mangai: Ya, I think being wise was fine, you know. I mean, if somebody calls a woman wise, that's ok. But then I think this whole connection between 'she was wise because she was old' or at least greyed, not necessarily old, that connection which really caused, I think, a little bit of unease perhaps. And this play actually tries to address that. And as far as Tamil context goes, it has a very definite context to work from within. Because we had T.K. Shanmugam's *Avvaiyar* play. And then Vasana made this film based on that play and called it *Avvaiyar* and you know, that *Parasakthi*<sup>89</sup> came around the same time. So *Parasakthi* became a Dravidian movement's<sup>90</sup> voice and *Avvaiyar* became the voice that Vasana<sup>91</sup> was representing. So with all this around, you know there was this need to really explore into that. But I think for the play, the whole thing started with Inkulab<sup>92</sup> giving this lecture on female voices in Tamil literature. And he talked about Sappho and in the same breath, referred to *Avvai*. And he said, I see this *Avvai* as a woman holding a toddy pot<sup>93</sup> in her hand and you know, walking as a tribal girl might do or something like that. It's a single line which really caught my attention. So, and that was also a time, I was working in Tirunelveli<sup>94</sup>. And...when the Babri Masjid incident happened, from the University, we formed this communal harmony unit and moved to a lot of places where Hindus and Muslims almost lived together. Because we needed to really safeguard the Muslim localities in that area. So, you know, for me, this gave a kind of a really alternate image. It's like saying, 'Oh god, why didn't I think of all this before'. You know, it was like that. So I thought there was, this would be an alternate image of a woman. So that's how I think *Avvai* was conceived, we can say. (...)

**Lakshmi: What was the emerging voice of *Avvai* in this play and the image of *Avvai*? Image of course, you have changed her completely and made her into a young woman. But what was the emerging voice in the play of *Avvai*?**

Mangai: I think first is that she is sensuous, you know, and I still remember how people got very flustered when she comes in with a...she actually sits on the shoulder of two men and they carry her in. So you know *Padini Vandal*, *Padini Vandal*<sup>95</sup>. So she announces the whole play. *Azagiya*

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<sup>88</sup> Name of a person; eminent female poet in Tamil who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>89</sup> *Parasakthi*: A popular film which represented the views of the Dravidian Movement which became a kind of cult film.

<sup>90</sup> The Dravidian Movement to put it simply, represented the views and aspirations of the non-brahmins as against the brahmins.

<sup>91</sup> S.S.Vasana - S.S.Vasana, a film producer who was a brahmin, an upper caste person.

<sup>92</sup> Male Tamil playwright.

<sup>93</sup> Toddy is the fresh or fermented sap of various chiefly East Indian palms.

<sup>94</sup> Town in S. Tamil Nadu.

<sup>95</sup> "Here come the songstress; here comes the songstress. With music and dance she comes."

*Avvai Padini Vandal*<sup>96</sup>. I think that summarises the whole thing. So you have toddy in one hand and you have love in the other hand, you know. So these are the two main things with which she comes. So that itself actually kind of projects a voice which has never been accepted. I think it was always there. And, what she also brings about is her relationship with other female voices. (...) But then I think on the whole, the voice of a woman who can be sensuous and who can be very earthy, can love toddy and talk about meat almost as if she is talking about poetry. So somebody like that actually became a very frightening woman. I mean, it's like it was staged in '98 and then the text is now prescribed for a language course in Manonmaniam Sundaram University. And BJP Tamil Nadu has passed a resolution saying that this is an insult to this old, wise Tamil poet because she is having toddy and she is also talking about love. But here is a woman who said, 'Won't I shout out my love?' *Aah ena koovuven kol*. And she does talk very clearly about her *Palai*<sup>97</sup> poetry, where she talks about the heat of love, I don't know how you would interpret it. But then, it is that. (...) So the play is actually talking about an already recorded voice of *Avvai* through her poetry to look at her face, you know, to discover her face. In fact, *athuthan*, that's what Inkulab says, he says *Moodiya pazamai tusai vilakki* (to remove the dust of tradition). So it's all this dust that's covering her face which you have just cleared so that her face can emerge. (...)

### Excerpt from the play “Avvai”

*Vandal, Padini Vandal* (“Here come the songstress; here comes the songstress. With music and dance she comes.”)

*Azagiya Avvai Padini Vandal* (“Beautiful Avvai songstress comes. Not offering words of wisdom. Some words with toddy, some words with love”)

**Lakshmi: Mangai, I know that I have broken the chronology of your work by asking you about Avvai after Mouna Kuram. Can you tell us what you did after Mouna Kuram before you did Avvai because then I'll be able to keep the chronology of the plays that you have done.**

Mangai: After *Mouna Kuramtjo*, as part of Voicing Silence work was *Chuvadagal*<sup>98</sup>. You know, almost simultaneously *Chuvadagal* and *Mouna Kuramtji*. But actually *Chuvadagal* work began before *Mouna Kuram*. It began as part of my AIDWA work. Because we started working on the story of *Manalur Maniamma*<sup>99</sup>. This communist leader of the '50s from Tanjavur region<sup>100</sup>. We, I think, initially we called it just *Manalur Maniamma* and staged it in one of the conferences in Nagapatnam. But then I picked it up again. The whole structure changed quite a bit and performed it as part of Voicing Silence. We called it *Chuvadagal*. And, I mean, around the same time, Rajam Krishnan's novel called *Paadhaiyil Padintha Adigal*<sup>101</sup>, again based on her life had

<sup>96</sup> “Beautiful Avvai songstress comes. Not offering words of wisdom. Some words with toddy, some words with love”

<sup>97</sup> *Palai: The Tamil region in ancient Tamil poetry was divided into 5 different regions – Kurinji, Mullai, Marudham, Neidhal, Palai. - Kurinji-Hill region, Mullai-Forests and pastoral region, Marudham-Wetland plains, Neidhal- Land along sea coast and Palai-Arid land.*

<sup>98</sup> “Impressions.”

<sup>99</sup> Name of a town and a woman.

<sup>100</sup> 200 miles south of Madras.

<sup>101</sup> Footprints on the path.

already come. (...) So Manalur Maniamma is actually born a Brahmin, married at the age of nine, widowed within two years. But her husband actually gave her English education. A lady came home. So this whole play talks about how she encounters life at different points. She was in the Congress Movement and then joined the Communist Party and all that. It's actually reconstructed. So it's a team of these nomadic singers who sing the life of Manalur Maniamma in *Chuvadagal*. (...) But it's more a cadre play. You know, it's meant for people who are interested in particular histories of movements, of people who are working, already registered as people who are working, in the struggle. So that way this is a documentation. In fact, I called it a docu-drama, which is a genre, as a genre also I really liked it. (...) *Chuvadagal* is my fourth play on the theme of female infanticide or foeticide? So we started with *Karpathin kural*<sup>102</sup> where the actual talk comes from the child, a new-born baby...which says, just let me live, I will make my own living. Please don't kill me now. And then we move to... Actually it began with, as a debate you know, when the India Today article<sup>103</sup> came in '87 entitled *Born to Die* and which exposed this whole issue of female infanticide or foeticide, we had to do something. So the initial format was a debate form. (...) *Pachcha Mannu* as a play is structured in a very, not loose, in a very flexible way. So, we had a beginning and the middle but we didn't have an end. At least we didn't have a definite end. So depending on how the audience responded, we kept changing it. So it's a take off on Augusto Bowal's Theatre of the Oppressed, where he called it Forum Theatre where you use theatre only as a pretext for a discussion. But what we had was, we had rehearsed about five different endings. And depending on how the response was, we just took it. So the actual performance was about 30 to 35 minutes, I guess. But then the show would go on for even more than an hour and a half, you know, so that's how *Pachcha Mannu* was structured. (...)

**Lakshmi: Tell us about *Vellavi* (Laundering clothes by steaming them) and your most recent and your most favourite play, *Pani-t-thee* (Frozen Fire)?**

Mangai: *Vellavi* is actually based on an oral history of a *dhobi*<sup>104</sup> woman. And this actually evolved as a student project, which Parthibaraja<sup>105</sup> took up in his own native village called Peruvakottai. So he knows this woman and who has been part of his family. She has been his family *dhobi*. And she is around 80 and her real name is Marudayi. So that, I mean they were almost all his classmates had collected all these oral histories. And they are also published now in Tamil. (...) When we look at *Pani-t-thee*, on the other hand, it's completely set in a mythical space<sup>106</sup>. And it's also a namesake. It's based on your name, the pen name that you chose. In fact I remember asking you around that time when I was working, 'Why did you choose that pseudonym?' And then you were talking about the androgyny that it represents. Ambai, Ambai's story, the story of Ambai in *Mahabharata*. (...) But then, Ambai is this tiny little character in the story. But actually like Bheeshma<sup>107</sup>, who has seen generations, I think Ambai also sees generations. So it's a take-off on that. And the additional fillip for me in this play was that I knew that Usharani with whom I have been working for the past four-five years will be doing that as a solo piece. And it's the first time that she will be doing a solo piece but you know, I

<sup>102</sup> "Voice from the womb"; a play about female infanticide.

<sup>103</sup> In June, 1986, *India Today* published an explosive cover story, "Born to Die," which estimated that 6,000 female babies had been poisoned to death during the preceding 10 years in a district in Tamil Nadu.

<sup>104</sup> Washer woman; indicates caste.

<sup>105</sup> Male student.

<sup>106</sup> Lakshmi chose "Ambai" as her pen name.

<sup>107</sup> Bheeshma: A character in the epic, *Mahabharata*.

mean, that is a play where I think in terms of form. You know, one is always scared, though you like those traditional forms, to negotiate with them. You don't know how much you can enter into it, how much of the tradition that you don't want to tamper, and all that. But then, in this I thought you can freak out, you know, I mean this is a solo piece which is very contemporary in terms of concern, but set within a mythological framework, and again set within traditional format. But then we had this fabulous freedom to work with because its just a solo piece. And also as a theatre piece, I don't think *Pani-t-thee* can be seen only as a play text. You know, somewhere like they say total theatre for music, dance and everything in a way this is a total text as far as I am concerned because the costumes have a role to play in this, you know the whole make-up and costume because she comes in, in this full male attire of the *Koothu*. And as she kind of, what do you say, unlayering? You know as she kind of removes one after another, she transforms herself. And by the time she changes her makeup, she becomes Ambai. You know, so costume is part of that, and there is this, also this very interesting digression from you know, what it is to be a male and what it is to be a female. (...)

**Lakshmi: Mangai, you have travelled to many parts of India as a part of your theatre experience. Can you tell us something about one such theatre experience you have had outside Tamilnadu?**

Mangai: Outside Tamilnadu, we have gone for a few performances, you know either in Tiruchur<sup>108</sup>, as part of Women's Theatre Festival or in Delhi as part of NSD. And much earlier, when I was working with Chennai Kalai Kuzhu<sup>109</sup> as part of Sehmat you know Street Theatre festivals and all of that. Of late, I think it started in '98 – from '98 I have also kept in touch with Surya Cultural Group in Batikola, Sri Lanka. It's kind of not very formulated...because these experiences haven't really been consolidated yet in me. I always kind of have very strong emotional experience whenever I recall, because Sri Lanka is a crisis-torn place. And this is a group, it's a women's group which has a cultural group and tries to kind of work on, you know, either talking about issues that are prevalent or talking about the stories that they would like to share. (...) So in '98, we had this very brief week-long workshop. Most of them were already performing other street plays you know, they had already performed like three or four plays and they had the support of theatre people in and around Baticola. So in that sense they were not novices to this form. So we didn't start from elementary thing. We started from basically sharing experiences and then trying to evolve plays out of that. And I think we did three short presentations in the first workshops. (...) And we just put together four stories you know either a rape, by the military, and one of their own men, you know, to a school-going girl...and or what you would call as molestation but not rape you know, of this elderly uncle who will come and caress, in the name of caressing, how there is the sexual abuse of a female body. And we also had to deal with this real case. And they were fighting this case about this four year old young girl called Krishanti who was harassed by her father and her mother was away you know, which is a standard phenomenon. They were in a... she was working as a nurse abroad. And so this child doesn't even know what it was that this man was hitting her from, with, you know. She described it as a stick. And I heard, and I heard the child talk about all these things in - I am sorry. (Breaks into tears.) And it was this recorded voice of that child. *Avar saarathilirindhu oru porulai etuthu kuthuvaru*. ("From inside his clothes he will take out a thing and prick me with

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<sup>108</sup> Tiruchur is a town in Kerala (state on the western side of the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent).

<sup>109</sup> Arts group from Chennai.

it.”) And her anus was red and they were giving her treatment and also fighting a case. And in the play actually it was this Surya Cultural worker who was handling this case who had to say it. I don’t know what I am moved by, you know. I don’t know whether it is the voice of the child or this girl Jayanthi who was dealing with the issue, who narrated it on stage...

We had this play called *Mattanagar Kannakigal*<sup>110</sup> about their lost man. You know, there was this whole village near Baticola. Baticola is such a beautiful place, good lagoon and you know it’s described as *meenpadum mattanagar* (Where fish sing). And there is that one village there, where after the IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Force)<sup>111</sup> operation, almost all men below the age of 18, in that particular village all men below the age of 18 had been killed. (...) So we set it in the *oppari* form like, these were three stories — one is this widow, the other one is where this girl actually becomes mad waiting for him and she dresses up everyday you know, goes and stands, and the whole village mocks at her and makes fun of her for all that and all that and the mother tells the story of this mad girl. And then we had this one other story, which is, which is about, you know, this woman with three children who, whose husband never came back. And, we kind of structured it in an *oppari* form, you know *oppari* is again wailing. In Tamilnadu it didn’t sound, I mean, it was significant and I thought it was a very powerful medium to express that. But in Sri Lanka, even for a performance, I think *oppari* is difficult to handle. So, even when we set it, most of them couldn’t come out of that and they couldn’t sing and one of them, the woman who had three children, you know, it was her *Chitthi*’s story, her mom’s younger sister. So she said, ‘I won’t perform it in my place’. You know, she won’t, she can’t tolerate it. And, they had lot of reservations. But for me, I always feel that a certain kind of physical expression to your agonies gives you a framework to work with and maybe you will come out of it. So like a usual, typical director perhaps, I just told them, ‘No, you keep doing it, it will be okay.’ But then I reached Madras and then within two days, Vasuki<sup>112</sup> who is the co-ordinator of Surya Cultural Group, she called me and she said, that woman who said that she won’t perform in her village, her mom had died. And there were like two other women in the group, who got some messages of death. And all of them thought it was because we were using this *oppari* form. You know, for the first time I began to wonder. Does form have its own breath? You know and they found it very difficult. It was only much later, in ‘99; I was attending a conference in *Trinkonmali*<sup>113</sup>, when they revived that play for me, you know, and they performed it again. And now of course, they have come to terms with it and they are performing. And this girl who acted mad actually had a brief stint of madness and was treated – you know it was like, it sounds very superstitious, but it happened. And I, I am still resolving that. Of course, I went back again in 2002 and we did this play called *Oru Pidi Anbu*<sup>114</sup>. And it was in that workshop that we actually had this – what do you call it – this is like a collage. I mean Vasuki drew that and then they just stuck whatever colour, a piece of cloth that they liked, onto this picture, and that’s why it’s very precious you know, where you patch up your lives and give shape to it. Just like how people talk about quilts. I think this is something very, very, precious as far as I am concerned. And in that play, we

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<sup>110</sup> “Town girl.”

<sup>111</sup> Response to news story that India military had killed all of the males in Sri Lanka as part of a peacekeeping process sanctioned by the India government.

<sup>112</sup> someone in the troupe.

<sup>113</sup> Sri Lanka.

<sup>114</sup> “One handful of love.”

ended with one of Vilvaratnam's poem, you know, which says, "Why don't you give me one handful of love?" *Oru Pidi Anbu* that's what we called it. *Oru Pidi Anbu-* (Sings) (...)

**Lakshmi: Mangai how did you choose an epic character like *Manimekalai* for one of your plays?**

Mangai: Actually that was a continuation of *Avvai* you know, *Avvai* was actually exploring into the Sangam poetry. So naturally Tamil literature became a major source, a major reservoir of various themes. And also, I think, we, you know how we can think of alternate images. Not from the *Ramayana*<sup>115</sup>, *Mahabharata*<sup>116</sup> epics but from alternate traditions. And Buddhism and Jainism have been the two major alternate traditions of India, you know, though we don't have it, though it is not prevalent today. We have remnants of it. We have historical records of that. And I think, in Tamil, *Chilapathikarkam*<sup>117</sup> and *Manimekalai*<sup>118</sup>, the twin epics, both of them have female protagonists. I mean good enough reason for you to really look into that. So mainly I think it was Buddhism and especially the character *Manimekalai*. At one go she was actually giving alternative to caste as well as the problem of gender as it is constructed in a patriarchal society. So *Manimekalai* seemed one of the major images from Tamil literature and Inkulab<sup>119</sup> was also keen on that. I think he was willing to work on the play. Because we knew we were going to work with *Isai Natakam*<sup>120</sup> artists, the traditional format – of course, he didn't set it to that form. He wrote a script first and then we had to kind of tune it. But we knew that this will be all female performance coming from this particular genre. So, that was how we struck on *Manimekalai*.

**Lakshmi: In *Avvai*, you did a transformation of the entire image. Did you do the same in *Manimekalai* or *Manimekalai* is a radical enough image in the original epic itself?**

Mangai: I think so. Actually, except a few emphasis, it remains exactly to the point. You know, in the sense, right from... because *Manimekalai* as an epic has all the story within a story and all stories branching out and all that. (...)

**Excerpt from the play "Manimekalai"**

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<sup>115</sup> Story of Ram.

<sup>116</sup> Story of a woman who is married to five brothers.

<sup>117</sup> Kovalan is a hero of the epic and the father of *Manimekalai*, and is married to Kannagi. Kannagi is the lead female character in the Tamil epic *Sillapathikaram* written by Illango Adikal. Kannagi epitomizes the power of chaste woman. She avenged the wrongful death of her husband Kovalan who was executed by the Pandiya King without a trial because the King thought Kovalan stole the queen's anklet. Kannagi, a subdued housewife till then, went to the court and proved that her husband was innocent. She then commanded the fire goddess to burn down the whole city leaving women, children and old people. She symbolizes the power of chaste woman. She is worshipped as a goddess.

<sup>118</sup> Kovalan was in love with a courtesan Madavi and had a daughter *Manimekalai*. She is the protagonist for *Silapathikaram*'s sister epic, "Manimekalai." *Manimekalai* becomes a Buddhist nun and devotes her entire life to feeding the poor and destitute using a magical bowl called *Amudasurabi* (one that never depletes of food). In the video clip they enact the scene where *Manimekalai* picks up *Amudasurabi* from the pond. Both Kannagi and *Manimekalai* are strong women, celebrated and revered for their strength, courage and sacrifices.

<sup>119</sup> Professor and playwright, poet, leftist Muslim.

<sup>120</sup> Musical theater.

*Actor 1: So, do you also support her? Everyone must go her way. Manimekalai must choose her path.*

*Actor 2: Chitravati, Manimekalai has attained wisdom. She'll not be caught in any relationship.*

*Actor 1: Who can stop this flood of light?*

*Manimekalai :I take leave of all of you. Like Kaveri river taking leave of the mountains of Kodagu. Soaking the path it travels before reaching the sea. From all the shores that have been denied water arises a cry...*

*All: A river walks to those shores to spread its soothing touch*

**Lakshmi: Mangai, how did you decide to do an epic, which is a classical format, you know, in a popular form?**

Mangai: I don't know about other languages but at least in Tamil, I don't think these have been really compartmentalised. Like you have *Kovalan Charitram* you know, written by Shankardas Swamigal right, but he actually talks about it as *karna paramprai kathai* (age old story). So it must have been something like a tale, you know, which he consolidated into a play. And he knew *Chillapathikaram* existed at that time, you know. So somewhere I think there has been a relationship between the two. And then, I mean, if you extend popular to include films and on stage and all that, we have always fallen back on these resources to — for popular images, you know. Right from today's movies to anything for that matter. So, it didn't sound jarring at all to me. And I think epic proportion and the way the popular company dramas, as you call them, with music and all, the way they are performed are very similar. You know, it's kind of larger than life, anyway, and lot more stylised. So it really lend itself to that. (...)

**EXCERPT FROM THE PLAY PANI-T-THEE AND VELLAVI AND EXCERPT FROM "WE WERE MAKING HISTORY" BY K.LALITHA AND SUSIE THARU**

**Excerpt from the play "Pani-t-thee"**

Mangai: (directing the actor) Usha, we are doing that song portion. Take the portion from little before that. Remember, you are born a girl, but they announce it as a boy for your sex was going to change later. You are going to say how they teased you. It is about them and not your feelings.

*Actor: So many heads – heads of kings.*

*And ripped off armour.*

*So many hands chopped.*

*So much rotting flesh, so much steaming guts, so many bodies that smell.*

*Nerves that lie shattered and bones.*

*Broken thigh and rotting tender feet.*

*War! War! The great war! A war to end all wars, a war to end time.*

*They flee, those denizens of the dark the spirits of dusk, the haunting ghosts*

*Blood-sucking vampires and gods of the night. Monstrous animals that fill the heart with fear.*

*They flee, afraid and howling. They flee this great war.*

*This body...it's muscles, nerves taut as strings...these are not mine...they do not belong to me...*

*My mother received a boon: “You’ll give birth to a girl child and will turn into a boy.”  
She took it to heart and looked upon me, born a girl as a boy.  
Meanwhile, my father Draupada waited his time to kill Drona.  
And I who was not a boy, did not behave like one. There was Draupadi though she consoled me.  
But a fire burnt in her. That touched me too.  
Oh, oh! Well, well...shame, shame,shame! Shameful! And suprising...  
That you must refuse to be the lad you are. You must be, though – come on! Be the man that you  
are!  
Oh, oh! Well, well! Shame, shame, shame! Shameful! And surprising...*

### **Excerpt from the play “Vellavi”**

*During the Pongal festival on the 9<sup>th</sup> day we will go make the Pongal offering.  
We will take all the children an the donkeys.  
We will tie donkeys to a stone and then we will decorate the wash stone with turmeric and  
kumkum and worship.  
We will worship the stone.  
For us there is only one stone, the stone we wash the clothes on.  
We don’t allow our children to climb on the stone to ease themselves.  
That is not our god. We’ll never allow it to be used otherwise.  
From Peruvakottai to Karaikudi some 20 donkeys – I walked them all by myself.  
A child on my waist and one in my womb. All by myself I walked them.  
All the women here – all the donkeys they have! Such thin ones! My donkeys were healthy.  
Once loaded and given a pat; they will go on their own to riverside.  
They were sold off.  
Two went to Madurai and two to Salem. I sold them off.*

### **Excerpt enacted from the book “We Were Making History” by K. Lalitha and Susie Tharu**

My name is Kamamma. A doctor was taking classes in Suryapet. My son was just 10 months old. All of us were listening and he started crying. Every one was sitting there and he cried and I felt so embarrassed but the doctor said, “Don’t worry, the future is his.” But I felt bad. There was a comrade from my village. I gave him the child and told him, “Take him to my sister-in-law.” She had just delivered a baby then and she suckled him and reared him up. My milk dried after some days. And so it went on. I felt I was just roaming around with them. I became pregnant again and it was time for the baby to be born, I delivered under the bushes at night. And so it went on for six months and then the leaders called me and they said, “Kamamma, either you must give the child away or you must leave us.” Kamamma, either you must give the child away or you must leave us. Did you hear that? I was in no state to do that. I was scared in my belly. I couldn’t have left them even if I had died. So I gave my baby. Its 36 years now. I don’t know what happened to my son. How can one swallow a mother’s grief?

My name is Vajramma. In those days, when the Razakars<sup>121</sup> asked us to dance Bhaktamma, we danced, when they asked us to strip, we stripped. Where was the sense of shame? Where was

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<sup>121</sup> Razakars: In 1947, before independence, there was Nizam rule in Hyderabad. The nawabs and the muslims around the Nizam thought that they should have an independent Hyderabad which should not co-operate with India. So the Razakar movement was started against a free India.

honour? We left the baby in the cradle and ran for our lives. That's all there was to it. We are all telling you the same story. What does it matter if I don't speak? What does it matter who is it that speaks? It's all the same story. Rajakka, you tell them. It was near her well. She will tell you. It's all the same story. They burnt, they killed, they raped. Do you think we can tell our story? I don't know how!

When the struggle was over, what are we to do with the women was the question. Hmmm. They said the unmarried women should go back and marry. The married women should go back to their families. The men should study law. They thought we can't be party organisers or area commanders. So they asked us to set ourselves right. We had never thought of clinging on to families, husband our children. Huh. Go back and marry? Marry whom? Which guy will have the guts to marry these women? There are so many Ailamma. They were so many women. Their lives have gone without a trace. We wanted to write our history? Who can do it. Only we can do it? We, who were part of that. But, we never had the resources. Not Ailamma, not Satyavathi, not me. It's because we couldn't write, it has come to you. We were making history.

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