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Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, Volume 21, Number 1, Spring
2005, pp. 35-55 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jfs.2005.0009>



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A MILLION SHAKTIS RISING

Pongala, a Women's Festival in Kerala, India

Dianne Jenett

Each spring, Thiruvananthapuram,¹ the capital city of Kerala, India, shuts down for a day while more than a million women of many religions, communities,² and classes line the streets with their pots to cook porridge for Attukal Amma (Mother).³ They are performing a women's ritual that is deeply rooted in ancient Kerala mythology and cultural tradition and also has powerful meaning for women today, as evidenced by its rapid growth during the past twenty years.

This article was originally presented as a paper at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Denver, Colorado, in November 2001, and was subsequently published as "Cooking Up Equality: Pongala at Attukal Temple" in *Samyukta: A Journal of Women's Studies* 2 (July 2002): 158–68. The present version is an enlarged and theoretically more developed one. It is based on my dissertation, "Red Rice for Bhagavati/Cooking for Kannaki: An Ethnographic/Organic Inquiry of the Pongala Ritual at Attukal Temple, Kerala, South India" (PhD diss., California Institute of Integral Studies, 1999). I am sincerely grateful for the generosity of the women in Kerala who shared their stories and made this study possible, especially M. S. Hema, Kamala Bai, Sreemathi Nair, and Asha Thambi. Thank you also to the anonymous *JFSR* reviewers, whose insightful comments improved this article.

¹ Thiruvananthapuram, literally "city of the sacred serpent," was renamed Trivandrum by the British. Locally, both names are used for the capital city of Kerala.

² I am following the trend in Kerala, where there has been a move away from caste identity to speak of "communities" rather than castes or religions when describing a contemporary situation. I am also using the locally preferred term *Dalit* (suppressed and exploited people) in reference to communities that previously were considered *avarna* (without caste). As John Freeman has noted in "Purity and Violence: Sacred Power in the Theyyam Worship of Malabar" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1991), 96, "[T]he word 'untouchable' has little meaning in the Kerala context when virtually every caste was untouchable to every other caste immediately above it." I have no wish to perpetuate these divisions, but, in order to address the historical context of Goddess worship in Kerala, some use of the painful "upper/lower" terminology is necessary.

³ The names Devi (Goddess), Bhagavati (powerful, supreme deity), Bhadrakali (auspicious Kali, her fierce form), and Amma (Mother) were almost always used interchangeably by women I interviewed to describe the Goddess at the Attukal Temple, at the Kodungallor Bhagavati Temple, and at their neighborhood Bhagavati temples and sacred groves (*kavu*).

My research of Attukal Pongala, a women's offering to the goddess Bhagavati at Attukal Temple in Kerala, South India, brings to the academy some voices of women speaking about their own ritual experiences. This work attempts to place women "center stage" and to present them as "subjects, not objects, with their own experiences and aspirations."⁴ Although there were differences in women's ritual experiences based on caste, class, and religion, I attempt to understand what, in the experience of offering Pongala, each woman found valuable.

In an issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* that asks the question "Who speaks for Hinduism?" Vasudha Narayanan calls for the inclusion of the voices of women and the rituals of "lower-caste" Hindus, or else, she warns, "portrayals of Hinduism will remain the depiction of a high-caste, male-oriented, textual religion, an 'ism' in the best of post-Enlightenment traditions." She urges us to "listen to the goddesses—not the demure, circumspect ones but the dynamic ones who possess and who are progressive."⁵ This article attempts to answer that call.

Pongala is a ritual from the non-Sanskritic tradition in Kerala, which, unlike high-caste Hinduism, does not have written texts. Rather, its texts are the stories and poetry sung as songs (*tottam*), the ritual practices, and the dances and dramas offered as part of the festival to Bhagavati. Unless we consider this material, we will miss the worldview and praxis of the majority, that is, women and those who are outside the caste system.

I first witnessed Pongala in 1995 and was fascinated to learn that, although this public cooking of rice by women was traditionally an offering of the Dalit communities in agricultural fields and sacred groves, it spontaneously became a massive ritual in which women from most Kerala communities now choose to participate. To learn about contemporary women's relationship with the Goddess and the meaning of this ritual for the participants, I researched the ritual in the southern Kerala district of Travancore over a period of four years, interviewing women and offering Pongala myself on three occasions.⁶ It seemed to me at first that offering rice porridge is not empowering to women, because it appears to reinforce gender stereotypes concerning food preparation and cooking, but I came to understand the offering of cooked food to

⁴ Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross, introduction to *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), xv.

⁵ Vasudha Narayanan, "Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 4 (December 2000): 776.

⁶ In the Shakta tradition I am describing, she is understood as the cosmic creatrix and supreme being; therefore, I am following the usage of Savithri de Turreil, "Nayars in a South Indian Matrix: A Study Based on Female-Centered Ritual" (PhD diss., Concordia University, 1995), capitalizing Goddess as a proper noun in the way God is used in Western literature.

deities in South India as an ancient practice with deep ritual significance. Only male priests can make this offering in the Sanskritic temple context, but women have retained this important right in the Dravidian, non-Sanskritic rituals.⁷ Interviews with twenty-nine women representing wide socioeconomic, caste, and religious spectra revealed that they believed the ritual to be empowering for themselves and that their offering was necessary to increase the power (*shakti*) of the Goddess and her capacity to help all her devotees.⁸

Kerala is a small state in southern India whose socialist policies and funding in education, health care, and social programs give its people a basic security and a quality of life comparable in many ways to U.S. and European standards in spite of a per capita income of less than \$500 per year.⁹ Kerala's unique caste system included large Christian and Muslim populations in the elaborate separations that were part of the most complex and most restrictive system of

⁷ I am using the term *Dravidian* following the usage of American scholars John Freeman, "Purity and Violence," and Deborah L. Neff, "Fertility and Power in Kerala Serpent Ritual" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1995); and Malayali scholar Krishna Chaitanya, *Kerala* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1994), to refer to the worldview and culture of the indigenous traditions documented in the early Sangam literature (200–500 C.E.), which continue in the *kavu*-based rituals. (*Malayali* is the nomenclature for people who live in Kerala, from their language, Malayalam.) Freeman points out that although the use of *Dravidian* "allows one to label the distinctiveness of the cultural continuities within the area and through time, it need not be, and within indigenous discourse is not, a homogenizing label that obscures micro-regional variations, social differences, or historical process" (23). *Sanskritic* refers to Brahmanic, high-temple culture. Neff notes that the distinction between the two cultural elements "does not mean to obfuscate the existence of a cultural synthesis between the two, for Hinduism itself is constituted in such a synthesis" (14).

⁸ These interviews took place in Travancore over a four-month period in the spring of 1997 and included women from the Cheruman, Irhava, and Latin Christian (Catholic) communities, which were formerly considered untouchable; Muslim women and women from the "lower Nayars," who were in the middle of the caste system; and women from the "upper Nayar," Tamil Brahman, and Nambudiri Brahman communities. Pseudonyms are used for women who requested them.

The word *shakti* is used in Kerala to denote an energy or life force, a surfeit or capacity to create and maintain life, and/or the productively feminine Devi (Freeman, "Purity and Violence," 306). This life force can be seen and experienced in both men and women under certain circumstances, as they "get the power" of the Goddess. In this tradition Mata Amritanandamayi, also known as Ammachi, is a Malayali woman whom millions of devotees around the world believe to be an embodiment of the divine as Amma. For more on *shakti* and women's empowerment, see Kathleen M. Erndl, "Is Shakti Empowering for Women? Reflections on Feminism and the Hindu Goddess," and Rita DasGupta Sherma, "'Sa Ham—I Am She': Woman as Goddess," in *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, ed. Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 24–51, 91–103. Deborah Neff, in "Fertility and Power" and "Aesthetics and Power in Pambin Tullal: A Possession Ritual of Rural Kerala," *Ethnology* 26, no. 1 (1987): 63–71, provides a detailed description and analysis of *shakti* in contemporary Nayar rituals.

⁹ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor, 2000); and Richard W. Franke and Barbara H. Chasin, *Kerala, Development through Radical Reform*, 2nd rev. ed. (New Delhi: Promilla, 1994).

any state in India. (In addition to untouchability between castes, there was the concept of “unseeability,” which required persons of lower castes to call out their presence or to vacate the road so that higher-caste persons could avoid seeing them.) But, paradoxically, although caste prejudice still exists, Kerala has progressed the furthest and fastest toward communal equity and justice.¹⁰ Until 1936 only a small minority of people were allowed in or near temples, so community rituals were centered on the accessible *kavus*, the sacred groves and fields dedicated to a local goddess who was understood to be the protector of the people of that place. These open-air rituals frequently concluded with women offering Pongala.

Pongala is traditionally a ritual of the Dalits, and until caste barriers began to fall, women of the upper castes would supply lower-caste women with the pots, fuel, and ingredients to offer Pongala but would not cook it themselves, and both families would then share the porridge as a blessing from the Goddess. As neighborhoods are changing, some sacred groves and family shrines are developing into larger temples with Brahman priests and practices, but some of the Dravidian offerings associated with the *kavus*, such as Pongala, have been retained, and now people from many communities and religions participate.

In Kerala today, few public rituals center on women or feature women as ritual specialists, but this was not always the case. Remnants of an earlier tradition of women as priestesses and shamans of the Goddess may be found, such as the Bharani Festival at Kodungallor, wherein women act as priestesses and *veliccappatu* (literally, “bringers of light,” who are oracles and healers). Female life-cycle rituals, as well as rituals to the family tutelary serpent (*naga*) in which women participate in oracular capacities, have been important rituals of the matrilineal system. For about a thousand years, from at least the eleventh century C.E., a substantial proportion of the population of Kerala, including most Hindus and Muslims and a few Christians, followed matrilineal descent and lived in joint families in which children were raised by a woman and her natal kin.¹¹ In this system, known as *marumakkathayam*, people lived matrilocally and a male’s primary responsibility was to his sister’s children, not his own. “Female” was an “auspicious category,” and from the moment of her birth a female was “perceived as the (potential) purveyor of prosperity, fertility, and good fortune.”¹² Deborah Neff compares women in this system with the “truly powerful South India goddesses” and sees them as “symbolic virgins—daughters and sisters whose life force is channeled for the auspicious prosperity of

¹⁰ Franke and Chasin, *Kerala*, 100.

¹¹ A. Aiyappan, *The Personality of Kerala* (Trivandrum: University of Kerala, 1982).

¹² de Tournell, “Nayars in a South Indian Matrix,” 48.

the ‘matrilineal’ *taravadu*.¹³ (*Taravadu* is the indivisible combination of the people, land, house, ancestral serpent, lineage goddess, and ancestors reckoned from a common ancestress.)

This matrilocal and matrilineal system began dissolving in the early twentieth century, and by 1976 it was legally abolished. Now almost all people in Kerala live in nuclear families, but members of matrilineages strive to keep close family relationships, retaining many of the positive attitudes toward women of the matrilineal system. Female fetuses are not selectively aborted, girls and boys are equally educated, women inherit equally with men, and widows do not lose status upon the death of their husbands.¹⁴

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the most important and elaborate rituals in a family centered on women and their bodies: *talikettukalyanam*, a mandatory prepuberty ceremony for a young girl that “celebrated her as a source of power and life and claimed her sexual potential for the lineage”; and *tirandukalayanam*, a menarche ritual.¹⁵ In the early 1900s Bhadrakali worship, blood sacrifice, and prepuberty and menarche rituals were challenged by religious reformers, social activists, and advocates of equal rights, who wanted everyone to have access to temples and to be allowed to adopt the deities and ritual practices of the upper castes. Families dropped the expensive public celebration and feasts of the woman-centered rituals, but some families today hold low-key, private menarche rituals.

Prepuberty and menarche rituals depend on close communities of women and on spontaneous free time, given that the rites are timed with bodily processes and a lunar calendar. Separation of women into nuclear families and the conflicting demands of jobs and schools timed with a solar calendar make the traditional rituals almost impossible to perform.¹⁶ As they are fading, the Pongala Festival at the Attukal Temple is growing at an astounding rate. From a few women cooking in a field across from a small shrine fifty years ago, it has

¹³ Neff, “Fertility and Power,” 233.

¹⁴ Leela Gulati, Iqbal Gulati, and Ramalingam, *Kerala: A Gender Profile* (New Delhi: Royal Netherlands Embassy, 1996).

¹⁵ M. J. Gentes, “Scandalizing the Goddess at Kodungallur,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 15, no. 2 (1992): 295–322. Scholarship in this area suggests that during these rituals the young women *were* the Goddess. Conversely, the Goddess’s menstruation (*urruval*) was an important annual agricultural ritual when for three days all work was stopped, all contracts restarted, and all debts forgiven. For further discussion of the connections between menstruation and Goddess rituals in Kerala, see Sarah Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence, and the Worship of the Goddess Kali* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999); de Tournell, “Nayars in a South Indian Matrix”; and Judy Grahn, “Are Goddesses Metaformic Constructs? An Application of Metaformic Theory to Goddess Celebrations and Rituals in Kerala, India” (PhD diss., California Institute of Integral Studies, 1999).

¹⁶ Although menarche rituals are rare, Judy Grahn and I interviewed four young women who had recently had menarche rituals, and we videotaped one of the celebrations.

evolved to a mass gathering of hundreds of thousands of women, and Attukal Temple, as a direct consequence, has grown to be a powerful and prosperous temple.

Pongala is an offering of rice, boiled until thick white foam spills over the top of the pot, which represents an overabundance, “more than enough,” and it is offered to fulfill a woman’s vow to the Goddess. The ingredients are simple, and almost any woman can afford to do it. Rice, after being boiled out in the open in a new red clay pot over a coconut fire, is sweetened with jaggery, a dark brown, unrefined sugar from the palm tree. This form of offering by women to the *yakshis* and the fierce goddess Korravai appears in the Sangam literature of the fifth century.¹⁷ (*Yakshis* are sexually alluring female deities associated with the sacred groves, and the goddess Korravai was a precursor to Bhadrakali.) In an ethnography from the 1930s, Pongala is described in tribal rituals, as an offering to the sun or the moon for protection from disease; in menarche rituals of various castes; in rituals done during the seventh month of a woman’s pregnancy; and in Dalit agricultural and *kavu* festivals to Bhadrakali.¹⁸ In the *kavu* context, any woman who is not menstruating, including widows, can offer Pongala. This contrasts with the food offerings in patrilineal Brahmanic-community domestic rituals, which can be prepared only by married women, and in Sanskritic temples, where they can be offered only by priests.

Pongala Day 1997

The ten-day Pongala Festival begins in the month of Kumbham (February–March). (Literally, *Kumbham* means “earthen pot,” also understood to be the Goddess and her generative capacity.) The ninth day, a full-moon day, is Pongala Day. Women awaken in the dark of the early morning to the din of music blaring from the street. The sound of splashing water begins to fill the air as the women pour buckets of water over their heads to bathe in preparation for Attukal Pongala. By the light of the moon, groups of women and girls wash the street, arrange three bricks in a triangle, and carefully set their pots on their hearths. Film music and popular songs about Pongala in the Malayalam language provide a joyous background, charging the atmosphere with the excitement of the women’s festival. I’m joining in offering Pongala today, so after my head bath I put on a new *mundu*, the traditional dress of Kerala: two

¹⁷ *The Cilappatikaram of Ilanko Atikal: An Epic of South India*, trans. R. Parthasarathy, Translations from the Asian Classics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, *The Castes and Tribes of Travancore* (Trivandrum: Superintendent Government Press, 1937).

simple lengths of homespun white cotton wrapped over an underskirt and blouse.

By dawn the streets and courtyards for seven kilometers surrounding Attukal Temple are already filled with women preparing to cook for the Goddess. Excitement and anticipation have been building for the past eight days, as women from South India have poured into the city carrying their pots, rice, and firewood. Women who came days ago to claim the most auspicious spots for their cooking fire (those closest to Amma, at the temple) now carefully examine their pots for weak spots or holes. If a vessel is defective, a new one is purchased, selected from the enormous mounds of clay red pots piled against the walls in the city. State and city officials have pressed every agency into service. Autorickshaw drivers and cabdrivers work without pay, carrying women to and from the temple area. Special trains and buses are provided free of charge and arrive packed with women. City water trucks supply water for the women's pots; the city supplies the bricks. One year, when not enough bricks were provided, I've been told, women calmly began dismantling the public walls and traffic circles.

Vendors line the winding streets, selling items that reflect the lives of women in Kerala: brightly colored bangles, children's toys, stainless steel pots and pressure cookers, the red dots (*bindi*) that women wear on their foreheads, red silk to dress the Goddess, spices, posters of gods and goddesses, silver devotional items,¹⁹ camphor, flowers, jasmine headdresses for young daughters, and bouquets of flowers to be carried by young boys. Devotees set up elaborate neighborhood shrines for Devi in her many manifestations. She is the red, pale, formal Attukal Amma, sitting on a cushion of luscious pink and red flowers. She is the shiny black, piercing Karinkali,²⁰ wearing a *mala*, a necklace of limes, to cool her. In another guise, Bhadrakali, she is blue, ferocious, and in motion, with a garland of severed heads, protruding tongue, wide eyes, and curved, animal-like teeth.

It is auspicious to live near Attukal Temple, because the Pongala Festival brings prosperity to those who live in the Goddess's territory and who help her devotees, the women who come to offer Pongala. As more women participate each year and extend the area of the cooking, more of the city is brought under her domain. Some Christian and Muslim families invite women into their courtyards to cook Pongala, and every courtesy is extended both to friends who have been invited by the family and to those who just show up in the vicinity.

Narrow streets are completely filled with women and young girls, all mov-

¹⁹ Some of these silver items are representations of a part of the body that needs healing—an eye, ear, leg, head, or arm—which are given to the Goddess. In some Christian churches they are offered to Mary.

²⁰ The Goddess in her *ugramoorthy*, or fierce, aspect, Karinkali is from the mountainous areas.

ing in the direction of the temple. Their hair is wet from their baths and shiny from the coconut oil they rub into it. Thousands of women move smoothly together down the street, some holding hands, touching and stroking each other's arms. Young girls have their own ceremonial observance, *talipolli*, during Pongala. *Talipolli* is offered by girls under the age of eleven or twelve as a *nercha* (vow, promise) to safeguard them from disease and to increase their beauty and wealth. (The age varies, but it is clear that the girls should not have experienced menarche.) Mothers and aunts paint intricate designs on the young girls' faces, adorn their hair with crowns of jasmine, and dress them beautifully in traditional long skirts, blouses, and often vests. One by one they walk slowly or are carried in their mothers' arms to the presence of Attukal Amma, where they offer *poli* (araca-nut flower bunches, rice, and coconut) on a brass plate to the Goddess.

Women say that it's important for them to do the cooking together and without men. This is one day when they aren't responsible for their husbands and families and they can be free of any distractions and have a concentrated mind. The only men who are allowed near the temple on Pongala Day are priests, temple authorities, policemen, firemen, and men who have special passes, such as reporters and volunteers to help with crowd control. These passes are difficult to get from the temple authorities and are highly prized.

In confined spaces such as the courtyards, about two feet separate one woman's fire from the next one, so latecomers must thread their way carefully through women with their pots and paraphernalia and squeeze into a vacant space. Women prepare the hearths but will not light their fires until given the signal by the temple. Occasionally a woman accidentally sets her clothing or that of her neighbor on fire. Thus, cotton *mundus* and saris are favored not only because they are traditional but also because they are safer than the new polyester variety, which is highly combustible. Some women have been fasting for several weeks in preparation for Pongala, abstaining from eating meat and from having sexual relations. Most women have vowed not to eat or drink during this day until the offering is completed, in the late afternoon.

By mid-morning the sun is beating down and the temperature is over ninety-five degrees. Women have begun putting cloths on their heads as shields from the sun. Women from the Dalit communities wrap turquoise or pink plaid cotton material around themselves as skirts and wear white, towel-like upper cloths over blouses. Sitting beside them are women wearing more costly white *mundus* with gold and colored borders, the traditional dress of women from the higher-status Nayar caste. A few women, probably Brahmans, wear bright silk saris. It's impossible for me to tell which of the women might be Christian or Muslim, but women from those communities do participate. Fifty years ago the mothers of the women who today offer Pongala could not have drunk from the same well, eaten in the same room, or even walked down

the street at the same time, yet today they sit and cook for the Goddess side by side.

The fuel for cooking Pongala is always dried coconut-palm leaves (*choottu*) and the outer covering of the coconut flower (*kodumba*), and most of the women have brought their fuel from home. Even the most modest Kerala home has a coconut tree that provides cooking fuel; oil; material for mats, baskets, and decorations; and of course coconuts, an important cooking ingredient. Women unpack bundles they have brought from home containing the rice, jaggery, and other ingredients they may use. Before cooking it, they wash the rice carefully, some taking as long as ten minutes for this part of the ritual, because no grain should be dropped.

Food believed to have intrinsic healing qualities or given as an offering for a cure that has already been effected is also prepared. There is an expression of joy and satisfaction on the face of a young woman stuffing sticky, sweet rice into wrappers of pungent green leaves for steaming. She is preparing *terali*, a sweet made of rice powder and jaggery steamed in cones made of leaves from the cinnamon tree (*vayana*) and eaten to cure stomachaches and headaches. *Mandaputtu* dough of rice powder and green gram is molded by women into the shape of body parts that need relief and is steamed in a pot.

Although the goddess of the festival is Attukal Amma, or Mother, in none of the stories is she a biological mother. Attukal Amma is also understood to be Bhadrakali, “auspicious Kali.”²¹ In this form she is black or blue in color and is often shown with a protruding tongue and wearing skulls around her neck and a belt of severed arms. The image (*pratistha*) of Attukal Amma is made from the wood of a live jackfruit tree carved in the form of a young girl and covered with gold leaf. Bhagavati is autonomous, not married, and usually understood to be a virgin. In various ritual contexts and sometimes spontaneously, men and women go into trance, allowing Bhagavati to continually communicate her wishes. The Goddess, having a *kavu* lineage, is “in the sacred grove,” so, when temples such as Attukal are built around the original *kavu*, an opening is left in the roof over the place where the Goddess is installed so that she is always open to the sky.

²¹ Elaborated in many versions, the basic story of Bhadrakali is that an *asura* (male demon) named Darikan, after undergoing arduous penance, asked the god Brahma to grant him the boon of immortality. Brahma asked Darikan whether he also desired immunity from women, but Darikan contemptuously rejected this offer. Darikan proceeded to go on a rampage of destruction so horrible that the whole world and all the gods petitioned the god Shiva to save the universe. Helpless himself, Shiva used his energy to call forth from his third eye a goddess, Bhadrakali. Armed with weapons from all the gods, she battled the demon and finally killed him by cutting off his head, thus restoring order to the world. During the premonsoon hot season, between January and April, performance rituals reenacting some parts of this story are held in most Devi temples in Kerala. For studies of the performance rituals *teyyam* and *mudiyettu*, see Freeman, “Purity and Violence”; and Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*.

The story of Attukal Devi that connects her to the original Nayar *kavu* shrine, now the heart of Attukal Temple, is that she appeared to the *karnavar* as a beautiful young girl and asked him to take her across the river. (The *karnavar*, the eldest male member of a lineage in the *marumakkathayam* system, is the primary ritual, social, and economic male authority for the matrilineage.) After carrying her across, he left her in his *taravadu* ("house" in this context) and went to get her food. When he returned, the girl had disappeared, but that night she came to him in a dream as the Goddess and asked that he build her a temple. In another popular story explaining the origins of Pongala, Devi came as a stranger, an old woman, who appeared to poor women in the neighborhood. The Dalit women took pity on her and fed her the little bit of food they had: rice and jaggery. The old woman revealed herself as the Goddess and said that Pongala was now her favorite offering and that she would accept it only from women.

By 9:30 A.M. on Pongala Day, the pots are filled, the ingredients are ready, and the heat is oppressive. As the women wait and the tension mounts, suddenly the drums and the repetitive, rhythmic clanging of cymbals increase in speed and intensity, accompanying the long oral poem that has been continuously sung for the past eight days by three old men who sit in a thatched shed facing Devi. This song, an integral part of the festival, recounts the story of Kannaki, a woman who is wronged both by her unfaithful husband and by her king. After the king unjustly accuses her husband of theft and executes him, Kannaki confronts him with the truth of her husband's innocence, severely censuring the ruler and demanding justice. The king collapses and dies, but Kannaki, still full of grief and fury, rips off her breast, a symbol of her sexual power, and hurls it at the city of Madurai, setting the city aflame. Kannaki travels across the south of India until she reaches Kodungallor, now the site of the most famous of the Kerala Bhagavati temples. The best-known literary version of this story is the fifth-century South Indian epic poem *Cilappatikaram*, but oral versions in Kerala merge the stories of Bhadrakali and Kannaki. Devotees believe Kannaki to be an incarnation of Kali and Attukal to be the place where she rested for the night on her way to Kodungallor. In all versions of the story, Kannaki represents the capacity of divine power in female form to bring retributive justice to those whom the law fails to protect.

At the point in the recitation of the oral poem when Kannaki rips off her breast, the priest lights the first of the devotees' fires from Attukal Amma's fire in the temple. The air is filled with the sounds of the women's ululating,²² ringing bells, and the deafening din of firecrackers and drums as the fire comes

²² This ululating, a trilling sound (*kurava* in Malayalam), is also made by older women at critical moments in weddings and menarche rituals. It removes all negative elements and restores auspiciousness.

down the line from the temple, passed from woman to woman. Women near me reach over with coconut fronds and touch them in the flames of the fire held by the woman next to them and then light their own fires. Women who are not near the temple hear a loudspeaker announcement, light a fire, and pass the flame down their street or in their courtyard. Women sit next to each other in a continuous linkage to the Devi. They believe, "If I can't be next to the Goddess, then I can be next to a woman who is nearer than I am." Soon the air is filled with the smoke and heat of hundreds of thousands of coconut fires.

The acrid smoke is burning hot, white, and thick. Women breathe through the upper cloths of their *mundus* and wipe away the blinding tears that stream from their eyes. They watch the Pongala pots and the flames simultaneously to ensure they do not set themselves or women near them on fire. After the water begins to boil, each woman takes a handful of rice, careful not to spill any, and makes a circling motion (*arati*) over the pot as she puts in three handfuls of rice in succession. She then carefully adds the rest of the rice. As the cooking continues, she minds the fire, adding just the right amount of fuel to bring the rice and water to a complete boil. Creamy white foam slowly rises, expanding, filling the pot until it's barely contained by the lip. Many of the urban upper-caste women do not know how to cook over a coconut fire or other details of Pongala preparation, so they are sometimes instructed by the Dalit women.

Some women have incorporated changes consistent with their community customs. One is the use of the white, polished rice used by Brahman women, rather than the red, incompletely polished rice used by the majority of the women. Brahman women, and women who have been instructed by them, limit their flames and stir their pots so that the rice foam doesn't spill over. One Brahman woman worried that the foam should spill to the east, toward the sun, and that if it didn't, it would be bad luck, so she didn't allow it to boil over. A Muslim woman who was instructed by Brahmans said, "It has to overflow, that is the part of Devi's blessing. That is one belief. That is the symbol. But we [when she does it with the Brahmans] don't do it. We stir it—we don't let it overflow. We limit the pot, even the flame." Hema, a Tamil Brahman, agreed that Brahman women didn't want the pot to boil over, because that seemed "wasteful."

Most women, however, believe it is crucial that the pot boil over, spilling creamy foam down the side. A young Nayar woman explained: "It is believed that it is an important thing that this Pongala has to boil and come up out of the vessel. It is believed that she has accepted our Pongala and she has given us grace." Sreemathi, a house servant, concurred: "It must boil up and spill. I don't know the particular meaning, but I believe that the Pongala should burst out, and only then the Goddess will be pleased. It should be full. It is the bursting [that is important]."

Given that the overflowing of the pot is traditionally the most important moment in the ritual, this difference in a critical ritual detail and its interpretation is striking. Deborah Neff, in her ethnography on the *kavu* rituals of the Nayar community, observes that Sanskritic rituals intend to *contain* the power, or *shakti*, of the deity, whereas non-Sanskritic rituals attempt to *engage* and *increase* the *shakti*. The boiling over of the pot at the moment of Pongala is an example of this difference between the two traditions.

The women of the Sanskritic tradition want to limit the possibility that the Pongala might spill the wrong way, so they stir their pots to control the process. The women of the *kavu* tradition want the fullest, most potent Pongala possible and are willing to take the risk that the pots won't boil over or will boil in an inauspicious direction. Most women want a Pongala, an overspilling of the foam down the side of their pots, because then they know that the Devi has accepted their offering. We all cry from the smoke, the wind is blowing into our eyes, and at times it seems we might suffocate. Finally my pot boils over and I feel the tension release in my body.

The fires die down, and we cover our finished pots with banana leaves. Some women have been tending more than one pot, perhaps for a friend who was sick or for someone who had her menstrual period and could not participate. Women from widely different communities meet in the same courtyards year after year and know each other only through this ritual. In this relaxed space women seem happy to talk about Pongala.

Most women ask the Goddess for something and make a vow that if it is granted they will offer Pongala: "If you give my husband a job . . . if my son recovers . . . if my daughter passes her exam . . . I will offer Pongala." Their relationship with Bhagavati is reciprocal. There is no requirement to do anything for the Goddess, but there is a clear understanding that if a woman's request is granted but her vow to the Goddess is not fulfilled, there will certainly be consequences, a strong sign that the Goddess is displeased.

In an article of this length, it is not possible to address the cultural, familial, and historical specificity of each woman's voice, but I bring their collective voices and arrange them here thematically as they spoke about their lives, their relationships with the Goddess, and the values they associate with the ritual. This approach reflects the communal and cooperative nature of the Pongala Festival and the intimate bond and reciprocity between the women and the Goddess that it affirms. Western academic discourse might lead us to emphasize themes of female leadership, independence, and religious creativity and initiative in the Pongala ritual. For the women themselves, however, the themes of interdependence, unity, and equality are uppermost.

The Goddess Sustains and Assists

Many women have a firm belief that the Goddess is actively helping them by providing for them. Kalyani, a vegetable seller of the Irhava community who has offered Pongala as part of her tradition for fifty years, says she is able to afford to eat each day because Devi gives her food and sustenance. Years ago she was worried, because she had to leave the vicinity of Attukal and the Goddess who had protected her: “It is only food I have asked for in distress. I asked the Devi, ‘I am going away with my children from here; please, I have no one to give me water.’ I left fifty years ago. I have never missed food in all those years. Devi is taking care of me.”

In all economic classes, with unemployment over 20 percent, getting and keeping jobs was a priority for the women, their husbands, and their children. Competitive exams now determine a student’s occupational and economic future, and mothers are completely responsible for the educational achievements of their children. Therefore, mothers and young women offer Pongala in fulfillment of vows they promised to keep if the marks were high. Although the average age of marriage for women is twenty-two, several of the women of this age to whom I spoke did not want to get married before they had a good job. Most marriages are arranged, and if a woman has a good job her parents don’t have to pay dowry, so, as Asha, a college-educated young woman and an assistant in a computer company, remarked, she would be “self-sufficient” in the marriage and “not a burden” if she had a job.²³ Two young women commented with humor that they knew their mothers were offering Pongala and asking the Devi for good husbands for them, whereas they themselves were asking for jobs!

Married women offered Pongala for the well-being of their entire families. Shakunthala, a woman from a rural matrilineal Nayar community, voiced this goal: “It is for the general prosperity of the family, the health of children, our general welfare. We will do this every year if all these are granted by Devi.” Although husbands were occasionally mentioned as intended beneficiaries of the ritual, Pongala is not a ritual (as some of the Sanskritic ones are) to ensure the long life and health of a husband. Devaki, a former construction worker, stated succinctly, “I asked for good health and that my children would live. Nothing special.”

²³ Common in the Brahman and Christian communities, dowry is a fairly recent custom in the matrilineal and lower castes, and rapidly accelerating dowry demands could soon become a factor in parents’ choosing not to have female children.

Obligation to Share Resources

Kalyani, a woman who lives on the edge financially, spoke of her responsibility to feed women who came to do Pongala:

There was an obligation to feed all of the people who came to do Pongala in front of my house, and I would wonder how I would make the money. As I would have those thoughts, people would offer me a lot of money and I would get enough and more to feed all the people. Because it is your obligation to feed everyone who comes. So I could do it and I would have plenty left over. That is always my experience.

Shivari, a middle-aged woman from a remote fishing village, spoke of her experience as a stranger offering Pongala in the streets of Thiruvananthapuram:

If you were doing Pongala in front of a house, those people fed you, so none had to go hungry. They would see to it. It is an offering to Devi—anyone who comes gets fed. The house that we were in had so many people, and it was quite difficult cooking for so many.

But if you want a pot, urgently, if you need water, they will give it to the women. When we get thirsty, they give us lime water and curd [buttermilk] and water. And they will give plantain if we want. I didn't know them the first year, but now I go back every year and I know them. And everyone is helping everyone.

The women cooking are required by the Goddess to share with strangers all resources necessary to perform Pongala, and the Goddess is paying attention. According to Chandramadi, the matriarch of a rural matrilineal family, "When you go to the Pongala, you try to share everything there. There is nothing that belongs to you exclusively. So you don't try to exclusively appropriate whatever you have taken; not give it to another person. If you did that, then you would be immediately given a [disapproving] sign of it before you reach home. You would have to share." According to this principle, the transformed and blessed food, Pongala, is shared not only with families and neighbors but also with strangers. The women on their way home often give it to people on the streets.

Protection and Justice from a Loving Mother

Women imparted to me that Devi provides protection from disease and from one's enemies. Smallpox and cholera, the diseases traditionally associated with Devi, have been eradicated in Kerala, but women promise Pongala in return for protection from or cure of chicken pox and other illnesses. Kalyani, the former agricultural worker, called on Devi to keep chicken pox from spreading

from her son to others in her family, which in her straitened economic circumstances would be disastrous. Kamala, an English professor whose mother was a nurse, reported that women believe the heat and smoke of the Pongala fires prevent future disease, especially smallpox and chicken pox.

Some women, particularly those in the groups that have been socially and economically oppressed, expressed a firm belief that the Goddess was protecting and actively assisting them. “You can feel the protection of somebody helping you,” Kalyani said. Usha, from the fishing village, said, “We firmly believe the Goddess can help us.” Kamala, the first professor in Kerala from a Dalit community, said, “The fierce aspect of the Goddess protects people from their enemies and from wicked people. For our enemies she should be bad, and for us she should be a loving mother.”

Kannaki, whose grief and wrath set a city aflame, also stands for justice for some women—the justice due an innocent, wronged woman. One group of wealthier, older Tamil Brahman women connected Kannaki to women’s rights and women’s sense of injustice, particularly the injustice inflicted by temporal authority. “Yes!” Bala, one such woman, exclaimed. “She stands for women’s rights! Justice—women’s justice. But [she is] still a mother.” Most women I spoke with expressed devotion to a Goddess who, though capable of terrible wrath and anger on their behalf, was also a loving, protective mother whom they did not fear.²⁴

Positive Action and Peace of Mind

Life is changing rapidly for women in Kerala, with many women working full-time outside the home in addition to taking responsibility for their housework, cooking, and children. Women are feeling the pressure. Bala, a Tamil Brahman mother, said, “People always have tension. Always some problem or another. They want to get away and do something for themselves. They don’t have time to do all these things, these get-togethers and all. Life is so fast, people are doing so much.”

Pongala is a joyous holiday, a break from the routine and pressure of daily life, and an unusual opportunity for women to come together. For some women,

²⁴ Sarah Caldwell’s 1995 dissertation was published as *Oh Terrifying Mother* just as I began my research. She concluded from her fieldwork in northern and central Kerala that the women of Kerala are afraid of Bhadrakali and are not devoted to her (203). This prompted me to ask the women directly about their relationship with the fierce aspects of the Goddess. Only one woman, a Brahman, said she had once been afraid of Bhadrakali, and she attributed this to her education in a Christian school that considered the fierce Goddess “weird.” Her mother-in-law, who lived in Kodungallor, told her to look into Bhadrakali’s eyes to see that she is a benign, loving mother. Jenett, “Red Rice for Bhagavati,” 276.

particularly those who are balancing full-time jobs and raising children, Pongala is also an opportunity to leave the traditional role of mother and wife. Prasanna, an engineer and teacher, said, "It's fun, getting out of the house. One day we are fully free from the burdens of the house. We offer the Pongala for the Goddess, and after that is over women will sit there and forget all their problems. Women always are having family problems. So we forget. We sit and talk, and there is also a social aspect."

Although they may have originally done Pongala because their friends were doing it, for the women I interviewed Pongala seems to have become a permanent, important part of their lives. As Thara, a nineteen-year-old Nayar woman said, "It's not just fun, it is devotion."

The Pongala Festival provides a break in the annual round that does not merely offer recreation but also affords a sense of emotional comfort and renewed strength to face the challenges of life throughout the year. Peace of mind and a reduction in tension were mentioned by many women as two of the benefits of Pongala, produced by a belief that they are taking some positive action and that Devi is helping them. Kalyani said, "Very often what happens is, there is somebody sick, and you need to go to Pongala to feel the comfort. You can feel the protection of somebody helping you." Shivari, who prayed for her wayward son, told me, "There is no reduction of sorrow actually, but there is a feeling that we can bear it. Devi is there, that is our belief." Usha, who gave away Pongala to strangers as she returned to her fishing village, said, "I have satisfaction. I have peace of mind. I distributed Pongala on the way with the firm belief that things will turn out better." A woman whose husband had a mental illness had offered Pongala each year to remove the "mental tension" they suffered by taking a positive action on his behalf. Summa, a Muslim woman whose Hindu husband was killed in a motorcycle accident, had been afraid to appear in court but vowed to the Goddess that she would do a Pongala and through this act received the courage to testify.

One of the primary differences between a Sanskritic and a non-Sanskritic offering is that in the temples of the Brahmanical gods the offering must be mediated by a priest who is paid to prepare the offering and to perform the *puja* (a ritual communication with the Goddess). Some people now pay a priest to offer Pongala to Devi at Attukal. But as Asha said, "There is a difference. We will get a lot of satisfaction if we have done it with our own hands. We will get a lot of satisfaction and comfort that we have done it to the Mother. It is easy to give the money to the temple. If we have a chance to carry and do it, it is better to do it ourselves." From the women's remarks we can see that Pongala provides psychological support not only by offering a joyous break from their demanding daily routines but also by giving women an opportunity to actively be in relationship with the powerful Goddess who provides them material support and emotional comfort.

Equality of Religions

It is probably not surprising that some women from the Christian and Muslim communities participate in Attukal Pongala. From the earliest recorded history in Kerala, there appears to have been a tolerance for and even a promotion of diversity in religious expression. Many women I interviewed were comfortable visiting Christian churches, Muslim mosques, and Hindu temples alike. Fatima, a department chair at a university and a Muslim, informed me that on the day she got her car, the first trip she took was to a mosque and then to a temple to have it blessed, and she took her son to a temple for his first rice feeding. Asha's family members are deeply devoted Hindus who "go to almost all temples" and also frequent churches. "I even go to churches. All the members of my family go to the Christian church. We have faith in it. We think that all is one God." Renu, who works as a translator, often visits Hindu temples, but she says her Catholic church does not approve: "People always ask me if I'm a Hindu, and I don't know what to say. Partially I am. People always ask me after the Mass if I am Hindu or Christian, because there was a big problem in my hostel because I went to a temple with my friend."

Especially in times of crisis, several women I interviewed visited "powerful" shrines to ask for help, regardless of the religious sect. Shivari, a fisherwoman, made vows in a church, mosque, and temple to ask for the safe return of her son. As her friend Kamala said, "The religions are no different—the mosque, the church, the temple. Everybody respects all of them. Even though they are Hindus. These are such perilous times, you know, when you are undergoing so much agony that cannot be explained in words, then you say, 'I will give You'—mosque, church, temple, there is no difference."

Equality before the Goddess

Any woman of any caste, religion, class, or nationality is welcome to participate in Attukal Pongala, and almost every woman can afford to do so, because it is a simple, inexpensive offering. A vegetable seller expressed the principle of social equality that prevails during Pongala most emphatically: "Devi doesn't differentiate between poor and rich; it is we who differentiate." In one of our conversations Asha told me, "Before the Devi, everyone is equal and there is no difference, higher or lower. There is no distinction in front of Devi."

Nayar and Brahman women mentioned the theme of social equality more often than women from the Dalit communities. Chandramadi, a seventy-year-old Nayar woman who rarely leaves her rural *taravadu* land but comes fifty kilometers by bus to Thiruvananthapuram to offer Pongala, said,

Yes, generally when people get together there is competition and there is jealousy. But in Attukal, when we go together, there is oneness,

there is no competition, there is no strife. It is all one. You accept the equality of everyone. Neither would you try to be superior at any time to anyone.

We have come to realize that there is a place where everyone can meet on an equal footing, and we all like to participate in it. We wouldn't do it earlier, but now we are happy to do it.

When I asked Sreemathi, a servant to Brahmins who had offered Pongala at Attukal all her life, how she felt about the Brahmins and new groups now doing it, she said, "In the earlier times, only Hindus did Pongala, but now everyone including Christians and Moslems are doing it. There is no difference between the communities." Kerala still has distinctions based on caste and now class, but for this one day the erasure of social difference and an affirmation of oneness prevail.

Many of the women we interviewed worked in offices or attended college, where they have developed friendships across diverse communities and religions. These friendships contribute to non-Hindu women's participation in Pongala. Renu, a Christian, went to her first Pongala with a Hindu friend from college. Fatima, a Muslim who goes with the women in her government office, told me, "All the ladies in my office all are going. Our servants are also going. Everybody is going. Rich and poor, all are going. Film stars. All of them have the same materials, the same way of doing it. There is no separation, no one is special. There is no separation between the rich and the poor. No special area, everyone does it together."

In light of the Kerala history of differentiating and separating one community from another in the smallest details of every area of life, this statement illustrates the power of Pongala to affirm the political, religious, and social changes that have been under way for the past one hundred years and are still continuing.

Paradoxically, Dalit women have traditionally had the most personal freedom, and they are losing their autonomy as they adopt higher-caste norms for women.²⁵ However, women from all the formerly matrilineal communities have lost security and autonomy, as the social system has shifted to nuclear families headed by men.²⁶ Equality, in the sense of having the right to adopt norms from the dominant castes, can work against women. Marion den Uyl finds that the new values being adopted are rooted in the current socially dominant views on labor and sexuality in the nuclear family, in which the father-husband as authority and breadwinner and the mother-wife as subservient

²⁵ Karin Kapadia, *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste, and Class in Rural South India*, Studies in the Ethnographic Imagination (Boulder: Westview, 1995), 253.

²⁶ Marion den Uyl, *Invisible Barriers: Gender, Caste, and Kinship in a Southern Indian Village*, trans. Aileen Stronge (Utrecht, Netherlands: International, 1995).

housewife play central roles. The new values include “sexual chastity, monogamy, obedience and meekness,” and “the changing views on work, marriage and sexuality contribute to a loss of freedom of movement, decline in labor participation and limitation of their [women’s] access to land.”²⁷ In the new marital norm dowry is expected, thus transferring the woman’s traditional inheritance from herself to the man to “buy” him.

Women can now exercise some choices regarding which values, traditions, symbols, rituals, and even goddesses they adopt. Perhaps the most dramatic exercise of this freedom of choice is their enthusiastic embracing of the non-Sanskritic Pongala as “their” ritual, with its values of tolerance, egalitarianism, and community.

Women’s Relationship with the Goddess

One of the most remarkable features of Pongala is that many women believe that Attukal Amma comes out of the temple and is one of the women cooking in the crowd. Thus, a woman or girl of any age or community can *be* the Goddess. The Tantric basis for Goddess practices in Kerala makes the concept of Devi as immanent—as being one of the women—both significant and understandable, because a common concept in Tantric ideology is that women represent or manifest the Goddess in a ritual context.²⁸ Because there are three stories of Devi—as a young *kanya* (virgin), as the mature Kannaki/Kali, and as an old woman—she could be any girl or woman in the crowd. Sreemathi, who had offered Pongala for thirty years at Attukal, said Devi is seen as a young girl bathing near the temples. Women and temple authorities told me that Devi is frequently seen as an old woman in the neighborhood, particularly around the time of Pongala. Rumors of her sighting buzz through the crowd, but, upon being recognized, she suddenly disappears.

Almost all the women offer Pongala each year at Attukal, once they have begun. Although they acknowledge the difficulty of the heat, smoke, and physical exertion, they still want to do it. Prasanna said, “The first time I went, I thought, ‘I’ll never go again.’ And after that, every year we [women] feel like going. It has become part of our life. Every year we have to go.” The group of Tamil Brahman women, one of the last groups to begin to do Pongala, expressed the centrality of Pongala to their lives: “We can’t imagine our lives without Pongala. We have gotten so attached to it. We can’t live without Pongala, that is what we feel!”

Attukal Pongala, which now extends more than seven kilometers in a concentric circle with Attukal Temple at its center, continues to grow each year

²⁷ Ibid., 264.

²⁸ Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, 27.

and is becoming more powerful because of the relationship between the Goddess and the women. Devaki described the divine-human reciprocity that is operative during Pongala: "Women ask Devi for something, Devi gives it to them, then women give Pongala to her, 'feed' her. Devi gets stronger, more powerful, so she can give those in the community who helped us even more blessings."

As Pongala Day 1997 draws to a close, women sit together visiting with each other, playing with their children, and waiting. Late in the afternoon, after the inauspicious *rahu kalam* period of the day has passed, priests come out of the temple carrying silver-colored pails filled with rose water. Using the flower of the araca-nut tree dipped in the rose water from the temple of Attukal Amma, they sprinkle our pots, signaling the end of the ritual. Immediately the women gather their belongings and begin the return trip to their homes with the Pongala to share with their family and neighbors, distributing the blessings of the Goddess now contained in the porridge. After the Pongala ritual, more men begin to reappear on the streets, distributing water and buttermilk to refresh the departing women and showering them with rose petals.

When I asked women why the priests open and close the ritual, the women looked at me blankly. What was the point of my question? "The priests just start the fire and carry the Goddess's water and put it in our pots; they're not important," one said, summarily dismissing the male priestly role in the ritual. This response reminded me that many of my questions didn't make sense to these women, because the questions assumed an androcentric perspective.²⁹ I was unconsciously privileging the role of the male priests, who were a very minor part of the ritual, rather than recognizing the hundreds of thousands of women as the primary ritual performers.³⁰ Women were doing the offering, and the deputized male priests were helping *them* in this context.

Malayali feminists and activists have told me that some Western feminists, with their focus on independence and individualism, do not understand the complexities of the joint-family system, the advocacy for a woman that can be

²⁹ Unconscious androcentrism is a serious problem in studies that include female deities and matrilineal communities. Carol P. Christ addresses androcentrism in the study of religion in "Mircea Eliade and the Feminist Paradigm Shift," in *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, ed. Darlene M. Juschka, Controversies in the Study of Religion (London: Continuum, 2001), 571–90. Jordan Paper, *Through the Earth Darkly: Female Spirituality in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Continuum, 1997), explores models for nonandrocentric research in religion.

³⁰ Part of the problem is the translation of the Malayalam word *tantri* to the English "priest," with its associations with power in the West. A better translation is "ritual specialist." *Tantris* do not have the same kind of social position or moral authority as Catholic priests and do "not have a particularly esteemed role except under certain ceremonial circumstances." Vasudha Narayanan, "Brimming with *Bhakti*, Embodiments of *Shakti*: Devotees, Deities, Performers, Reformers, and Other Women of Power in the Hindu Tradition," in *Feminism and World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 71.

found within the extended family, and the extreme social difficulties a woman alone would face in Kerala.³¹ I asked questions that I hoped would help illuminate a gendered analysis, and the women's responses emphasized their pride in acting collectively as women. Initially I framed my questions around autonomy and found myself asking questions that assumed a power differential between men and women. If the women were "witnessing" a ritual but were not the ritualists, they weren't fully participating, in my original view. As I lived in Kerala, however, I came to understand the female and male roles as complementary, often based on inner/outer space, and necessary.³² Women spoke of the all-male pilgrimage to Sabarimala by millions of men of any religion, caste, or creed as Pongala's complementary male equivalent.

Women are described in the ethnographic literature as doing "domestic" rituals, which might be taken to signal their insignificance. However, almost without exception Keralites I met asked my husband and me about the details of our domestic, familial life, not about our work, reflecting the primacy of home in their worldview. The "domestic" rituals, which can be time-consuming and difficult, are undertaken for the health, education, prosperity, and harmony of Keralites' families, which appear to me to be the primary concern of most Malayalis, so in their value system such rituals are extremely important.

Many streams of Devi worship come together at Attukal. The fierce Goddess of justice who protects the poor and oppressed, the metaphysically sophisticated and encompassing Goddess of the upper castes, the agricultural Goddess of the land who menstruates, the Bhagavati who has been the center of family life for generations, the Amma who listens and cares for her children regardless of their caste, religion, or creed—all are contained in the iconography, traditions, and rituals of Attukal Temple. Each year a growing number of women from all over South India are responding to her, collectively, equally, putting their auspicious bodies in the heat and smoke in order to secure the continued health, prosperity, and harmony of their families, and thereby empowering themselves, their communities, and the Goddess.

³¹ Sugatha Kumari (poet, activist, and former chair of the Kerala Women's Commission), personal communication, February 1997; and S. Uma Devi, "Care and Freedom" (occasional paper, Center for Working Families, University of California–Berkeley), October 2000, http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/wfnetwork/berkeley/papers/op1.pdf.

³² For an excellent analysis of gendered inner/outer space in South India, see Seemanthini Niranjana, *Gender and Space: Femininity, Sexualization, and the Female Body* (New Delhi: Sage, 2001).