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ARTICLES

Mirror, Mirror: Srivaishnava Women's Reflections of Self through a Ninth-Century Hindu Saint

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Andal, the medieval Hindu poet-saint, composed two poems known for their vast differences in voice. Where *Tiruppavai* outlines a vow concerned with women's auspiciousness, *Nacciyar Tirumoli* offers an intimate image of Andal suffused with eroticism. Through interviews, dialogues, and participant observation in South India, I traced how elite Hindus engage and imagine Andal by analyzing her significance in ritual, familial, and expressive contexts. I argue that the expressive dichotomies in Andal's poetry encourage distinct interpretations of her identity which are deployed to sustain or negotiate traditional womanhood. Additionally, I suggest that through idealized understandings of Andal elite devotees construct two models of womanhood structured by opposing emphases on transgression and devotion, unrestrained sexuality and wifehood, and how gender shapes who Andal was and what she wrote.

On the penultimate night of the ten-day annual festival celebrating the life of Andal, a ninth-century Hindu poet-saint, my research assistant and I were in her hometown of Srivilliputtur, deep in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu.[1] The Andal temple was festive and bustling, and after filing through the crowds we began our clockwise circuit through the main chamber, following a young priest who was guiding us. Unlike most Hindu temples, in Srivilliputtur, devotees are encouraged to stop at an additional place before exiting the temple's main chamber: a well. The well invites visitors to partake in Andal's story — she is said to have used it as a mirror while imagining herself as Lord Vishnu's bride in an intense act of devotion. This story is further embodied by a large mirror facing the innermost shrine, so that Andal can see her own reflection. These two tangible references to the mirror story highlight self-reflection as one of Andal's significant attributes, and helped me to fully appreciate the intimacy felt with the poet-saint that my conversation partners articulated. Grounded in seven

1 I want to extend special thanks to Dr. Amy L. Allocco for mentoring this three-year research project and sharing with me her longstanding contact network in South India. This project would not have been possible without her support, encouragement, and willingness to create opportunities. Fieldwork in South India during Summer 2023 was generously supported by the Multifaith Scholars and Summer Undergraduate Research Experience (SURE) programs, and by the Rawls and Center for Research on Global Engagement (CRGE) endowed grants at Elon University.

weeks of participant observation in Hindu temples, fifteen semi-structured interviews, and dozens of informal conversations in South India, I argue that the expressive dichotomies represented by Andal's two compositions encourage distinct interpretations of her identity which are variously deployed to sustain or contest the boundaries of traditional womanhood. Additionally, I suggest that through idealized understandings of Andal, elite-caste Srivaishnava Hindus construct two broad-based models of womanhood structured by opposing emphases on transgression and devotion, unrestrained sexuality and wifehood, and the degree to which gender shapes who Andal was and what she wrote. I pay special attention to the form of South Indian classical dance called bharatanatyam, one expressive context in which Andal features prominently.

Among the twelve South Indian poet-saints called *Alvar*s, who composed Tamil-language devotional poetry to Vishnu between the eighthand eleventh centuries, Andal is both the only woman and the most prominent in contemporary Hindu ritual practice. The poetry of the Alvars is collectivized as the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*, 4,000 verses central to the Srivaishnava — or South Indian Vishnu-oriented — devotional tradition. Srivaishnavas comprise the smallest subgroup of Tamil Brahmins, an elite caste who, as C. J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan have outlined, transformed "from a traditional, mainly rural, caste elite into a modern, urban, middle-class community" over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[2] Included in the first thousand verses of the *Divya Prabandham* are Andal's two works: the 30-verse *Tiruppavai*, detailing a vow undertaken by a group of girls seeking to be united with Vishnu; and the 143-verse *Nacciyar Tirumoli*, offering an intimate expression of Andal's desire for the deity — the ache of longing for and ecstasy of union with Vishnu.[3] The Tiruppavai is pervasive in ritual contexts, while the Nacciyar Tirumoli is engaged far less and sometimes even overlooked altogether by devotees.

In typical accounts of Andal's life, she manifested miraculously as an infant in a temple garden in Srivilliputtur. She was taken in as the daughter and student of Periyalvar, the temple's garland weaver and himself an Alvar poet-saint. Andal, known in her youth as Kotai, was fascinated by stories of Vishnu and, imagining him as her lover, often secretly wore the garland meant for the deity — a ritually transgressive act which would traditionally render the object polluted. Once caught by Periyalvar, his abject horror at her transgression was only allayed by a dream-visit from Vishnu, who insisted that he preferred Kotai's "polluted" garlands. With redoubled zeal, she composed

2 C. J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan, *Tamil Brahmans: The Making of a Middle-Class Caste* (The University of Chicago Press, 2014): 7.

3 Vidya Dehejia, *Āṇṭāḷ and Her Path of Love: Poems of a Woman Saint from South India* (Albany: The State University of New York, 1990): 4–5; Archana Venkatesan, *The Secret Garland: Āṇṭāḷ's Tiruppāvai and Nācciyār Tirumoḻi* (Oxford University Press, 2010): 12–13.

two works of poetry expressing her vow of service to — as well as her intimate desire for — her divine love. In the throes of this passionate devotion, Andal refused marriage to mortal men, and felt herself so equal to Vishnu that she eventually entered the sanctum of the Srirangam Temple and became united with her beloved.[4] It was then that she gained her epithet "Andal," meaning "she who rules."[5]

Andal pervades Srivaishnava ritual and popular contexts. The winter month of Margazhi (mid-December to mid-January) — also the performing arts season in Chennai — is structured by the Tiruppavai vow, each day mirroring a verse as women flock to temples to pray for a good marriage or to arts venues and concert halls to see Andal in performance. While the meanings she takes on in these contexts are well documented by scholars,[6] no study has accounted for the meanings everyday Srivaishnava devotees attribute to Andal and the ways they derive those meanings. Lauren Leve has written that meaningful ethnographic knowledge begins with an "openness to having our own knowledge transformed — including inherited academic expectations about who we are writing for and what we hope our work will achieve."[7] At the outset of my fieldwork in South India, I hoped to understand interactions between Srivaishnava women and Andal, and to identify what their articulations about that relationship might reveal about culturally dominant notions of womanhood. Although knowledge about Andal gleaned from academic literature indelibly shaped this project, it was the knowledge shared by my interlocutors that helped me achieve an understanding that each woman's expression of Andal reflects personally significant, varied understandings about womanhood and its relationships to devotion, marriage, and agency. My ethnographic approach allowed me to access more intimate and personally meaningful expressions of Andal that reflect my interlocutors' broader notions of worship and womanhood by investigating how they "actually live out their beliefs," especially when their lives "differ considerably from the behaviors sanctioned by institutional hierarchies."[8]

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4 The Srirangam Temple holds special significance as both the largest operating Hindu temple in India and the first of the 108 sacred abodes (*divya desam*s) of Vishnu — famous and lively temples which are extolled in the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*. The overwhelming majority of these *divya desam*s are within Tamil Nadu.

5 Chithra Madhavan, ed., *The Splendour of Srivilliputtur* (Universal Publishing, 2022), 25–29; Archana Venkatesan, "A Different Kind of Āṇṭāḷ Story: The *Divyasuricaritam* of Garuḍavāhana Paṇḍita." *Journal of Hindu Studies* 6, no. 3 (2013): 1–54, quotations on 1–2.

6 Madhavan, *Splendour of Srivilliputtur*; Venkatesan, *The Secret Garland*; "A Different Kind of Āṇṭāḷ Story"; Archana Venkatesan and Crispin Branfoot, *In Andal's Garden* (The Marg Foundation, 2015); Katherine Young, *Turbulent Transformations: Non-Brahmin Śrīvaiṣṇavas on Religion, Caste and Politics in Tamil Nadu*, (Orient BlackSwan, 2021).

7 Lauren Leve, "Interlocutors: Language, Power, and Relationality in Decolonial Ethnographic Practice." *Fieldwork in Religion* 17, no. 1 (2022): 47–61, quotation on 57.

8 Leve, "Interlocutors," 51.

In her study of non-Brahmin Srivaishnavas, Katherine Young found the tradition's patriarchal leadership structure to be a significant obstacle. She described being embedded in "male networks to locate informants" and only encountering women in the homes of male interlocutors, where she "could not break out of the interview process ... to develop an in-depth conversation with them, away from male ears."[9] Because many of my interlocutors are urban elites, these domestic structures were somewhat relaxed, and I did not experience this limitation to the same extent. I was also in the fortunate position of engaging many of my research mentor's contacts in Tamil Nadu, which afforded me credibility as a "researcher who wanted to understand more ... to tell a story," without my having to navigate the precarity of community and domestic social networks.[10] While my research and Young's differ in important ways, I share her goal of presenting as holistic an image as possible and foregrounding interlocutors' interpretations even — and perhaps especially — when they conflict with scholarly accounts.[11]

Tamil Womanhood

Academic literature outlining Indian womanhood has tended to focus on the sources and embodiments of "normative womanhood" — that is, the spaces, roles, and relationships traditionally expected of/prescribed for women and which, if disrupted, may endanger their social respectability. A framework offered by Vasudha Narayanan parses three conceptual categories of women in historical Hindu worlds: *Sumangali*s (auspicious wives of living husbands), "wanton women," and widows.[12] Narayanan acknowledges two levels of auspiciousness in Hindu imaginations: a divine auspiciousness related to a man's pursuit of his cosmic *dharma* (often rendered "duty"), and a "this-worldly" auspiciousness dedicated to the pursuit of prosperity and pleasure; the latter is often imagined as a woman's responsibility. Rightly, she identifies these preoccupations as "levels" rather than "types," as ritual and worldly auspiciousness often overlap with and sustain one another.

The Sumangali model emphasizes a woman's relationship to her husband, and Narayanan argues that the Sumangali traditionally represents "the ideal woman, with high auspiciousness," due to her exclusive capacity to facilitate this-worldly *dharma*.[13] The second category, "wanton women," refers to an array of extramarital possibilities for women, including so-called "*devadasi*s,"

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9 Young, *Turbulent Transformations*, 6.

10 Kristy Nabhan-Warren, "Participant Observation: Embodied Insights, Challenges, Best Practices, and Looking to the Future." *Fieldwork in Religion,* 17, no. 1 (2022): 26–36, quotation on 33.

11 Young, *Turbulent Transformations*, 5.

12 Vasudha Narayanan, "Hindu Perceptions of Auspiciousness and Sexuality." In *Women, Religion and Sexuality: Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women*, ed. Jeanne Becher (WCC Publications, 1990): 64–92, quotation on 64.

13 Narayanan, "Hindu Perceptions," 67.

a complicated and stigma-laden exonym for non-Brahmin courtesan-dancers that I discuss further below. Relationships involving married men and "wanton women" were once acceptable to the extent that they did not interfere with the man's marriage — that is, so long as her intimate relationship with him remained purely transactional. If necessary, these women could be absorbed into the extant family network as additional wives or concubines to avert the *dharmic* dilemma brought on by the developing emotional relationship. Conversely, widowhood is widely stigmatized and traditionally connotes a failure of womanhood: where a wife's duty is to facilitate a husband's pursuit of *dharma*, his responsibility to her is more transitory than hers to him; indeed, the death of a Sumangali "is perceived to be in the rightness of things, for she has fulfilled her duties."[14]

Ruby Lal and Lata Mani have both discussed how women — and more specifically, women's bodies — became the legal and discursive grounds upon which "tradition" was reconstituted through specific interpretations of Hindu scripture by colonial administrators and their Brahmin informants.[15] These scholars have independently pointed to dominant conceptions of women wherein they are seen paradoxically and perennially as both a girl-child under the control of her father (i.e., an unmarried daughter) and a married woman under the control of a living husband (i.e., a Sumangali), shaping discourse on womanhood according to particular imaginations of docile domesticity. In her 1990 article, Narayanan wrote that the Sumangali had been the most persistent model and continues to exert considerable pressure on women.[16] During my field research, I found this to be equally pertinent. Likewise, Fuller and Narasimhan suggest that Srivaishnavas are generally more conservative with regards to tradition than other Tamil Brahmins, and that Tamil Brahmin women in particular expect — with good reason — that their behavior will be scrutinized and discussed by other Brahmins, a sentiment which was echoed by my interlocutors.[17] For these reasons, I will consider the Sumangali model to represent "normative womanhood" in Tamil Nadu.

During my fieldwork, women frequently expressed a sense of patriarchal pressure to embody the Sumangali ideal in familial, educational, and professional settings — including from other women. For example, a

14 Vasudha Narayanan, "The Two Levels of Auspiciousness in Srivaishnava Ritual and Literature." *Journal of Developing Societies 1* (1985): 55–63, quotation on 58.

15 Ruby Lal, *Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India: The Girl-Child and the Art of Playfulness* (Cambridge University Press, 2013): 43; Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India." *Cultural Critique 7* (1987): 119–56, quotation on 121.

16 Narayanan, "Hindu Perceptions," 84.

17 Fuller and Narasimhan, *Tamil Brahmans*, 6; 162.

university administrator I will call Geeta[18] lamented the frequent policing of her students' behavior and comportment (e.g., for dating or attire) by other women faculty, and suggested that these forms of social scrutiny discourage students from pursuing important professional careers, especially in government.[19] In one story Geeta offered, fellow administrators dismissed her opposition to a traditional dress code for women students by reminding her that she is not originally from Tamil Nadu, though she had been living and working there for over thirty years at the time. In this instance, a conservative notion of womanhood was claimed as a particularly "Tamil" cultural value by a group of highly educated, professional Tamil women, who were intent on policing Geeta's comportment and appearance, as well as her preference to preserve a less conservative dress code. The notion of being a "good woman" is deeply connected to wifehood and motherhood and the aesthetic embodiment thereof. Younger women like the students discussed above are seen as "girl-children" whose appearance and behavior are vulnerable to scrutiny from elders and teachers, who often push them to embody "good" (i.e., Sumangali) womanhood. Geeta spoke frankly about this constant production and maintenance of "good" womanhood in Tamil Nadu:

> The idea of being "good," the good daughter, the good mother, that weighs a lot on people. And, you know, even on me ... For me, wearing the *pottu* [the traditional Hindu women's forehead marking], it's not something I want to do ... But if I didn't do it, then I wouldn't be the good wife; the good mother. My husband will ask me, "Why aren't you wearing that?" I wouldn't survive a day here if I didn't wear it. There would be people coming and offering it to me and saying, "Why don't you wear it?" So, I think: "Okay, I will be 'good.'"

"Goodness," as we see, is constructed according to a set of perceptions about women's comportment and appearance. The intense and multidirectional reinforcement of this expression of womanhood creates many everyday barriers for women seeking to contest it. Citing a Tamil idiom, Geeta explained to me that "We say you should behave in such a way because, 'what will four people think?' ... So, society, what will they say about us? What will they say about our family? Or how we raised you?" Here, we see the

18 Per my IRB protocol, all interlocutor names are pseudonyms.

19 At the time of my field research, women comprised between 4% and 12% of India's state government employees and occupied roughly 15% of India's lower house of Parliament (Naqbi Saba, "Women's reservation: A law on paper, but a reality far away." *Frontline*. October 3, 2023. https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/womens-reservation-a-law-on-paper-but-a-reality-far-away-saba-naqvi-nari-shakti-vandan-adhiniyam-women-in-parliament-state-assembly/article67345156.ece). Geeta expressed deep concern over women's underrepresentation and resulting lack of political ambition, suggesting that without a substantial share of government positions, issues affecting women could not be effectively addressed. Since then, the Indian Parliament has adopted an amendment to the Constitution enshrining a one-third share of seats for women in legislative assemblies nationwide.

notion that "good" womanhood begins in daughterhood and evolves into wifehood and motherhood, maintaining this familial association throughout. Normative womanhood is maintained through a complex and long-term network of aesthetic and social policing, and its disruption can threaten women's social respectability.

I do not intend to suggest that the boundaries of normative womanhood are immovable or all-encompassing. In fact, I hope to demonstrate that negotiation and intervention are integral to any comprehensive model of lived womanhood in Tamil Nadu. Although the traditional models outlined in this section do indeed "weigh on" many women, especially Srivaishnava Brahmins, I want to be careful not to essentialize normativity in my discussion of women's social possibilities. The Sumangali ideal has always been just that — an ideal standard to which Brahmin women are expected to hold themselves; it does not necessarily reflect how women have historically behaved and imagined themselves. While my field research accords with scholars' characterizations of the qualities comprising normative Tamil womanhood and the ways in which they are constructed and maintained by caste-class elites, my conversation partners also emphasized the creative ways in which women routinely negotiate these norms. The dynamic I refer to as "negotiation" relies on the scholarship of Narasimhan, who argues that "adjustments" to traditional purity practices allow Brahmin women to "achieve educational and economic goals while also negotiating the strictures of a small, close-knit community."[20] While she traces this dynamic specifically in one elite subcaste (Vattima Brahmins) and with respect to one tradition (menstrual separation), I believe that this framework can be productively generalized to Tamil women from other communities and engaging different traditions.

Although some urban elites expressed to me a contentedness with or nostalgia for normative expressions of womanhood, for many others the structures supporting this model are vanishing; multigenerational households are relatively less common today, exogamous marriages are increasing, and a globalized Tamil community is learning how to balance traditional models of family and community with globalized social and economic networks. Several of my interlocutors leveled more intentional challenges to normative models of womanhood, opting to proudly transgress the Sumangali expectation and construct their identities differently. Seemingly minute but meaningful adjustments such as the advent of the ready-made nine-yard sari — a less laborious version of traditional Brahmin women's attire — have allowed them to respond to a growing sense of cultural endangerment in India

20 Haripriya Narasimhan, "Adjusting Distances: Menstrual Pollution among Tamil Brahmins." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 45, no. 2 (2011), 243–68, quotations on 246.

while mitigating the inconvenience of conservative lifestyles.[21] Harika, a Srivaishnava academic whose family no longer practices very conservatively, identified adjustments like this as one way to address a "push" to preserve Tamil Brahmin cultural, educational, and religious traditions. Even in Srivaishnava ritual contexts where the Sumangali model inheres, negotiations like this facilitate women's embodiments of normativity.

While the models traced above do not produce a single neat or consolidated definition of Tamil womanhood, I hope I have demonstrated the variegated nature of womanhood in Tamil Nadu, outlined its relationship to and reliance upon normative and historical conceptions, and located negotiation, intervention, and adjustment at its center. Against the backdrop of this flexible and generalizable model of Tamil womanhood, the remainder of this article will focus specifically on Brahmin Srivaishnavas in Tamil Nadu. Those women make up the preponderance of people meaningfully engaging Andal in ritual and social contexts, and thus most of my interlocutors. I also want to acknowledge that for non-Brahmin women, alternative models are relatively more common and accepted. Further, it is important to note that the self-constructed womanhoods my conversation partners articulated inevitably include a degree of cross-cultural translation. As a white, American male, I am an outsider; I did not naturally inherit the intellectual systems for analyzing Indian womanhoods, and my often unacknowledged positionality certainly influenced the ways that lived experiences and constructed identities were communicated to me during my field research. My approach has been to partially mitigate these limitations through deep engagement with "insider" scholarship.

Andal as a Role Model for Srivaishnava Women

Andal looms large in Tamil and Srivaishnava imaginations. Beyond the quaint doors of home *puja* rooms and the red and white striped walls marking each temple's perimeter, she retains this prominence in public spaces as, for example, a central fixture on a Tamil government float, an award-winning piece of bridal jewelry, or as the subject of one item in a thematic bharatanatyam performance. [22] These aesthetic representations of Andal highlight her popularity and prominence as a Tamil cultural icon. As scholar and translator Archana Venkatesan has demonstrated, however, Andal's

21 Harika described to me that ready-made saris allow her to present normativity and auspiciousness for important religious functions without having to learn and remember the proper way to drape the cloth herself. She conversely explained that as part of a "reaction" to relatively relaxed religious norms, many Srivaishnavas have in turn become "more religious" and some women simply prefer to drape the sari traditionally: "Nobody forced them to do this, they just think that that kind of life is a good life."

22 Venkatesan and Branfoot, *In Andal's Garden*, 132; Pothys Swarna Mahal (@pothysswarnamahal) B*ridal Gold Jewellery of the Year 2022 Winner*, Instagram video, November 10, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CkyCqD7pq7i/?igshid=ZDFmNTE4Nzc%3D&fbclid=IwAR1Fe6Gp0g7cld0noQMjIEG8tdxJ4dl8FAq37EhEzBcoqeco6F7sX-RHssk

position in the roster of Alvar saints has been historically contested, and by the thirteenth century she was often excluded from the Alvar and instead deified as a manifestation of Bhu, the goddess of the earth and one of Vishnu's consorts.[23] Contention surrounding Andal's status as an "Alvar goddess" persists for Srivaishnavas today, with some including or excluding her from the Alvar rank and variously emphasizing her roles as a saint, goddess, or poet. For women in particular, constructions of Andal's identity have implications for models of embodied womanhood. These engaged constructions take two primary shapes: a devoted and conjugal Andal primarily associated with the Tiruppavai, and a transgressive and affective Andal associated with the Nacciyar Tirumoli. Anita Ratnam, a popular dancer, described these to me as an "outer" and "inner" Andal, respectively characterized as "perfectly sweet" and "tumultuous."[24]

Beyond her presence in ritual contexts, Andal plays an intimate role in many Srivaishnava families. Sanjoli, who collects and sings devotional songs on Andal, described that just as Periyalvar taught Andal the stories of Krishna from her birth, Andal herself "naturally comes" to Srivaishnava children. Likewise, Ratnam expressed that "when all girls are born, Andal is right there with the midwife or the family, and she is watching as they emerge," almost as if there is an Andal born parallel to each Srivaishnava woman. There was broad consensus on this point, with many of my conversation partners unable to recall their earliest memories of Andal. Due in part to her reliance upon laudatory verses to the Tiruppavai and hagiographic accounts of her life, this Andal transmitted through the family often arrives with particular characteristics.[25] Lakshmika, a Srivaishnava professor who was raised near Srirangam, described her as "a very humble woman ... a priest's daughter" who was elevated by "the steadfastness and love that she had for Narayana [Vishnu]," who accepted her ritual transgression.[26] The steadfastness Lakshmika refers to is the unwavering devotion Andal had to her divine husband in both his roles as deity and lover. The Andal which emerges here resembles normative models of womanhood which are built upon this heteroconjugal expectation. All Andal's attributes in this characterization derive from her hagiography and its later articulations in Srivaishnava popular literature such as the *Divyasuricaritam*, a text which Venkatesan implicates in the "effacement" of Andal's agency in her

23 Venkatesan, *The Secret Garland*, 6.

24 I do not use a pseudonym for Anita Ratnam because she is a public figure and the foremost public performer of Andal.

25 Laudatory verses (*taniyan*s) are short verses appended as a preface to works of Tamil devotional poetry extolling the virtues of the poet. Generally, these have been composed by later priests and theologians.

26 Vishnu is known by many different names, but those primarily used by my interlocutors were Perumal and Narayana. Throughout this article, I chose to refer to the deity as Vishnu because it is more accessible to non-expert audiences.

hagiographic story and her subsumption under male authorities such as Periyalvar (her "father") and Vishnu (her husband), further elucidating this construction's reliance on daughter- and wife-centric models of womanhood.[27] Lakshmika later recalled her grandmother's lifelong interactions with Andal, emphasizing that "everyone would want to be like Andal: to be dedicated, devoted to their husbands, and to have that sense of immense love bordering on divinity." Here devotion and marriage are again held up as the crux of Andal's significance for women. One widespread aspiration for Srivaishnava girls is to embody this particular image of Andal: the sweet, devoted, and pure songstress-turned-divine-bride — a daughter and wife that directly mirrors the Sumangali ideal described above.

Learning to recite verses of poetry from family members is the primary vehicle of religious education for many elite Hindu children, and Andal is no exception. Unlike the Tiruppavai, however, the Nacciyar Tirumoli is often omitted from children's religious education.[28] Several of my interlocutors recalled shocking first encounters with the latter text as teenagers and adults, having never been exposed to it through familial networks. Extant scholarship suggests that this lopsidedness of awareness and engagement extends also to many ritual contexts and may have been part of an intentional effort by historical Srivaishnava commentators to mute taboo themes of self-harm and female sexuality in the text.[29] This is not to suggest that the Nacciyar Tirumoli has been obscured in a sustained and malicious effort to constrict possibilities for Srivaishnava women: the text features in several popular and ritual contexts such as at Chennai's Sri Parthasarathy Temple, where it is recited in entirety on the day of *puram* — Andal's birth star — of each month.[30] Among average devotees, however, this garland of verses is not afforded the same deep consideration as its counterpart and is often considered secondary. Most notably, the sixth song of the Nacciyar Tirumoli—*Varanam Ayiram* — eclipses all others in the popular tradition.[31] Traditional Srivaishnava weddings are structured according to this song, which depicts in detail Andal's dream of her grand marriage to Vishnu. In many contexts, however, this song centering marriage and auspiciousness is the extent of devotees' engagements with the Nacciyar Tirumoli, illuminating

27 Venkatesan, "A Different Kind of Āṇṭāḷ Story," 22.

28 A few of my interlocutors suggested that, setting aside *Varanam Ayiram*, the content of the *Nacciyar Tirumoli* may be seen as too inappropriate to teach to children.

29 Venkatesan, *The Secret Garland*, 14; Venkatesan, "A Different Kind of Āṇṭāḷ Story," 14–15; it is worth noting that Venkatesan also identifies the far greater significance that the *Nacciyar Tirumoli* takes on in the Srivilliputtur temple than in other Srivaishnava ritual contexts (2010, 33; Venkatesan and Branfoot 2015, 31).

30 Sri Parthasarathy Temple is the largest Vishnu temple in Chennai and is counted among the *divya desam*s.

31 The naming convention for these poems is not necessarily standardized, and here I follow Archana Venkatesan's 2010 translation, *The Secret Garland: Āṇṭāḷ's Tiruppāvai and Nācciyār Tirumoḻi*.

the primacy given to normative, Sumangali womanhood even when embedded in a text that is generally characterized by subversive passion, pain, and eroticism.

Over the last several decades, Andal has undergone a critical re-presentation in Tamil Nadu. Several of my interlocutors characterized this as a process by which Andal was detached from her inviolable religious stature and considered for the first time as "emblematic of gender mobility" by women and scholars. Ratnam said of this recent resurgence in Andal's popularity:

> I think it came with a slow rise in women's studies, in goddess studies; the interest in sacred poetry, in women's voices, in the second or third wave of feminism. Women [were] looking back in time at role models that wanted to either subvert patriarchy, confront patriarchy, or say "no" to a normal narrative of husband, children — drudgery life, you know?

For some cosmopolitan Srivaishnavas, models of Andal that rely on her devotion, love, and wifehood are insufficient. Women like Kaveri, a Chennai-based contemporary dancer, construct and deploy models which resist this "tameness" and emphasize "agency ... as a woman, and her physical, emotional, and sexual desire" as central characteristics of Andal's womanhood. Where the previously outlined model derives mostly from the Tiruppavai and hagiography, the Nacciyar Tirumoli is central to this agentive reading of, and figures prominently in some women's engagements with, Andal. Mirroring the role of *Varanam Ayiram* in normative conceptions, many women favoring transgressive models of Andal instead lift up the thirteenth song of the Nacciyar Tirumoli, in which she passionately proclaims that she will tear and throw her breasts at Vishnu as retribution for his tormenting absence.[32] Similar episodes of passionate pain and eroticism recur throughout the text. These agentive models are not, however, limited to urbanite elite. In temples, I heard stories of Andal's life which include details that underscore the power she holds over her divine lover, such as a contest between Vishnu's many forms to determine which one she would marry. Pravasthi, a lifelong devotee of the Andal temple, emphasized Lord Vishnu's utter infatuation with Andal — a passion even greater than hers for him — as she proudly gestured to the central pavilion where the processional images are ceremonially married at the end of the festival each summer. Interpretations like these signal affective engagements that recognize Andal as an active and powerful figure, and have sway beyond Tamil Nadu's urban centers and younger generations.

32 Venkatesan, *The Secret Garland*, 185.

Both implicitly and explicitly, Andal is compared with and deployed by Srivaishnava Brahmin women to critique or justify embodied expressions of womanhood. In the most visible and ritualized sense, the month of Margazhi is characterized by a 30-day vow called the *pavai nonbu* which is structured around the Tiruppavai. Women undertaking this vow today do not typically follow its structure as described in the opening verses of the Tiruppavai, and some feel it has been conceptually diluted to a "husband-catching ritual," as Kaveri put it, to push Srivaishnava women towards Sumangali lifestyles. Regardless of its shape, however, the central tenets of this vow in contemporary practice are consideration of Andal's life and verses and the maintenance of ritual purity — in this capacity, many Srivaishnava women do undertake the vow. Tamil Vaishnavas widely regard the *pavai nonbu* as efficacious for improving one's prospects for a good marriage. Coupled with Srivaishnava brides' traditional appearance as Andal, this vow seems to encourage the replication of a conjugal and devoted Andal in women's own lives.

Additional creative and emotional engagements with Andal are also common among Srivaishnava Brahmin women. It is understood cross-generationally that Andal is an admirable figure whom women should emulate, with many of my conversation partners recalling stories of parents and grandparents who looked to Andal either for guidance in personal dilemmas or as "some impossible role model" for daughters of the family. In recent years, some women have published and performed reinterpretations of Andal's poetry, creatively exploring her character in ways that challenge "perfectly sweet" characterizations. For example, Meena Kandasamy's 2010 poem "Passion becomes piety" reads tragedy into the hagiographic life of Andal and conjectures a history of sexual violence and ostracization.[33] In 2011, Anita and Pritha Ratnam staged *Andal-Andal*, a choreographed dance exploration of Andal's two disparate voices.[34] My conversation partners have also explored their own agency and selfhood through poetry, choreography, journaling and otherwise producing personally meaningful interpretations of Andal grounded in their own lived experiences, demonstrating the contemporary desire to humanize her through self-reflection.

Many of my interlocutors cited dressing as Andal, or seeing others dressed as Andal, as a compelling early point of contact with the poet-saint. While the act of mirroring Andal's appearance surfaced in numerous ritual and social contexts during my field research, it is most evident in two key contexts: the Srivaishnava wedding ritual and bharatanatyam. In both contexts, women's

33 "Passion becomes piety" is excerpted from Kandasamy's book *Ms. Militancy* (Navayana, 2010), an experimental volume of poetry that intentionally disrupts dominant caste and patriarchal hierarchies through pointed and subversive interpretations of Hindu mythology.

34 Venkatesan and Branfoot, *In Andal's Garden*, 133.

embodiment of Andal generally conveys an image of Sumangali womanhood which is considered socially desirable. The wedding ritual, traditionally a reenactment of the Nacciyar Tirumoli's wedding sequence, includes the marks of ritual and social auspiciousness which usher Srivaishnava women towards their Sumangali potential. Several of my interlocutors explained these aesthetic engagements teleologically as early sites of enticement by Andal for young Srivaishnava girls and women. Much in the way children are taught to memorize and recite verses before considering their interpretation, young girls and women are encouraged to physically embody Andal before learning the details of her hagiography, ritual significance, and literary corpus. Recalling her own early interactions with Andal brides, Lakshmika explained:

> As a child, you don't know the depth of how Andal is the embodiment of the devotee whose love is celebrated ... Rather, you just see that you get to wear a nice sari, you get to wear nice jewelry, and then you wear the bun and you look like a goddess.[35] You just look so beautiful, and then you want to be a part of that reality ... And all I knew was that I wanted to become Andal.

Aesthetic engagement evidently plays an intimate role in constructing Andal as a role model for Srivaishnava Brahmin women, and brides' traditional dress is a key factor in inspiring women's self-reflection through Andal.

While the bridal Andal conveys normativity, her role in Srivaishnava weddings supersedes individual discomfort with Sumangali womanhood. Kaveri, who otherwise rejects patriarchal understandings of Andal and relishes in a reading that emphasizes the saint's agency, still chose to dress as Andal for her own exogamous wedding while substantially negotiating the traditional Srivaishnava ritual structure of the event. Guising as Andal does not, then, seem to function exclusively as a tool for cultivating normative womanhood, but rather as a broader expression of Andal's unique position as a "living deity" — one who is worshiped as though she lives among the people — and a surrogate for Srivaishnava women's expressions of self. Other more traditional readings of the bride's Andal appearance represent the bride as embodying "all the true devotion and love that she expresses." In these cases, women embody Andal to emulate her devotion to Vishnu, implicitly represented by the husband in the context of the wedding ritual. These countervailing interpretations of Andal's role in the wedding ritual demonstrate that her transgressive and normative elements can be reconciled according to Srivaishnava women's sense of personal identity and aspirations.

35 Andal's side-bun or *kondai* is the centerpiece of her iconography and is among her most recognizable features.

To understand the significance of women's embodiments of Andal in bharatanatyam, substantial context on the history and politics of the dance form is necessary.

Sanskritizing Dance Traditions

At the end of Margazhi in January 2018, the Tamil daily newspaper *Dinamani* published a speech that Vairamuthu, a poet and film writer, had recently delivered at Srivilliputtur's Andal temple. In his speech, he claimed that the historical Andal was "herself a *devadasi* who lived and died in the Srirangam Temple."[36] A week later, police were stationed outside of *Dinamani*'s office in Chennai to guard against the intense backlash he faced for this statement, which he quickly insisted was quoting an American scholar and not intended to offend religious sentiments.[37] The incident remains in Tamil public memory; several of my interlocutors denounced Vairamuthu's carelessness and recalled the shock it produced among the public.

To understand what motivated Vairamuthu's comment, as well as the potency of the incident for Srivaishnavas, we must attend to the role of so-called "*devadasis*" in bharatanatyam discourse historically and today. This stigma-laden exonym, literally meaning "servant/slave of the God," grew to prominence in the twentieth century to denote an array of expressive and ritual roles accorded to non-Brahmin women, generally as courtesans, priestesses, and secular dance performers.[38] These roles were typically characterized by an initiation ritual in which women became "tied" (or symbolically "married") to their local temple and deity.[39] For many centuries, these courtesan-dancers were central to Hindu religious life and South Indian social life. In the temple, they were responsible for carrying out preparatory tasks for everyday worship, such as performing dances to prepare the deity for other stages of worship including the feeding and adornment of the image.[40] As a means of generating income, troupes of dancers also performed

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36 Vinita Govindarajan, "Tamil poet Vairamuthu's speech on seventh-century mystic Andal sparks controversy," *Scroll*, January 11, 2018, https://scroll.in/article/864573/tamil-poet-vairamuthus-speech-on-seventh-century-mystic-andal-sparks-controversy.

37 The notion that Vairamuthu quoted an American scholar has become a truism in discussing this incident, but he did not in fact quote anything. His comment referenced a chapter from *Indian Movements: Some Aspects of Dissident Protest and Reform* (Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1978) by Subash Chandra Malik, in which the authors briefly discuss the implications of the few women of the *bhakti* movement (including Andal) who subverted traditional ritual structures. They go on to say that the *bhakti* movement's inclusion of women was the basis for the "*devadasi* system" and that those courtesan women were once of high status, but later "degenerated into common prostitutes" (quotation on 57).

38 Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (The University of Chicago Press, 2012): 6.

39 Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 163.

40 Joep Bor, "Mamia, Ammani, and Other Bayaderes: Europe's Portrayal of India's Temple Dancers." In *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*, ed. Davesh Soneji (Oxford University Press, 2010), 13–49: 15.

for wealthy and elite members of society, a practice which grew increasingly popular during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and eventually transformed the available repertoire by adopting foreign and regionally different styles.[41] They enjoyed high prestige and social agency, and although they were not permitted to conventionally marry, many took on lifelong romantic and/or sexual partners, often elite-caste married men.[42]

In some cases, courtesan-dancers also participated in sex work to generate income. This detail would later supplant nearly all other elements of their practice in public discourse, but for many centuries upper-class Indians and Europeans alike patronized these women for sex without any stigma attaching to either party.[43] Davesh Soneji's book, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*, complicates simplified narratives of this history by outlining the social and artistic histories of non-Brahmin performers and tracing women's experiences of stigmatization and criminalization, catalyzing new awareness of and perspectives on these largely bygone traditions and challenging many of the accepted truisms about hereditary performing communities.[44] Recent activist publications have also called for sensitivity to the suppression and replacement of non-Brahmin dancers and challenged the use of the stigmatized term *devadasi* in favor of terms like "courtesans" and "hereditary performers."[45]

By the end of the sixteenth century, European travelers and Christian missionaries had begun to challenge the morality of these practices. Colonial and traveler accounts in Europe spread an image of a lifestyle in which young girls were given away by their families at a young age, dedicated to the temple and subject to perpetual sexual abuse by Brahmin priests, for whom they would become lifelong mistresses and prostitutes.[46] This conflation of courtesan-dancers with European prostitutes became an important aspect of pejorative rhetoric against them for the next several centuries, and remains central to how they are viewed in Tamil Nadu today.

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41 Lakshmi Subramanian, *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy: A Social History of Music in South India*, (Oxford University Press, 2006).

42 Bor, "Mamia, Ammani, and Other Bayaderes," 22–23.

43 Teresa Hubel, "The High Cost of Dancing: When the Indian Women's Movement went after the Devadasis." In *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*, ed. Davesh Soneji (Oxford University Press, 2010), 160–81: 162.

44 The public outrage surrounding hereditary performers culminated in their criminalization with the Madras Devadasis [Prevention of Dedication] Act passed in 1947. As I was poignantly told by a Tamil historian, this law did not give women any alternatives, only bleakly told them that their livelihoods "no longer exist" and permanently relegated them to social and economic marginality.

45 Nrithya Pillai, "Re-Casteing the Narrative of Bharatanatyam." *Economic and Political Weekly* 57, no. 9 (2022).

46 Bor, "Mamia, Ammani, and Other Bayaderes," 25; 37.

Europeans were not alone in their growing disdain. As nationalist sentiment grew in the late colonial period, courtesan-dancers were excluded from the new national image spearheaded by middle-class and upper-caste Indians. There was a concerted effort throughout the 1920s and 1930s to criminalize temple dedication and nullify initiated status from courtesan-dancers — a shift which would fundamentally disrupt their means of generating income and displace them from the hereditary, temple-granted plots of land on which they traditionally lived. These efforts represented many of the suspicions that had been stirring for centuries around the dual erotic and ritual roles often fulfilled by courtesan-dancers. In a 1929 attempt to formally criminalize dedication and ritual dance practices, prominent activist S. Muthulakshmi Reddi described them as the "most pathetic ... regrettable ... revolting ... custom," by which "the young and innocent children [of courtesan communities], who [in other circumstances], would become virtuous and loyal wives, affectionate mothers and useful citizens" are instead condemned to a life of promiscuity and degradation.[47] As elsewhere, here marriage and motherhood are held as a woman's primary responsibilities, solidifying the Sumangali ideal as the acceptable model of womanhood for the Indian nationalist movement.

Bharatanatyam, a purported revival of these ancient dance traditions, emerged in the context of this suppression. The effort to "revive" courtesan dance was spearheaded by two Brahmins —Rukmini Devi Arundale and E. Krishna Iyer — who made a mission out of enhancing the "respectability" of courtesan dance and disassociating it from its hereditary performers and its expression of passionate desire. Arundale, a ballet dancer and prominent reformer, successfully promoted the notion that the dance of hereditary performers was an immoral corruption of an older, purer bharatanatyam authorized by a sacred text called the *Natya Shastra*.[48] Through these appeals to ritual purity and the growing public outrage concerning "dancing girls," bharatnatyam attracted a new Brahmin community and valorized religious devotion as its guiding principle.[49] As Kaveri bluntly stated, "From being the art of the courtesan community, it became the art of the rich Brahmin daughter," a reality reflected by the fact that instructors sometimes still

47 S. Muthulakshmi Reddi. "Why should the Devadasi Institution in the Hindu Temples be Abolished?" in *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*, ed. Davesh Soneji, (Oxford University Press, 2010), 115–127, quotation on 116–17.

48 Rukmini Devi Arundale, "The Spiritual Background of Indian Dance." In *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*, ed. Davesh Soneji (Oxford University Press, 2010), 192–96, quotation on 195–96; Fuller and Narasimhan, *Tamil Brahmans*, 205; the *Natya Shastra* is a Sanskrit text which provides both the fundamentals of dramas and a comprehensive aesthetic theory. A lecture I attended in Chennai outlined the slow compilation of the *Natya Shastra* from unsourced manuscripts and by many different scholars over several centuries of colonial contact, and it is very likely that the techniques and principles described therein existed long before being written down.

49 Hubel, "The High Cost of Dancing, 173; Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 177.

turn away non-Brahmin or lower class students.[50] This "revival" movement occurred against shifting social circumstances. Attempts throughout the 1930s and 1940s to criminalize courtesan-dancers precipitated many legal reforms that slowly restricted economic and social opportunities for their communities, forcing many more into sex work and homelessness. No alternative path existed nor was ever established for these women, whose lives and livelihoods would be finally outlawed in 1947 by the nascent Indian government.[51]

When Vairamuthu made the comparison of Andal to a "*devadasi*," he evoked this entire history through which contemporary ideas about Tamil womanhood were constructed. His comparison underscored her subversive eroticism and distanced her considerably from the prevalent Sumangali expectation, scandalizing Srivaishnavas and dancers alike. On the surface, the backlash revealed the enduring stigma against non-Brahmin performers in South India. But it also highlighted a binary interpretation of Andal as either devoted, married, and deific; or as passionately expressive, agentive, and subversive. To some of my interlocutors, the comparison relegated female sexual desire to a singular, defunct mode of social existence and denied the validity of Andal's hagiographic story.

Dancers uniformly articulated that Andal's aesthetic appeal is a source of her popularity in bharatanatyam. While this embodiment is primarily physical, dancers must interpret Andal's poetry and comportment through the lens of their own lived experience; I was fortunate to sit in on several dance classes where students at various stages in their training demonstrated their different interpretations of particular verses from Andal's poetry. Many dancers, however, are often encouraged by their instructors and religious scholars to pursue accepted Sumangali expressions when portraying women. Kaveri recalled frustrating moments of her dance training in which her own interpretations and self-expression were discouraged by superiors who instead urged her to perform the Sumangali role, both on and off stage. For Kaveri, these experiences of suppression or dismissal by instructors blended with the performed contents of Andal's own life and poetry, ossifying the reflexive dynamic between the dancer and the poet-saint. Recently, she has returned to the same Andal verses she once performed, attributing new significance and "reclaiming" the agency she was denied as a younger dancer. Andal's experiences of both pain and power made her poetry useful for Kaveri's

50 While there is growing awareness of and sympathy for the lasting harm done to hereditary performers among Brahmin dancers today, there is also a deep sense of impotence and uncertainty among them about how to address these historical injustices and their contemporary legacies. Many elite-caste dancers described a broader lack of agency they felt in the bharatanatyam community due to pressures and scrutiny from gurus, venue organizers, critics, and the public.

51 "Appendix 2: The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947." In *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*, by Davesh Soneji (The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 236–237.

explorations of her personal and professional identity. Despite the considerable tenacity of the Sumangali depiction of Andal in dance, recent performances such as Ratnam's *Andal-Andal* and *Naachiyar Next* — two dramatic explorations of the poet's ordinary life — as well as personal experiences like Kaveri's make Andal immanent for dancers through engagement with the transgressive elements of her story and directly channeling her life through their own.

The valorization of Sumangali womanhood in bharatanatyam is woven indelibly into its history, and the amplified pressure upon dancers to embody perfectly normative womanhood was felt ubiquitously among my interlocutors. The stigmas associated with hereditary performers reflect a persistent social attachment to the auspicious Sumangali ideal even as many dancers strive to reconcile with a history of suppression. In bharatanatyam, as elsewhere, Venkatesan describes that Andal's "ritual transgressions, the disturbing violence, and the frank eroticism of her poems are completely subordinated or erased in the larger cause of devotion."[52] Because Brahminical norms and devotion are emphasized in mainstream bharatanatyam, the performed Andal was likewise cast as a Sumangali; indeed, Rukmini Devi Arundale's own 1961 dance-drama *Andal Charitram* offered a "nonconfrontational and comforting" depiction of an "innocent and asexual" Andal story, and has remained a popular mainstay in bharatanatyam since.[53]

Concluding Thoughts

Considering Andal's numerous ritual, social, and artistic lives, Venkatesan wrote that "women in South India have found ways to make Andal their own" without emulating her "rejection of social norms" in their own lives.[54] While it is true that Srivaishnava Brahmin women do not typically unsettle ritual and social norms in daily practice, Andal inspires a sense of personal agency in women that justifies their diversions from and adjustments of Sumangali womanhood. As new interpretations proliferate and the traditional standards of Brahmin womanhood continue to shift, Srivaishnavas are challenged to reconsider who Andal can acceptably be. Lakshmika described this dynamic as one in which "Andal's narrative and people's own stories intermingle," enlivening her poetry through women's embodiments of the saint and variously sustaining or contesting normativity.

In this article, I have offered two generalized models of Srivaishnava Brahmin womanhood reflected through Andal, distinguished by respective emphases on her normativity and subversiveness. I have demonstrated how, in various

52 Venkatesan, *The Secret Garland*, 38.

53 Venkatesan, *The Secret Garland*, 37

54 Venkatesan, *The Secret Garland*, 38.

contexts, women are encouraged to look and behave "like Andal," despite varied interpretations of what that embodiment means. Thus, from a young age, Srivaishnava women learn to interpret their lives through Andal's and to structure their identities in conjunction with her. Sanjoli shared the story of a successful *pavai nonbu* she undertook for the Margazhi season before meeting her husband. She explained that while men may approach Andal as a goddess, she approaches Andal as a mirror — both a close confidant and a respected role model. For Srivaishnava women, Andal can represent many different attributes, for example, as a perfect devotee, a bold and assertive lover, or, as Kaveri put it, as a woman "in control all the time, of her own narrative and her own story." Throughout childhood, marriage, performance, and ritual worship, women see themselves reflected in Andal. The special allure she holds for my interlocutors takes many different shapes, but in each case communicated what they emphasize about their own embodied womanhood as Srivaishnava Tamil Brahmins.

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