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The Chandogya Upanisad, a widely read religio-philosophical classic from the pre-Buddhist era, has a wishful prayer by a spiritual aspirant: “May I never, ever, enter that reddish, white, toothless, slippery and slimy yoni of the woman” thereby depicting the vagina, body and sexuality of a woman as something repugnant and abominable. From time immemorial, a woman’s sexuality has been seen by the dominant classes as threatening, troublesome and dangerous, and hence to be kept under vigil and control. Her body is regarded as a field (kshetra) where male seed can be sown for male progeny. By virtue of possessing a biological body with a womb, vagina and breasts, the female is ascribed a restrictive gender role and rel-egated to a position of subordination within the family unit and society in many patriarchal social orders. In the orthodox Vedic tradition, by virtue of possessing a female body with biological functions such as menstruation and reproduction, the woman is declared unfit for philosophical scholarship, or for higher spiritual pursuits such as liberation. Even today, the Vedic orthodoxy does not permit the communication of Vedantic mahavakyas (the highest spiritual instructions) to women and Shudras. Even if we ignore Manu and the misogynistic lawyer’s views on the woman’s body and sexuality, we are still confronted with the wellpreserved genre of Sanskrit literature the Puranas, both ancient and medieval, many of which abound with anecdotes and stories about good/chaste women and bad/unchaste women. An unchaste woman has a loose tongue and licentious behaviour, while the one of few words, who allows her body and sexuality to be controlled by men, is declared a good woman. She silently suffers all her trials and is ever subservient to the patriarchal norms. To illustrate this, we have a quotation from the Brahmanaivartaapurana, which categorises women into three groups on the basis of sexuality. It proclaims: “All women are sprung from prakriti/The best, the worst and the intermediate./The best are derived from the sattva portion,/The intermediate are parts of rajas,/Seeking pleasure and ever intent on their own ends./The worst are parts of tamas, of unknown ancestry./Bad-mouthed, unchaste, licentious, independent, fond of quarrel./Unchaste women on earth and the heavenly nymphs,/Are known as prostitutes, and are parts of tamas.”

Such orthodox views have percolated deep into the mass psyche in many parts of the subcontinent, creating a powerful patrilineal and patriarchal Indo-Aryan kinship form of social organisation. This has remained a dominant form for centuries, with some exceptions in the Northeast and South India. But often, these exceptions offer us the voice of the other. Many are the articulations of women, indigenous people and ordinary folk of the oppressed classes — the subalterns — who intelligently resist the norms of the prevalent dominant hierarchy by introducing refreshingly new and alternative conceptions of female sexuality and body through their oral and performing arts.

This essay exposes some essential differences in perceptions of female sexuality and body in the Samkhyan understanding and purusha has had immense influence on the constructions of the physical and social woman and man in the Indian social system, including the perpetuation of dominant hierarchies and inequalities. These culturally sanctioned constructions, based on male privilege, were seen as part of the larger scheme of nature, and therefore as inviolable truth. This school of philosophy, which upholds a sharp dualism positing two independent realities, matter and consciousness, ascribes the feminine gender to matter or prakriti and the masculine to consciousness or prakriti. Materiality or prakriti is constituted of a tripartite process, called sattva, rajas and tamas, with an ethical dimension of moral excellence, moral decadence and amoral indifference. Lack of intellectual capabilities, desire and deviance are construed to be feminine, while renunciation, asceticism, sophisticated intellectual capabilities and spiritual pursuits as masculine.

Though every biological male or female possesses soul/consciousness/prakriti, and every physical body is a product of prakriti, in many places the text Samkhyanakrika blurs the philosophical principles with those of anatomy. Biological females are identified with prakriti and her evolutes, while males are equated with purushas. Thus the perceptions of both are rendered almost permanent, and cultural constructions are assigned the status of nature. The text feminises prakriti by calling her a dancer who performs for her male. As a dancer, she is a seductress, stimulating desire in purushas. She is secund but anarchic, requiring control and order by the masculine principle. She is also a nurturing principle, benevolent like a cow that provides milk for others. She is likened to a bashful virgin, who will flee if her nudity is exposed.

What develops from this scheme — purushas bondage by prakriti and his struggle to rediscover his essential identity and subsequent liberation from her force — is the different spaces allotted to prakriti and purusha on the one hand and women and men on the other. The domain of prakriti is the world, while that of a physical woman is home and its immediate surroundings. The sphere of operation for purusha...
is apparently twofold. One is the world created by *prakriti*, and the other the space away from the web created by *prakriti*, the renunciate’s trajectory into the wilderness. This is transposed onto the activity of the biological male. Men are granted two spaces, one within the house, where they cohabit with wives, have relations and father children, and another one outside, in the wilderness. This is the essence of masculinity. Masculinity consists in using the intellectual faculty to understand one’s own prakriti, and to control cravings of prakriti. Masculinity is the ability to be detached from matter. The expression *prakriti*, I mean two things: tales told by women, and women-centred tales.

Alliyarasanimalai is radical in many respects, two of which can be stated at the outset: (a) it overthrows almost all the orthodox conceptions of female sexuality; (b) it is a woman-centred ballad with an emphasis on female desire, in its description of a woman-centred and animal-centred genre. This may be contrasted with the folk legend *Alliyarasanimalai*, which is presented more as intruders. The expression *Alliyarasanimalai* requires men even for sexual pleasure and lacks a woman-centred ethos. Folk legends about women who resist prevailing heterosexist norms.

The expression *Alliyarasanimalai* is derived from the legendary hero-in-name Alli, literally means the kingdom of Alli. The Tamil word *Alliyarasanimalai* communicates the idea of the Sanskrit *strirajya*, or the “land of women” — a kingdom where women are predominant. Women do not require men even for sexual pleasure or procreation. Female characters in the *Penumarajthir Kaatari* and *Alliyarasanimalai* have created a space for women where men are literally banned. In a paper entitled “*Strirajya: Indian Accounts of Kingdoms of Women*,” W.L. Smith delineates the accounts of *Strirajya* or “land of women” or societies ruled by
women in the Northeast and north-west of India. According to Smith, “the most common conception of a land of women” is that they are “ruled by predatory female magicians”. Through their sexuality, these women sap the strength of male visitors and often magically transform them into beasts or birds. Smith also makes a passing reference to Chinese sources which contain numerous references to women’s countries and woman-dominated countries. According to him, there are two types: mythical or historical record. In the first kind, women live in “maleless lands (and) mate with apes, dogs or demons, and become pregnant by bathing or drinking water from a certain river or well, or exposing (themselves) to the wind.”

There are two aspects of their subject matter. One is interested in the erotic than the military and her female warriors, not on their prowess, power and martial tactics of the heroine and her female warriors, not on their erotic life.

Folk ballads are not single-author texts. They are collective phenomena in the social and cultural history of a population. Both women and men of other castes and communities could have contributed to the richness of folk legends. Alliyarasamimalai derives from the grand classical parameters of the Mahabharata but is deeply influenced by local motifs and legends. It is useful to remember Ramanujan, according to whom we cannot talk of classical and folk as antagonistic terms, but as part of a continuum of forms, the endpoints of which may look like two terms in opposition. But in this case, the classical epic and the folk legends are oppositional. The Tamil ballad is woman-centred, focusing on the woman Alli as invincible, while the Sanskrit epic is consistently male-centred, with Arjuna as the invincible hero.

The folk legend Alliyarasamimalai was written down in the 19th century along with other legends with a variety of topics, themes, diction and styles of narratives. Though it was essentially authorless, there was a literary need to ascribe authorship to the enormous range of this matter, which had been published for the first time. One Pukalenti Pulavar, who was actually of the 14th century, was chosen to be the author of a large number of Tamil folk ballads. It could have been a matter of convenience to select a single eminent poet from the classical Tamil tradition. The actual poems of Pukalenti, however, demonstrate very different stylistics.

The focus of the ballad is the alluring queen Alli (Tamil for ‘lily’). Her story is located in the city of Madurai, where the goddess Meenakshi is worshipped as the supreme empress even today. As mentioned earlier, this is not just a freak folk legend but belongs to a genre of legends characterised by non-conformist women - unmarried, childless, who take up well-defined masculine roles. The over-emphasised quartet of feminine virtues - invincibility, valour, courage, learning - are strongly propagating the classical and Brahminical ideals of distinct spaces for men and women are boldly subverted.

This genre of legends promoted a different value system by applauding female characters who, through successfully practising masculine activity, violate the exclusive and sexist Brahminical zones of the world (for men) and the home (for women), and discard all the established conventions of virtuous womanhood. Women occupy both domestic and external spaces. They war and go on elaborate hunting expeditions. They avoid heterosexual marriages, and instead pursue interests in the political, social and economic spheres. As a young girl, Alli goes to school, learns to read and write, masters algebra and multiplication, practises martial arts, reads and writes Tamil literary classics. There is no way to confirm if this was a social reality for the ordinary folk, especially women. But the very existence of this Utopia is stimulating and refreshing to readers.

Castes, geographical regions and religious denominations divide Indian women into complex groupings. But in the present context, we are referring to non-Brahmin Tamil women. An important factor that creates a deep connection among all Indian women is a segregated, gender-specific and highly gender-coded way of life. Sex segregation has been integral to the functioning of modern as well as traditional India. A significant component of Indian society lives in...
joint families, which promote strong inter-feminine bonding. Despite rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, the nation continues to segregate cultural, social, religious and familial spaces by sex. While modern nuclear families are generally organised around heterosexual relationships, the traditional joint family is conducite to the existence of gender-coded spaces.

Such marking and limiting of space can be interpreted either as disempowering women by controlling their movements, or empowering women by creating homosocial, eroticised spaces wherein women lend and receive mutual support. Both interpretations are historically legitimate. I subscribe to the view that sex segregation allows women to bond freely with other women. One feature of spatial sex segregation is the construction of gendered worldviews in which women and men perceive the world and utilise their spaces differently.

In a recent survey of village clusters outside Bangalore in Karnataka, southern India, Seemanthini Niranjana discusses the strong spatial narrative of ‘olige-horgi’ (inside-outside) that governs people’s lives. These spaces are seen to be circumscribed by gender. Femininity, the female body, morality and women’s activities are embodied in the idiom olige, often depicted as the household, the centre of women’s lives. Niranjana’s study can be extended to the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, which too makes a strong division between the female ullakam (interior) and male velippuran (exterior). The identification of women’s interest with the household has been prevalent among the upper-class, upper-caste, non-working women who occupy the interior space as their legitimate territory. Here, women participate in many chores together waking, bathing, washing, cooking, eating, sleeping, and raising children. In such family systems, women experience their significant life events in the company of other women, rather than the men of the clan. A strong consciousness of solidarity between women develops in this space, according to the anthropologist Margaret Egner. It is not to acquire her skills when she goes on a grand hunting expedition to the forest, when she wages war against the usurper of her father’s kingdom, when she travels from the southern peninsula to the north with her female army to battle Arjuna, who deviously married her. Similarly, Arjuna does manage to access the inner space of both fort and queen, but only through trickery, intrigue and supernatural assistance.

Arjuna, the valiant Pandava prince, unmatchted as an archer with his victorious Gandiva bow, is a great Mahabharata hero, but in the legend of Alli he is portrayed as selfish, consumptive and delinquent. He cannot make a single rational or irrational move without the aid and the magic of his companion Krishna. Despite having several wives and mistresses, he lusts after other women. He is not interested in male activities such as warfare or hunting, and he loses to Alli in battle. He cannot accept his failure to penetrate the all-woman fortress and turns into a sexual predator when his desire is thwarted.

Having seen his eldest brother Yudhishtithira and their common wife Draupadi making love on a saffron bed on the terrace of the palace, Arjuna decides to expiate this sin by undertaking a pilgrimage to all the holy places, including Madurai, where Alli reigns supreme. Yudhishtithira and the Pandava matriarch Kunti summon Krishna, the companion and the Lord, and beseech him to accompany Arjuna. The two set out on this long journey and finally arrive at the outskirts of Madurai, and hear from a pearl merchant all about the mighty unmarried queen Alli. Arjuna falls hopelessly in love and pesters Krishna for help in forcing Alli into marrying him. The pearl merchant warns Arjuna of the consequences of even proposing marriage to Alli. According to him, Alli has declared: “She will flog the groom hopelessly in love and pesters Krishna for help in forcing Alli into marrying him. She is feminine, beautiful, loves and bonds only with women. Women are her political advisers, women render personal services to her. She also adores ferocious snakes who are at her beck and call. According to A.K. Ramanujan “…a snake in a male-centred tale is usually something to be killed, a rival phallus, if you will. In woman-centred tales, i.e., where woman are protagonists and usually the tellers, snakes are lovers, husbands, uncles, donors and helpers.” She falls in love with the beautiful young wife of an old Brahmin and shelters her and her old invalid husband, only to realise later that they are Krishna and Arjuna, who had assumed such appearances to gain entry to her all-female fort. The folk ballad also characterises Alli as a fierce fighter, who rides horses and elephants, goes on hunting expeditions, and kills ruthlessly in war. Alli threatens and challenges all her enemies, including the trickster Arjuna, who has stealthily tied the wedding string around her neck, saying: “I am a fish-hook for your throat, a sharp nail to your navel…”

The ballad uses the metaphor of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ to demarcate Alli’s kingdom and the male hero Arjuna’s lust-provoked wanderings. Alli has an all-woman fort and lives ‘inside’ while Arjuna is ‘outside’ the fort, constantly desiring to penetrate, invade, capture, possess and violate the kingdom as well as its queen. But Alli is not restricted to the inner space of the fort; she also accesses the ‘outside’ when as a child she goes to school to acquire skills. When she goes on a grand hunting expedition to the forest, when she wages war against the usurper of her father’s kingdom, when she travels from the southern peninsula to the north with her female army to battle Arjuna, who deviously married her. Similarly, Arjuna does manage to access the inner space of both fort and queen, but only through trickery, intrigue and supernatural assistance.

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has vowed to harm the man who seeks her hand. In her palace, she exhibits the spoils of war. No man has the courage to seek entry into the palace. At strategic points, women warriors are deputed to guard this space from male intrusion. In that all-female city, women are administrators. Alli’s friends are women, her advisers are women, her carpenters, priests, executioners, hunters, snake-charmers are all women. Even her royal elephants are female.

Krishna advises Arjuna to forget about Alli. If Arjuna insisted on marriage, he would arrange an alliance from his own country, caste and clan. But Arjuna is agonised, so Krishna finally decides to help him. However, Arjuna is quite often portrayed as comic and idiotic, almost a buffoon. When Alli goes on a hunting expedition, Arjuna follows her, disguised as her female companion, retrieves her arrows, massages her feet and entertains her with stories while she rests. But wanting to draw her attention to his self-proclaimed glory, he begins to give her his autobiography. Hearing a story about a man, Alli flies into a rage and looks at the face of the storyteller, and notices the thin line of hair revealing his manhood. Before Alli can collect herself, Arjuna darts like the wind into the forest.

Arjuna tries to gain entry into the palace but Alli’s female guards and companions throw him out. With the help of Krishna’s divine powers, he assumes the form of a huge serpent and is carried to Alli’s fort by the snake-charmer, which is Krishna himself in disguise. Alli is captivated by the serpent and asks the snake-charmer to leave the snake with her for a night. Stealthily, Arjuna enters her bedchamber and beckons the sleep goddess to overwhelm Alli. Alli rapes her while she sleeps and manages to impregnate her. Later, Arjuna gains entry into the palace in the form of a woman and in the middle of the night, while Alli is asleep, he ties the marriage string around her neck and leaves for his hometown with Krishna.

Alli wakes up, sees the string around her neck and is furious. She tries to sever it with a saw, a sword and other means, but is unsuccessful. Enraged, she decides to wage war on Hastinapur, Arjuna’s home, with her army of female troopers - which include Tamils, Telungas, Kattiyadas, and Muslims. The army and the pregnant Alli are invincible. Arjuna and his divine companion Krishna run away from the battlefield in shame. Krishna is badly wounded, his body is covered with blood and he must face his failure. The indomitable Pandava brother Bhima throws down his weapons and fears for his life. Arjuna rushes to his half-brother Sahadeva and tells him to somehow, by any means, capture Alli. Sahadeva connives with the gods to create a magic cage with several doors and bars, draws Alli into it during the fight and traps her.

Alli is portrayed as a ferocious caged lion wanting to break free, but is told by Draupadi, one of the wives of Arjuna, that only if she gives up her weapons and marries Arjuna will she be released and allowed to go back to her country. Draupadi sings the glory, valor and chivalry of her husband to Alli, who rebuffs and ridicules every claim. However, in order to be free Alli surrenders her weapons and once more Arjuna marries her. Immediately, Alli leaves for Madurai with her warriors, and in due course gives birth to a son who will be taught to take revenge on his father, Arjuna.

The folk legend of Alli is unique in reversing the almost inviolable gender norms prescribed by Brahminical traditions. The warrior queen is born after her parents and Pandya kings perform severe penance, in which all the citizens and animals of Madurai participate. Pleased with the collective effort, the goddess of Madurai creates Alli from a fragment of her shoulder and hands her over to the parents, saying “she is both male and female”.

Alli lives with her parents in the village, goes to school, learns to read and write. She comes home to gulp down her afternoon meal and runs back to school to learn more. Thus when she is nine, she learns about the kingdom being usurped by her half-brother, Neenmukan. She engages him in battle, wins back the kingdom and rightfully establishes her all-female empire, in which men are at the periphery, receiving orders from and dependent for their survival on women.

This female space is portrayed as being well organised and self-fulfilling. It is disturbed by Arjuna, whom we may identify with the Samkhyan purusha, whose function is to establish order in the chaotic world of prakriti. However, in this legend Arjuna, over-powered by lustful desire for Alli, is an agent of profound disorder.

The obsessive Arjuna seeks Krishna’s help. The latter, knowing of Alli’s reputation as a huntress, conjures up wild and ferocious animals in forests around Alli’s kingdom, metaphorically signifying Arjuna’s desire and readiness to let the blood of slaughter flow, to satiate his own desire for the few drops of the warrior queen’s virgin blood. Intimidated by the prowling animals in the forest, the foresters seek Alli’s help. She decides to go on a hunting expedition, a typical masculine, heroic act, in this case not to claim territory or to subjugate but to fulfil the duty of a sovereign.

With a strong entourage of heavily armed female soldiers, Alli ceremo-

niously goes to the forest. Arjuna assumes a female form and accompanies her until he is found out. What is significant here is the reversal of masculinity and femininity. If Alli represents prakriti, she is exactly the opposite of the Samkhyan definition. Arjuna, the male principle, driven by ego, is never in control of himself. He lives in the world of fantasy and delusion, utterly abandoning the power of discrimination that is so prized in the Brahminical model. In the classical tradition, desire, lust, delusion or māyā are identified with the feminine, but in this representation of the folk tradition, it is satirically inverted. Arjuna’s every fantasy, every desire causes increasing turbulence in the well-ordered female kingdom. His fantasy makes him rape and impregnate Alli. His lust makes him so unstable that he quite often changes his sex, age, caste, class and form to achieve his scheming end. Totally lacking discrimination, he is unable to see the web of delusion in which he has ensnared himself, even while he focuses obsessively on mechanisms for ensnaring Alli.

The deviant Arjuna’s lack of discrimination and pursuit of darkness instead of light, and ignorance instead of knowledge, is satirised from the very beginning of the narrative. Supposedly undertaking a journey of penance and propitiation to counter the sin of accidentally witnessing his respected elder brother and their common wife in the sexual act, Arjuna bathes in holy rivers on his pilgrimage, but is actually immersing himself further in the waters of his own desire and fantasy. Alli is the Pearl that he must possess at all costs, even his power of discrimination. The omniscient Krishna is by his side, yet the only advice Arjuna wants from him is about how to conquer Alli, through either guile or force.

According to the Samkhyan model, woman has the power to seduce,
deceive, bind and destroy. But in the folk legend it is man who initiates the cycle of physical violence that culminates in his raping the virgin warrior queen within her homosocial/homo-erotic space. The binding is materially asserted through the symbol of the magic marriage string that he ties around her neck, and which she cannot take off. The string legitimises his claim on her body and on the body of the child he has implanted in her - his offspring trapped in the interior/house of Alli’s womb. Externally, the marriage string is the perfect symbol of the household, the space that the man of discrimination is supposed to renounce in his quest for knowledge and freedom.

Later in the narrative, Alli is rendered captive in the interior of the magical cage erected on the battlefield by Sahadeva, on Arjuna’s request. Only thus can Alli’s force be contained. Arjuna’s act of deceiving, violating, and binding Alli expands into grotesque and blood-soaked parameters that compel others to participate in the thickening veil of pathological fantasy which now clouds the individual and collective discrimination of his family, army and the kingdom of Hastinapur, his homeland.

The power of the Alli legend lies in its satirical subversion of Samkhyan-influenced gender-coded worldviews, its blurring of the sociological boundaries between the household and the world, its radical reworking of the classical stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, and its audacious deconstruction of the principles of prakriti and purusha that have profoundly influenced Hindu culture for millennia, and continue to do so.

Notes:
6. Ibid.
8. Pennarachiyar Katai, eds., K. Jayakumar and D. Boominanganathan, English translation by S. Mark Joseph, Institute of Asian Studies, Madras, 1996. The ballad of Pennarachiyar is sung to the accompaniment of the musical bow, villu, and the drum, utukkai pattu. When the bow, a weapon of war, is transformed into a musical bow, a number of jingling cymbals are strung along the string and the performer hits the string in a rhythmic beat as he sings his/her ballad.
10. Ibid.
11. Vijaya Ramaswamy, “The Taming of Alli: Mythic Images and Tamil Women”, Journal of the Inter-University Centre of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 5, No.2, 1998: pp. 71-84. I do not subscribe to Ramaswamy’s account of the ballad as “the taming and domestication of Alli into a virtuous and obedient wife of Arjuna.” From beginning to end of the plot, valiant Alli resists Arjuna. Even when he forces her into marrying him, she continues to reject and fight him.
12. Irawati Karve, Kinship Organisation in India, Deccan College, Poona, 1953. Karve, a noted sociologist, defines a joint family as “a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat food at one hearth, who hold property in common and who participate in common family worship and are related to each other as some particular kindred.”