

# People in Conservation

*Biodiversity Conservation and Livelihood Security*



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## **Opening word**

*The issue of sexuality has been a taboo in all traditional societies. Particularly in India. The sexual liberation that was initiated in the 1960s in the West took its time arriving in India even though the emergence of first generation feminists ( in the western sense of the word) can perhaps be traced to around late 60s and early seventies.*

*This does not mean that India did not have a strong strand of feminist thought. Be it mythic characters like the philosophers Gargi, Maitriye, or queen Draupadi, or more recently social reformers and freedom fighters like Pandita Ramabai, Savitribai Phule, Rani Laxmibai, or Sarojini Naidu, women have always played a positive and central role in how the Indian culture and polity unfurled over centuries. This obviously does not mean that the Indian reality has been sans oppressive and violent Patriarchy. At best, the women mentioned above represent what woman can be and do despite the oppression and violence Patriarchy inflicted and continues to inflict, not only on women, but all those who do not identify with sexual binaries (LGBTQ).*

*This issue of People in Conservation is dedicated to all those brave warriors who battle Patriarchy, often at the risk of their lives.*

*milind*

## 1. News and Information

### Hakki Pikki: The Global Nomads of Karnataka

By Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed

Devoid of access to the forests after the passage of stringent environmental laws in the 1970s, the Hakki Pikkis were forced to settle down wherever the government provided them land. In Gowripura, for instance, Ramakrishna said that 100 acres of land were set aside for the community in 1982 with two acres provided for each household. While this elder has a conventional sounding name, he pointed to another tradition among the Hakki Pikkis which is of their quirky naming conventions. "If you walk around this colony of around 600 residents, you will find persons with names such as Japan, America, Inspector, Cycle Rani, Mysore Pak, Dafedar, Doctor, Lawyer, High Court," Ramakrishna said with a laugh. He was joined by a person called "Huli Raja", or "Tiger King".

Huli Raja said that the community members were adventurous travellers and spirited entrepreneurs, and visited different parts of India selling the herbal products they manufactured as well as all kinds of knick-knacks such as copper rings, plastic flowers, scrunchies, dolls, soft toys, rudraksha malas, precious stones, and trinkets.

Thus, all the Hakki Pikkis who lived in Gowripura have travelled all over the country and are polyglots.

**Read more:** <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/hakki-pikki-the-global-nomads-of-karnataka/>

### On the Cusp – Reframing Democracy and Well-Being in Korchi

By Neema Pathak Broome, Shrishtee Bajpai and Mukesh Shende

#### Introduction

Mainstream governance and development models – characterized by seemingly democratic but inherently centralized and top-down governance systems and extractive, commercially motivated, capitalist economic policies – have failed to achieve minimum levels of well-being for a very large part of humanity. They have, in fact, caused large-scale human and environmental injustice. However, there are also countertrends either resisting current models or developing and defending alternative forms of governance and well-being (Singh/ Kulkarni/Pathak Broome 2018). In this paper we explore and discuss the emergence of one such process towards direct democracy and well-being in Korchi taluka in the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra state in India. We use Zografos' definition of direct democracy as a "form of popular self-rule where citizens participate directly, continuously, and without mediation in the tasks of government" (Zografos 2019).

This discussion paper attempts to understand and analyze how these laws were used by an already mobilized community in Korchi taluka to move towards direct democracy and greater economic, social, ecological and political well-being. We discuss the model of democracy adopted by the Indian state and official processes of decentralization; the emergence of alternative democratic processes in Korchi and what they hope to achieve; and factors that lead to the emergence of such processes and constraints and the hurdles that they face. An analysis of the process in Korchi helps foster a greater understanding of the interface between forms of representative democratic governance and direct democratic systems.

Read More: <https://radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/on-the-cusp-reframing-democracy-and-well-being-in-korchi/>



## 2. Perspectives

### Queer literature for children is changing minds in India

By Chintan Girish Modi



When Siya Vatsa Rajoria started school, she was introduced to the idea that girls wear pinafores and boys wear t-shirts and shorts. Growing up in a home where her parents encourage her to wear whatever she is comfortable in, she felt upset by the sudden imposition. "It was jarring for Siya because we never force her to wear something she dislikes," her mother, Reshma Vatsa, a senior manager with a private bank in Mumbai, told me. "She is a child. She should have the freedom to discover what gives her joy, and express herself."

I was talking to Reshma and her husband Kshitij Rajoria in their fifth-floor apartment in Wadala, a suburb of Mumbai. It is a quiet and green neighbourhood. The walls of their home have turned into canvases for Siya, who is nearly three years old, and are covered with squiggles and scribbles made with crayons of different colours. Siya was dressed that day in a white frock with green cactus plants and a bright red waistband.

Excited to have a visitor, Siya brought her stuffed animals – a bear and an elephant – into the living room where we sat. "Look at this, uncle, look at this!" she said, utterly delighted, holding up every object for my inspection and appreciation. It was a privilege to be trusted and shown such warmth by a child, so I did not ruin the moment by saying that I

was not particularly invested in a male or masculine identity and that she could drop the "uncle".

The conversation quickly shifted to books. "When we share books with Siya, I am not sure how much she understands, and what exactly she absorbs at this age," Reshma said. "But we are stunned by some of the things she recalls, and the connections that she makes. Children engage with books in a unique way, and we must let them."

One of the titles that Kshitij, who is a senior strategist with an advertising and marketing agency, pulled out from the shelf in their house was the picture book *The Unboy Boy*. The plot revolves around a boy named Gagan who likes painting, collecting stamps, and saying "Good morning" to the sun, birds and flowers. His classmates bully him for not showing interest in fighting and breaking things. They call him "baby girl" and "sissy". Disappointed with Gagan's lack of enthusiasm for playing with toy guns and listening to stories about wars, his grandfather calls him a chooha, meaning mouse. When these people desperately try to make Gagan "more boy-like", his mother loves and supports him unconditionally.

Reshma and Kshitij are among a slowly growing number of parents who are raising their children to be queer-affirmative and using children's books with queer themes to approach the subject. These parents want their children to understand their own relationship to gender and sexuality over time and to respect varied identities among friends, relatives and acquaintances. They are aided by a number of books for children of different age groups that address queer themes overtly or subtly. Some books even help parents who grew up without having conversations on these themes appreciate the lives of people who challenge heteronormativity and the gender binary.

#### Beyond the binary

Reshma and Kshitij met, became friends and fell in love while studying at MICA, an institute for mass communication in Ahmedabad. This was also the place where they began to critically examine their

conditioning through discussions fuelled by books, films, essays and popular culture. "I was averse to people outside the male-female binary until I went to MICA," Kshitij told me. "Being there seeded the idea that I was going against the law of nature by shutting out diversity. I had quite a few friends from the LGBTQ community. They were brilliant at what they were doing academically, and they were so in touch with their natural way of being. It opened my eyes."

Reshma began reading about how to parent in a conscious manner soon after she and Kshitij learnt about their pregnancy. Kshitij wants his daughter to grow up as someone proud of who she is. He is waiting to introduce Siya to *The Boy in the Cupboard*, published by Gaysi Family, a queer-led initiative that promotes creative expression and community building. The book's protagonist is Karan, who enjoys trying on his mother's sari and wearing flowers in his hair. Other boys tease him because he has a pink cricket bat and a kitchen set. Fed up with the insults, he prefers to spend his time locked up in a cupboard – a metaphor for the closet. His mother is concerned about him, and promises to be there for him come what may.

Embodying this parenting philosophy – being available for whatever your child might need – can be challenging in real life, but Zahra Gabuji is attempting to do just that. She works as a storytelling project co-lead with Point of View, a Mumbai-based non-profit engaged in projects at the intersection of gender, sexuality and technology.

I met Zahra along with her five-year-old daughter Zoya at their apartment in Mumbai's Versova neighbourhood. They had moved into the apartment recently and still had some construction underway. We sat in Zoya's room, which had bookshelves, her bed, toys, a foldable tent and a gorgeous view of the Arabian Sea. She drew and coloured while her mother spoke with me.

"Zoya loves these two books," Zahra said. The first one she showed me was *The Many Colours of Anshu*, written and illustrated by Anshumaan Sathe. The second was *Ritu Weds Chandni*, written and illustrated by Ameya Narvankar.

Parents who use these books to normalise conversations around diverse gender identities with children do so in the hope of ensuring their children turn out to be sensitive, kind and inclusive.

*The Many Colours of Anshu* revolves around a seven-year-old named Anshu who is read as a boy but says, "I don't have to be like the other boys and girls. I don't even have to be just a boy or just a girl! I can be anything I feel like." Anshu likes flowers, flamingoes, floral socks and ice golas in various colours and flavours.

This book draws inspiration from Sathe's childhood and has a separate section introducing ideas of "gender play" and "safe space" to parents and caregivers. "Gender play lets a child try on different clothes, experiment with their hair, participate in games and activities across gendered categories," Anshumaan writes in this section for adults. "It is a crucial part of their developmental process, and Anshu, like most young children, has imagined several ways of being while trying to arrive at who he feels like and what he wants to be today."

Anshumaan encourages parents and caregivers to avoid shaming or labelling their child's gender expression, and to create safe spaces through conversations, acknowledging and working on their own discomfort and also educating the other adults in their child's life.

"Zoya does not use the words 'queer' and 'trans' but she has met my non-binary colleague. She knows their pronouns," Zahra told me. "The world is diverse. It is important to communicate that to her. At this age, she cannot articulate everything but she can feel and absorb." The fact that her husband, Jalal, has a cousin who is a lesbian woman and has been living with her partner for close to two decades, makes it easier for Zahra to have these conversations at home.

*Ritu Weds Chandni*, the second book Zahra showed me, celebrates the love of two women who get married in a traditional ceremony with the blessings of their families and friends. While the people who are close to them joyfully participate in their celebrations, some relatives who are offended by

this unconventional marriage try to disrupt their wedding procession by throwing water at it. The day is saved by a girl called Ayesha, who comes up with a simple but brilliant idea – to start dancing instead of being frozen with fear.

Zahra told me that Zoya was “really upset” when she first saw images of people throwing water at the wedding procession. Zoya, who was sitting close to us, turned the pages of *Ritu Weds Chandni*, pointed at an image, looked at me and said, “Their hair is soaking here.” Zahra turned to another page and said, “They are happy again.” Zoya replied, “Mumma, see here. There is a little teardrop, no?” I asked, “Zoya, can they be tears of happiness?” She nodded. Her mother said, “Sometimes, we cry when we are happy.” Zoya shook her head. Her attention had drifted away from the story, and she began telling us about her friend who was crying at school. Leaving her mother and me to continue talking, she jumped into bed and covered herself with a rainbow bedsheet.

### **Finding safe spaces**

Zahra said she feels unsure about gifting such queer-affirmative books to other children since many parents might not be open to discussing these topics at home. “People ask me why I am introducing these books to a five-year-old,” Zahra told me. “I have to tell them that reading a book does not make you queer. It does not work like that. If my child discovers that she is queer, she will always know that her family and her home are safe spaces. And if she does not identify as queer, she would have learnt how to treat queer people with respect.”

One aspect of *Ritu Weds Chandni* does make Zahra feel a bit uncomfortable. “It is so deeply set in Hindu culture; all the marriage markers, the mangal sutra and the patriarchy are there in the book. I feel more comfortable reading *Julián at the Wedding* to Zoya because I am not a religious person.” Zahra said she grew up in a Bohri Muslim family and absolutely hated it. “I found so many of the customs and traditions quite patriarchal,” she explained.

**Source:** <https://www.himalmag.com/queer-literature-for-children-is-changing-minds-in-india/#:~:text=Indian%20parents%20and%20community%20libraries,varied%20sexual%20and%20gender%20identities&text=When%20Siya%20Vatsa%20Rajoria,wear%20t%2Dshirts%20and%20shorts.>

### **Meena Kandasamy’s feminist intervention on the Tirukkural**

By Kavitha Muralidharan

In the vast expanse of the Tamil literary landscape, the Tirukkural – an ancient treatise that offers wise counsel on almost every matter pertaining to living – holds a singularly enviable place. The first-century BCE text remains arguably the most loved, commented on and translated volume in Tamil. The Tirukkural is universal. “It does not belong to one class, religion, race, language or country,” says the renowned Tamil scholar Thiru Vi Kalyanasundaram. “It is the text that belongs to the world.” The comment is as much about the secular nature of the Tirukkural as it is about its universality. Little is known about its author, Tiruvalluvar, who remains an enigmatic and widely honored figure in Tamil culture. Every attempt to dissect his identity and every claim made to his overawing legacy has been overwhelmed by the magnificence of the text. That Tiruvalluvar could pack so much wisdom for humankind, transcending time and worlds, into two-line and seven-word verses, remains a feat nonpareil.

The Tirukkural holds formidable sway in everyday Tamil life – literary, cultural, social, political and otherwise. Not a day passes in Tamil Nadu without Tiruvalluvar being remembered by politicians, actors, writers or activists. From its incarnations in folk arts, like *parai* and *theru koothu*, to its various literary interpretations, the Tirukkural generates a world of endless possibilities. But it is perhaps the text’s political appropriation that continues to influence Tamil life like no other literary work.

The Tirukkural is irrevocably intertwined with the ideals of the Dravidian movement, whose ideology has continued to govern Tamil Nadu for over fifty years now. The movement's relationship with the Tirukkural began by way of rejecting the commentary on it written by the 13th-century poet Parimelazhagar. Dravidian intellectuals, led by the stalwart Periyar, were rightly furious about Parimelazhagar's approach to the Tirukkural from the point of view of the Manusmriti, a legal text of Hinduism that codifies the caste system. Periyar claimed that Parimelazhagar, as a Brahmin scholar, had "imported into his commentary most of the Aryan tenets, and almost succeeded in hiding the genuine truths of Tiruvalluvar thoughts."

In reclaiming the Tirukkural from the patriarchal gaze, so shy in the face of human desire, Kandasamy has done what many other commentators could not – give this ancient treatise a much-needed feminist interpretation.

The scholar Devaneyya Paavanar – a proponent of the Thanithamizh Iyakkam, a Tamil linguistic purity movement, who also interpreted the Tirukkural in the 20th century – called Parimelazhagar's commentary a "sword that struck at the root of the Valluvam," contending that his interpretation of the Tirukkural was irrational and subjective. The anger was not unfounded. Parimelazhagar's interpretation was largely based on a Brahminical and Sanskritized understanding, including the laws of Varna – the caste-based social hierarchy. A couplet from the Tirukkural, pirappokkum ellaa uyirkkum, says that everyone is equal by birth. The line that follows, sirappovvaa seithozhil vetrumai yaan, as interpreted by many scholars, says that difference comes in the demonstration of their talent in the work they do. Parimelazhagar interprets seithozhil, or "profession," as Varna.

The Dravidian criticism set off a new wave of commentaries. Periyar, the founder of the Dravidian movement, was an atheist and a rationalist, and the movement and its offshoots have been rational since the beginning. As part of its rationalist campaign, the Dravidar Kazhagam, a political

movement founded by Periyar, campaigned against Hindu epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and the messages of discrimination these texts carried.

In the 1920s, Periyar asked, "If Tiruvalluvar had not been a man, but a woman who had written such kural[verses], would (s)he have portrayed such ideas?" This was in reference to two chapters – one on the "Worth of a Life Partner" and another cautionary chapter on "Statecraft against Being Led by Women" – which Periyar criticized as introducing "extreme slavishness and inferiority" in relations between women and men.

While Periyar was critical of these prescriptions on the role of a wife, he understood that the text was of central importance to Dravidian ideology. Periyar was of the firm view that the Tirukkural preaches virtues beyond caste and religion, and that the text is an embodiment of ideas of self-respect and love. "One of the subtle tricks of Brahmins was to accept rationalist teachers as their own and then twist and turn their teachings to suit the undemocratic, authoritarian Brahmanic teachings," he wrote. "First they did it with Buddha. Next they did it with Tiruvalluvar."

In the 1940s, Periyar organised a series of conferences on the Tirukkural and urged Dravidian scholars to write commentaries on it. Among those heeded Periyar's call was M Karunanidhi, who would go on to become a five-time chief minister of Tamil Nadu at the head of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party. His commentary on the Tirukkural remains easily the simplest of the many available, closest to the everyday language of the Tamil public. Karunanidhi's love for the Tirukkural also found expression in the Valluvar Kottam – a monument built in Chennai in the 1970s in honor of Tiruvalluvar, with inscriptions of all the 1330 couplets of the Tirukkural. Karunanidhi, as chief minister, declared a day in honor of Tiruvalluvar – the day after the traditional Pongal festival. In 2000, he unveiled a 133-foot stone statue of Tiruvalluvar at Kanyakumari – its height commemorating the 133 chapters of the Tirukkural.

Ideas of freedom, desire and sexuality run through the writings of Tamil women poets of the Sangam era, but it is easy to miss this in the current literary corpus.

The overarching presence of the Tirukkural in the Tamil polity has had its consequences. India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party is still struggling to make inroads in Tamil Nadu, and perhaps hopes the Tirukkural will offer some way forward. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has quoted verses from the Tirukkural at unlikely places – including at Ladakh in 2020 when meeting army personnel. The Tirukkural has also made regular appearances in parliamentary budget sessions presented by the finance minister, Nirmala Sitharaman. When Sitharaman failed to bring the Tirukkural into her presentation this year, Kanimozhi Karunanidhi, a DMK member of parliament, promptly took a dig, asking if the BJP had forgotten the Tirukkural since elections were not due in Tamil Nadu anytime soon. Kanimozhi said she "would like to remind you of something by quoting a Kural – Idipparai Illaatha Yemaraa Mannan Keduppaar Ilaanum Kedum": A king without honest counsel doesn't need enemies to come to ruin. Of course, there's a kural for every occasion.

In 2019, the Tamil Nadu unit of the BJP tweeted an image of Tiruvalluvar clad in saffron. This was seen as an attempt by the Hindu right to appropriate the saint-poet, and it led to a political storm. Many decades ago, with little information available on Tiruvalluvar, the artist K R Venugopal Sharma created an imagined picture of Tiruvalluvar. The Tamil Nadu government made it the official image of Tiruvalluvar in 1964, and it remains widely used by the public to date. The picture portrays the saint-poet in white robes, seated, holding a writing instrument in one hand and palm leaves in the other. Sharma has recorded that he took cues from the verses of Tirukkural – for instance, not using any religious symbols because the Tirukkural has none. That the BJP tried to subvert this acclaimed, long-accepted image was not merely an act of artistic license; it was an attempt to alter the essential idea of the Tirukkural – one that had held Tamil society together through centuries.

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It is against this backdrop, through the prism of the text's continuing social and political relevance, that one must examine Meena Kandasamy's powerful translation of the Tirukkural's third section, the Inpattuppal (or Kamattuppal) – published as *The Book of Desire*. For the uninitiated, the Tirukkural comprises three sections – Aram, Porul, Inbam (Morality, Materialism and Desire) – and 133 chapters. Each chapter has ten verses – making for a total of 1330 couplets, written in seven words each.

Among the many interpretations of and commentaries on the Tirukkural, Kandasamy's interpretation is perhaps the first of its kind. For example, the Tirukkural verse Inbam kadal matru kaamam Akthadungol Thunpam athanir perithu is translated by the 19th-century missionary and scholar G U Pope as "A happy love's sea of joy; but mightier sorrows roll, from unpropitious love athwart the troubled soul. The pleasure of lust is (as great as) the sea; but the pain of lust is far greater." Kandasamy's translation stands out in its directness, and does not embellish the intended emotions: "Sex: its pleasure (a wordless word), a sea; its path leading to a pain even more immense."

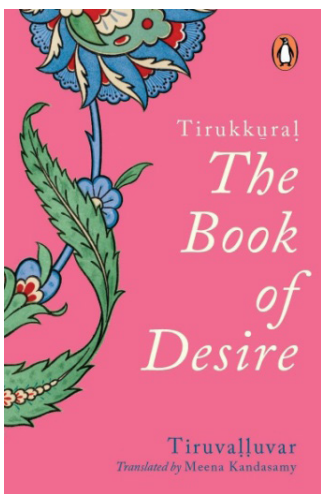
In reclaiming the Tirukkural from the patriarchal gaze, so shy in the face of human desire, Kandasamy has done what many other commentators could not – give this ancient treatise a much-needed feminist interpretation. But not before indicting Tiruvalluvar for his slip-ups. "As much as Tiruvalluvar was a man ahead of his times, he was inevitably a product of them too," she writes on couplets that condemn prostitution, ones that exhort women to worship their husbands and articulate the "collective male fears of becoming hen-pecked husbands and emasculated men." In her exhaustive, layered and brilliantly articulated introduction, Kandasamy contrasts the Tirukkural and Sanatana Dharma – the Brahminical "eternal order" – to establish how Tiruvalluvar's work was progressive for its time. "While the control of women is the heartbeat of Sanatana Dharma, the Hindu social order, nowhere does Tirukkural call for any woman to be controlled," she writes. Quoting Pope's translation of a kural that compares the domestic life of an



incompatible couple to living in a shed with a snake for company, Kandasamy places it in the context of her own life and experience as a survivor of domestic abuse. She writes that “unlike the Brahminical-Hindu marriage, which unites a husband and wife for seven lives, or the concept of pativrata – loyalty to a husband for eternity – the Tirukkural suggests that incompatibility can be fatal. Don’t risk your life, is the undercurrent of this kural.”

‘Tirukkural: The Book of Desire’. Tiruvalluvar.  
Translated by Meena Kandasamy. Penguin Hamish Hamilton (January 2023)

Reimagining the Tirukkural along anti-colonial and feminist lines is long overdue for a text that has seen many translations and commentaries. Starkly, not many women have attempted either. Before Kandasamy, Soibam Rebika Devi, a renowned Manipuri translator, was perhaps the only woman to have translated the Tirukkural. Inspired by the universality of the Tirukkural’s expressions, Devi translated all 1330 couplets into her mother tongue, Manipuri. In her translator’s note for Tirukkural in Manipuri, published in 2012, Devi writes, “It was a stupendous task to translate the rich content words, the rhythm, brevity, etc. of Tirukkural into Manipuri ... Words and concepts which are related to Tamil culture mostly in the third section inpam could not be translated into Manipuri fruitfully.” For example, the pronouns *avan* (he) and *aval* (she) in Tamil could not be translated because Manipuri has a single, gender-neutral word – *mahak* – for both. Hence, the translator chose to use *nungshibi* (female lover) and *nungshiba* (male lover).



Among the rare commentaries by women, perhaps most notable is the terse commentary of the Sangam poet Avvaiyar. In Thiruvalluva Maalai, an anthology of 55 ancient Tamil poems on the significance and grandeur of the Tirukkural written by predominantly male poets of Sangam

era, Avvaiyar describes the depth of the Tirukkural as something that “split an atom and infused it with seven seas.” Interestingly, there is more than one Avvaiyar in Tamil literary history – the earliest figure going by this name is believed to have been a poetess of the Sangam era. There is also folklore about Avvaiyar intervening to help Tiruvalluvar get the Tirukkural published in the Madurai Thamizh Sangam, a Tamil literary academy, which initially rejected it for its grammatical flaws. But, like many tales about Tiruvalluvar, this is arguably a flight of fertile imagination.

Reimagining the Tirukkural along anti-colonial and feminist lines is long overdue for a text that has seen many translations and commentaries. Starkly, not many women have attempted either.

Kandasamy’s decision to translate only the Inpattuppall of all the three sections is informed by her politics as a feminist and an anti-caste activist. She calls her endeavour “the first feminist interventionist translation into English – remaining true to the female (and male) desire throbbing through the lifeblood of this text, while retaining the drama that pervades the quintessential Tamil world of exaggerated hurt, lover’s quarrels and evenings lost to longing.” Kandasamy points out how the Inpattuppall “sidesteps that didacticism. Instead of pontificating on ‘how one ought to love’, the text presents a pair of lovers: anonymous, universal, absolutely democratic.”

The delightfully reckless abandon of the Inpattuppall has in the past left some too unnerved to attempt any interpretation or translation of it. The Jesuit priest Constanzo Beschi, also known by his Tamil name Veeramamunivar, chose to leave the Inpattuppall aside when he translated the Tirukkural into Latin, considering it taboo for a Christian. Kandasamy points out in her introduction how Veeramamunivar’s decision was the “beginning of a gradual but widespread neglect of the Tirukkural’s third portion.”

In choosing to translate the Inpattuppall alone, Kandasamy seeks to set right this historical wrong – an endeavour perhaps attempted just once before,

and in Tamil. In *Maalai Malarum Noi*, a collection of essays published by Kalachuvadu in 2021, the writer and poet Isai seeks to bring contemporariness to Tiruvallur's couplets, in the process reiterating their timelessness. "Tiruvallur's place as a love poet is not adequately established in Tamil," Isai writes. "This is an attempt to remove his priestly attire and put him on a throne on par with Kabilar and Velliveethiyar" – both Sangam-era Tamil poets who wrote erotic poetry. Isai's commentary draws parallels between the Inpattuppall and modern Tamil cinema and literature, and sometimes even contemporary issues like honor killings. "Alar [gossip] plays a major role in enabling honor killings," Isai writes. "In the Sangam era, mothers would gently berate their daughters. Today, they are willing to kill and bury them."

A couplet in the Inpattuppall speaks about a woman's deeply personal conflict on the return of her lover:

Pulappenkol, pulluven kollo, kalappenkol

Kananna kelir varin

In Kandasamy's translation:

Would I quarrel? Would I embrace,

Would I have sex –

When the love of my life,

The light in my eyes, returns to me?

In a similar poem from the Sangam-era text *Kurunthogai*, Avvaiyar wonders "who to hit, who to assault, who to seek out for intervention, in a village that sleeps without worrying about her lovesickness?"

Muttuven kol? Thakkuven kol?

Oren! Yaanum oru petri melittu

Aa a ole nak koovuven kol

Alamara lasaivali yalaippa en

Uyavu noi ariyaathu thunjum oorkke?

In another poem in *Kurunthogai*, the poet Kabilar proclaims that kaamam – lust, but often translated

as love – is large but life is short. Here, a woman's friend exhorts the man she loves to marry her because, "like jackfruit hanging on short boughs of the tree, her lust is large but life, short."

Veralveli verkkot palavin

Saaral naada! Sevviyai aakumathi!

Yaar athu arinthisinore! Saaral

Sirukottup perumpazham thoongiyaangu, ival

Uyirthavach hirithu, kaamamo perithe!

While Tiruvalluvar's Inpattuppall is not dissimilar to these works, what sets it apart is not just its pithiness but also the intimacy of the text, which is not particularly a characteristic of the first two sections of the *Tirukkural*. The Inpattuppall, as many have said before, is a standalone collection by itself, making Tiruvalluvar the finest among those who wrote classical love poetry in Tamil.

The woman in the Inpattuppall lays as much of a claim to desire as the man does. In Kandasamy's translation, we witness the quintessential Tamil woman in all her glory and power: the woman who strutted freely, with an air of easy confidence, through the verses of poets like Velliveethiyaar and Avvai. She was not afraid to love or have sex. She was not afraid to be vulnerable when in love. She was not afraid to demonstrate her lust. She was not seeking validation. Instead, she was forcefully demanding her rightful place in a relationship.

The chapter "Ninaithavar Pulambal", or *The Lament of Memory*, is about a woman speaking of her lover's absence and her memories of him. Declaring that sex is sweeter than wine, then declaring in the very next verse that sex is in fact sweeter than anything else, she embodies this power.

Ullinum tirap perumakil ceytalal

Kallinum kamam initu

Enaittona rinitekaan kamamtam vilvar

Ninaippa varuvatonru il

As Kandasamy has it:

Sex is sweeter than wine –

Causing a ceaseless rapture

Even when it is not present –

For mere memory intoxicates

Sex is sweeter than anything else –

Mere thought of my lover

And everything else disappears

In Kandasamy's translation, the woman is powerful – she relishes wine but knows sex is better. In Parimelazhagar's commentary, the same verses were interpreted from a male perspective. He starts with the comment that this was told to a messenger by the male protagonist – that since lust makes one happy from within, it is sweeter than wine. Was he afraid of a woman who drinks?

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In *The Book of Desire*, Kandasamy adopts ideas that give the text a certain radical element. To put it another way, Kandasamy restores the radical element in the original that had been lost in the labyrinth of interpretations and translations, most done from a conformist male point of view. She achieves this by "eliminating archaic words in translations" – for example, sex is referred to as "union" or "congress" in many English-language translations, which undermines the intensity and nuance of the original text. Kandasamy's translation itself is intimate, defying the tendency to be vague by "layering up the meaning where it felt necessary, paring it down to the bare bones to reflect the exact Tamil." What is lost or enhanced in translation may vary to various degrees, but translations like *The Book of Desire* are literary works in their own right.

In most Tamil volumes of the Tirukkural, the *Inpattuppal* is divided into two sections: seven chapters called *kalaviyal* and the remaining 18 called *karpival*. In the introduction, Kandasamy notes that *kalavu* has often been mistranslated as the "clandestine meeting of lovers" and *karpu* used

to refer to the "wedded (chaste) state of married life". Kandasamy chooses to forgo these divisions imposed on the text centuries after it was originally written, including by figures like Parimelazhagar. In arguing that her translation "comes into being in a society where women continue to inhabit a shaming culture, where offhand divisions of premarital or clandestine love versus married love will feed damaging stereotypes," Kandasamy undoes the limited understanding of feminine desire through the prism of the Tirukkural and breathes fresh life into the text.

Kandasamy reminds the reader that the Tirukkural "stands in opposition to Brahminical-Sanskrit texts which perpetuate ideas of birth-based inequality" and also "in opposition to them through its celebration of female desire." Her own task via translation is to free the Tirukkural from the burden of stilted interpretations that have tried to negate the idea of feminine desire. The word *nirai* from the original Tirukkural has often been interpreted by male translators as "chastity". Kandasamy chooses to avoid the connotations of shame that this term carries, and instead uses the translation "unwavering mind" to challenge "lazy patriarchal notions". Similarly, she interprets *penniyalaalar ellarum* as "everyone with womanness" to be inclusive of all who identify as feminine. Kandasamy also notes in her introduction that she decided to use "man and woman" instead of "husband and wife", and "wherever possible, the gender-neutral lover" to open the text up to a non-binary reading of gender. In the process, she has looked to "stop burdening this text of love with social custom whose contemporary connotations may be far removed from how they were employed in Tiruvalluvar's time." This is what sets Kandasamy's labour of love apart from other works on the Tirukkural.

Before Kandasamy, Soibam Rebika Devi, a renowned Manipuri translator, was perhaps the only woman to have translated the Tirukkural.

The first two sections of the Tirukkural, on morality and materialism, have been dissected, interpreted and canonised widely in the Tamil literary world and beyond. The *Inpattuppal*, however, has not

received adequate attention. The Book of Desire is not merely another addition to the countless translations of the Tirukkural. Instead, it rescues the text from misogynistic, patriarchal and often reductive interpretations. Kandasamy adopts a new approach to the text and sets it free, bringing to life the unafraid Tamil woman of yore. The Book of Desire is a work of liberation – of both the woman and the text.

The Tirukkural will always remain the most fascinating and sought-after Tamil work for translation, but the interpretations of it are of uneven quality and often fail to capture the nuances and progressiveness of ancient Tamil literature. The same is sadly true of other classical works. Ideas of freedom, desire and sexuality run through the writings of Tamil women poets of the Sangam era, but it is easy to miss this in the current literary corpus. Among the vast canon of Sangam poetry, the contributions of around 40 women poets, with over 150 surviving compositions between them deserve greater attention and efforts at reclamation. This includes Avvaiyar, Velliveedhiyar, Ponmudiyar and Nachchellaiyar, among others. One piece of welcome news is that the Tamil Nadu Text Book Corporation has an ambitious plan to publish the entire corpus of Sangam literature. This would mean the voices of pioneering Sangam-era feminist poets will be more accessible in the years to come, inviting further exploration and commentary.

**Source:** <https://www.himalmag.com/meena-kandasamy-book-of-desire-feminist-intervention-on-tirukkural-iruvalluvar/#:~:text=Kandasamy%20reminds%20the%20reader%20that,from%20the%20burden%20of%20stilted.>



### 3. Signs of Hope

#### Seeding Hope: Women's Collectives Create Pathways for Change

#### Volume 4 of the Extraordinary Work of 'Ordinary' People: Beyond Pandemics and Lockdowns



#### Background

The pandemic and the lockdown that followed brought about a lot of distress among various sections of women farmers and foregrounded the question of women's unpaid work as never before. The distress was further aggravated due to the disadvantages that women face due to caste, patriarchy, class and other forms of social discrimination. Increased instances of violence have been reported across social groups. However, hunger, lack of incomes and the increased work burden due to lack of food and work opportunities in many ways summarise the plight of women farmers across diverse groups in India.

Women farmers are engaged in multiple livelihood activities such as cultivation, wage labour, fisheries, livestock, forest work etc. During the pandemic women farmers from each of these sectors found themselves in severe distress. They did not have the money to invest in agricultural inputs, many had not been able to sell their farm produce which was lying in their homes due to lack of storage facilities. Much of the produce was

also destroyed as markets remained inaccessible. Minimum support prices have generally been inaccessible to single women farmers who usually market their produce through private traders, but the lockdown period further brought down the prices making it difficult for them to even meet the cost of cultivation. Women forest workers could not sell their non-timber forest produce (NTFP) for the same reasons. Marketing activities of women's collectives, farmer producer organisations (FPOs) had come to a standstill and they were looking to receive credit and market support for a seamless operation of their activities.

The demand for work was very high and yet public employment programme, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MNREGS) had not opened two months into the lockdown, creating further distress, especially for single women who are the sole earners of the family. Many of them saw themselves competing for wage work with the returning migrants.

Studies done in Maharashtra, Gujarat and several other states by MAKAM partners showed that a large majority of the women farmers had not in fact benefitted from the relief programme announced by the Prime Minister- Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY). Lack of documents, bank accounts, absence of land ownership meant that women remained excluded despite the relief measures. However not all outcomes have been adverse as the stories that we present here tell us.

Despite the adversity we have numerous cases where women farmers and their collectives, innovated and negotiated their way to address the problems of hunger and unemployment.

### **What the stories tell us**

This is a collection of stories of women's collectives in initiating and taking the lead in ensuring that support is extended by way of food and opportunities of work.

The ten examples are among the many where women's collectives, village assemblies, or even individual women farmers came forward to extend relief to people. Sometimes they came in to assist

the government in relief work but at other times also had to wage battles with the local, state and national governments to ensure that relief be provided. These are examples from the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Delhi, and Uttar Pradesh.

These women-led initiatives have shown pathways for grassroots solidarity-based economic initiatives. These are stories of how ordinary people have played extraordinary roles in extending relief, waging battles with the state and mobilizing local communities to act in the face of this adversity.

Self- provisioning and community production and solidarities have been very crucial in these trying times.

Many of the cases also show the way to a non monetised economy and social solidarity. For example, commodities were exchanged for other commodities over money. Panchayats came forward and ensured that work opportunities were created and that relief through food was extended. These examples provide us the space and opportunity to move towards social solidarity economies which allow for reciprocity that results in circulation of goods and services and do not rely on monetary exchanges.

Resilience is a useful concept to discuss the different stories that are documented here. Our use of the concept however goes beyond the idea of adapting to circumstances in the absence of choice. The feminist understanding of resilience recognizes the issues of power and social justice and sees resilience as also resourcefulness i.e the ability to innovate for positive outcomes.

We see its usefulness in understanding the human experience of adversity and in informing policy and practice.

A feminist reading of resilience also recognizes the mediating process that are critical for mobilizing agency in the face of adversity such as the present pandemic, but also the pre-existing ones around which society is organized-caste, patriarchy, class etc.

The case studies point out that this resilience or the ability to innovate and adapt in creative ways has been part of a broader process of women's empowerment. Each of the initiatives tell us a story of the mutually enriching processes between the communities and the organisations that worked with them.

### Way forward

As an alliance MAKAAAM actively engaged both on the ground through relief work, but also at different fora- National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) the Niti Ayog, State governments etc. and put forth its recommendations for strengthening public systems related to food and employment. It put forth immediate demands of ensuring that the food distribution system or the PDS should be universal and not be limited to those who have the documents. It should also be expanded to include nutritious food and not just cereals. One of the major demands of MAKAAAM has been to expand the public works programme to provide assured employment that includes works that enhance the productive assets of women farmers.

In the long run this could be seen as an opportunity to rebuilding, supporting and strengthening ecologically sound rural livelihoods of women. However, it means that robust investments need to be made in agriculture, water and other commons that women depend on and policies that help to protect and enhance their access to resources and not to dispossess them of it. It calls for a vision that brings focus on to women's human rights and transforms the current model of development through reimagining and redistribution of power and resources.

We believe that these examples hold important lessons for reviving livelihoods, in a post COVID India in seeking new pathways to strengthen social and economic solidarities.

**Source:** <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/womens-collectives-bring-change/>



## 4. Case Studies

### Bringing Women to the Forefront of Sustainable Mountain Ecosystems

By Salam Rajesh

*The decade counting from the year 2021 up to the year 2030 is being focused on by the United Nations as significant for the restoration of all types of ecosystems to address several issues confronting the world community, more perversely the climate issues.*

The year 2022 is expected to see activities focused on mountain ecosystems to address myriad issues connected to human life, the natural surroundings and all other life forms that thrive in the natural landscapes. These encompass a global effort in looking forward to a time zone when the blue planet will be relatively free from the stress on environmental degradation and degeneration that threatens climate catastrophe.

Deliberations on the topic are heating up with various research findings and general publications focused on the subject. As a part of this ongoing dialogue, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) discusses the role of women in sustainable mountain ecosystems through its publication 'Critical approaches towards gender in mountain ecosystems' (IUCN Commission on Ecosystem Management, 2021).

Bringing the gender profile at the forefront of the discussion, the IUCN CEM's report says that, "Women are vital to environmental action in mountain ecosystems. Their contributions to resource management, biodiversity conservation, water and food security cannot be stressed enough. On average, women in mountainous communities are more likely to engage in agricultural activities than their male counterparts. Similarly, they are more likely to stay behind as men migrate to urban centres. Since women are at the forefront of mountain ecosystems, they are also more sensitive to environmental change and degradation".

The IUCN gender profile talks generally of women all over the world who live and thrive in mountain ecosystems, linking their lives to the natural surroundings for all of their needs. This is particularly relevant for the people in the mountainous region that geographically is termed as the 'Northeast'. The eight sister States in the region are typically mountainous by nature and the people are adapted to living in rough and tough mountain landscape.

In Manipur, lifestyle is adapted to two dominating landscapes: floodplain and mountain ecosystem. A rough area of around ninety percent of the State is mountainous and is inhabited by different ethnic communities, quite distinguished from one another by their differing lifestyle, food habits, dress and custom, and belief system. The common thing is that they all have to adjust themselves to a lifestyle that is tough and rough by nature.

In this setting is the role of women in providing for the family and working in the agricultural fields for almost the entire period of the year coping with the different seasonal activities. So much so as the IUCN CEM report details, the multiple role of the women here in the State is definitely defined by their ability to harness the resources of nature for their living and sustenance.

In the midst of this hard-profiling conversation on gender is the emerging fact, as the key message in the IUCN report puts it, that, "Women play a key role in nature conservation, yet they often lack the inputs, technologies, training and extension services, and various enablers and linkages that can enhance the effectiveness of their efforts. They rarely formally participate in shaping conservation policies or programs".

The core of the discussion comes to the fact finding conclusion that women in general hardly find space in the decision making process in most instances. As is in the Indian system typically, the predominance of the male in decision making process is too evident. The women are usually relegated to the second layer of community affairs, often not given the opportunity to have their say in the decision making process.

Male chauvinism is all too evident in almost all forums beginning from the village structure to the highest forum at State level. This writer has been witness to several processes at the village structure where the women are there only in namesake, hardly asked for their opinion nor providing space for them to have their say. The little amount of female voice that comes up, too, is subdued by the ultimate decision that is dominated by the male voice. This is then the tragedy when the women are actually co-partners in providing for the family and in managing their agricultural fields and also shouldering equal responsibility in many activities including forest resource management and protection.

The decade counting from the year 2021 up to the year 2030 is being focused by the United Nations as significant for the restoration of all types of ecosystems to address several issues confronting the world community, more perversely the climate issues. There is no differentiation between male and female when it comes to collective effort at global ecosystem restoration. Everyone is a co-partner in this immense task.

The Global Gender Gap Report published by the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2018) states that, "Across the 149 countries studied, no country has yet achieved full gender parity. Moreover, gender disparities are one of the key barriers to economic growth and poverty reduction".

The truth is seen evidently on ground as and when dealing with decisions to be taken at the community level. More often than not, the decisions taken are male-opinion driven with less of time and space given to women to voice their concerns. This writer has been party to several community level interactions where for the better duration the discussions are led by the male voice without prioritizing women and children's needs and concerns.

The IUCN study seeks to understand the level of community-led initiatives where women are the driving force. In South Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America and in Africa, as is true of in many other

smaller nations, women are now seen taking proactive role in conservation and management of different ecosystems ranging from forests to mangroves, wetlands and mountain ecosystems.

Citing multitudes of good examples across the world where women are in the forefront of community-led initiatives in conservation, the IUCN CEM report is specific on the positivity of gender involvement in sustainable mountain ecosystems. The report says, "Notwithstanding the continued challenges of high out-migration rates and policy neglect, the women's solutions demonstrate effectiveness in enhancing the resilience of the target community and empowering women to lead nature conservation initiatives in the region".

Peter R.W.Gerritsen writing for the IUCN CEM report says, "Poverty remains an outstanding concern. Global biodiversity loss is another major challenge that humanity faces. The loss of plant and animal species is rising at an unprecedented rate. Both challenges, poverty and biodiversity depletion, appear as interrelated in mountainous environments, which are often inhabited by structurally disempowered and marginalized indigenous peoples".

Peter's observation cannot be better placed in a setting like the 'Northeast' where for the better part of their lives, mountain communities have to struggle much to achieve food and water security. Depletion of forests and a corresponding loss of water sources is a process that adds to the burden of mountain communities. It, therefore, necessitates prioritizing strategies for intensive ecosystem restoration to address multiple issues of which food and water securities are dire necessities. Policy planners need to lend an ear on this with due earnest.

First published by The Frontier Manipur on 2 Feb. 2022

**Source:** <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/bringing-women-to-the-forefront-of-sustainable-mountain-ecosystems/>

## 'Science of Women' Classes Take on the Patriarchy in Kurdish-Held Northeast Syria

By Elizabeth Flock



Kurdish Syrian women take part in Women's Day celebration in Syria's northeastern city of Qamishli on March 6, 2021. DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

*This reporting was supported by the International Women's Media Foundation's Howard G. Buffett Fund for Women Journalists.*

AL-HASAKAH, Syria—On a sweltering summer day in a military academy just outside al-Hasakah, male fighters grumbled over a mandatory class called "Jineology," or "the science of women." They'd already spent several days learning the basics of women's history and mythology as well as about the damaging effects of patriarchy in their region.

All 102 assembled men were members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of militias in northeast Syria supported by the United States and led by the Kurds, a stateless people indigenous to the Middle East. The jineology class was part of an 18-week academy that would also include military training. Most of the men were Arab and came from conservative communities. The lecturer, who went by the tough-sounding name "Roken 23 Doshka," a nod to the Soviet-era machine gun, was a woman.

As Doshka spoke to the class, some of the men nodded off. One male fighter complained that after a woman he knew had joined an all-female militia, she'd cut her hair short, which was considered



shameful in the Arab community. Then Dilbrin Rumailan, a young fighter with jet-black hair and a confident manner, raised his hand to say the classes had already changed his thinking.

“Before, I didn’t agree if my sister wanted to leave the house because I saw how the girls were getting out and how they were behaving,” Rumailan said, adding that he didn’t let his wife visit her family for longer than an hour at a time. “But now, I see that even the woman has a life, an ideology, and her own independent personality. ... I realize I misbehaved and offended her.”

Although not everyone has been as receptive as Rumailan to the teachings of jineology, the courses have continued to spread across the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). The self-governing, Kurdish-majority region, roughly the size of Denmark, emerged out of the chaos of the Syrian civil war. It declared itself democratic, egalitarian, and feminist, and the philosophy of jineology is core to the Kurds’ social revolution.

Jineology—whose name is a combination of “jin,” the Kurdish word for “woman,” and the Greek word “logos,” which means “word” or “reason”—is not only required learning for most of the SDF’s 100,000 members. Courses are also expanding at the college and master’s degree levels as well as in high schools for the first time this year. No one seems to know how many jineology institutes or courses exist, but it is now being taught in at least eight cities across northeast Syria, from Derik (also known as al-Malikiyah) in the north to Deir al-Zour in the south, from Kobani in the west to Qamishli in the east.

The proliferation of jineology courses comes three years after the SDF declared “total” victory over the Islamic State in Syria, with crucial battles won against the Islamist militants by the all-female militia, the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), which is part of the SDF.

That victory gave the Kurdish-led forces undisputed control over northeast Syria, but it also meant the decline of support from international allies who no longer needed their help in fighting the Islamic State. That change has made AANES far more vulnerable to longtime, outsized enemies, such as Turkey, which the Kurds have been at war with for decades and whose drone strikes on military targets in AANES are an ongoing problem. In late May, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened a new military incursion into northeast Syria.

Despite its shaky future, the Kurds have continued their efforts to transform patriarchal attitudes in the region. The area has long been governed by honor-based tribal and religious codes that have allowed for forced and child marriages, domestic and sexual violence, polygamy, and other harmful practices.

To combat these customs, the Kurds’ ideological leader, Abdullah Ocalan—who famously said, “A country can’t be free unless the women are free”—has been a prominent advocate for the teachings of jineology. Cynics point out that radical gender equality has also meant doubling the recruitment potential for Kurdish-led militias; the YPJ is currently 5,000 women strong, according to SDF commander Newroz Ahmed. Kurdish military forces have also included minors in their ranks: A United Nations report last year found the recruitment and/or use of 119 minors in the Kurdish-led forces in the span of roughly a year. (Ahmed said many girls “come to us and say they want to join, and we refuse them.”)

**Source:** [https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/18/jineology-science-of-women-classes-kurds-northeast-syria-ypj/#cookie\\_message\\_anchor](https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/18/jineology-science-of-women-classes-kurds-northeast-syria-ypj/#cookie_message_anchor).

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