The Light of Knowledge

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Like many efforts to remake the world, the Arivoli Iyakkam led to social changes that no one had expected. Over the course of the Total Literacy Campaigns, activists and bureaucrats were not only amazed at the scale of what the rural district of Pudukkottai had been able to achieve; they were equally surprised at who was participating and leading the way in many villages. Contrary to widespread fears among founders of the Arivoli Iyakkam that it would be very difficult to compel women to meet in public spaces for the purpose of holding literacy lessons, it was men who turned out to be more recalcitrant learners.¹ Leaders of the movement speculate in retrospect that men were more fearful of being embarrassed about their illiteracy in public (Athreya and Chunkath 1996, 177). Perhaps the initial apprehensions of urban activists also tell us something about widespread stereotypes regarding rural life. In any case, by the time I began my fieldwork, the literacy movement had all but given up on trying to attract men to their classes. The Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam (women’s
Enlightenment movement) of the early 2000s focused almost exclusively on women. Reflecting on nearly two decades of activism, many whom I had interviewed and befriended in the Arivoli movement during this last campaign would claim that the simple fact of creating a new form of public space for women in villages had a greater impact on social life than the spread of literacy itself.

By the mid-1990s, Pudukkottai had already become known among liberal and Left circles in India because of how the Arivoli Iyakkam mass-literacy program had taken on the character of a rural women’s movement. The charismatic district collector during the Total Literacy Campaign, Sheela Rani Chunkath, featured prominently in a number of well-publicized efforts to focus on women as agents of rural development and social change. A venture to train women in the once frowned-upon act of bicycling and to provide bicycles for Arivoli teachers through government subsidies is the best known among the district’s achievements during this period. Several thousand women learned to cycle through this program, irrevocably changing orientations to space and mobility in the countryside. Another innovation of the Arivoli Iyakkam, also attributed to Chunkath, was to enable Dalit women to take out leases from the government to work on their own granite quarries in an area where they had previously worked as bonded laborers under male quarry owners of the dominant Maravar community. After her term as the collector of Pudukkottai, Chunkath would help shape global development strategies, serving as one of India’s official representatives at the United Nation’s Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. She is also remembered fondly by many in Pudukkottai. “Sheela Rani” has since become a common name for girls in the district’s villages.

The manner in which the Arivoli Iyakkam combined grassroots literacy activism and feminist development politics through a joint state-NGO effort is emblematic of a broader shift away from state-led development. As a result of this convergence, many initiatives in rural India straddled what was once a much wider gap between development work and social movement politics. As we have seen in the previous chapter, it was only through such a hybrid initiative that the nonparty political Left could gain such a wide appeal in the Tamil countryside.
Scholars like Aradhana Sharma (2008) have noted, however, that what was once a critical feminist model of development has, in fact, been absorbed into a broader neoliberal restructuring of the rural economy. Participating in the new development regime focused on women has often meant the adoption of discourses of economic “self-help” and entrepreneurship. Whereas past adult literacy efforts that were fully state run, like the Farmers’ Functional Literacy Project of 1967–77, sought to impart literacy skills to men as a technical means to help the spread of green revolution technology, the Arivoli Iyakkam was designed to reshape women’s very orientation to development. In this regard, my ethnography of Arivoli Iyakkam activism among women enters into conversation with analyses of feminist politics in a context where renewed interest in gender and “empowerment” has become intimately tied to the privatization of development functions (John 1996; Kapadia 2002; Sharma 2008). Such hybrid programs face competing pulls from a politics that would demand a greater role for the state in redistribution, on one hand, and the attractions of a discourse on the grassroots “empowerment” of women as agents of development, on the other hand.

In this chapter, however, I pursue the seemingly much more basic questions of how women were targeted in activism and why it is that women participated in programs like the Arivoli Iyakkam in the first place. I seek to understand the very process of mobilization from the perspective of activism. The promise of becoming literate, and especially of learning to sign one’s name so as to escape the stigma of being a “thumbprint,” provides some explanation for why the movement was attractive. The material gains and sense of dignity offered by self-employment in the quarries, easier access to microcredit loans, and the simple thrill of riding a bicycle also go some distance toward explaining why women participated. But I would argue that these motivating factors do not exhaust the possibilities, and they tell us relatively little about how the Arivoli Iyakkam was able to attract and mobilize women in particular. Although I do not intend to provide a definitive answer regarding the primary motivation causing women to take part in the literacy movement and its associated activities, following this line of questioning allows analysis to define more clearly the models of agency and gender that have developed in attempts to empower women. What did “empowerment” mean to bureaucrats, activists, and other villagers? More specifically, what were the presuppositions about gender,
agency, sociality, and personhood undergirding such attempts at “empowerment”? How might we devise a means of thinking about mobilization otherwise than through the received logics of “empowerment” at the heart of contemporary development efforts?

Models of Agency in Practices of Mobilization

Scholars working in a range of contexts have argued that women are attractive targets of small-scale development aid because they are widely perceived to be more docile. The literature on microcredit goes so far as to show how efforts to “empower” women through the formation of self-help groups in Bangladesh, for example, in fact target women in particular because they are supposedly “more submissive than men” (Grameen Bank worker, quoted in Rahman 1999, 69). Such strategic adherence to gender stereotypes belies the feminism that microcredit banks claim to be promoting, and on closer scrutiny seems to have more to do with economic logic. How, then, can we begin to read attributions of docility differently?

At the outset, more work needs to go into understanding the very models of agency that are employed to mobilize women in development efforts such as the Arivoli Iyakkam. The literacy movement used several different idioms in which to articulate its vision of progressive change, ranging from familiar feminist critiques of the social construction of gender to more indigenist attempts to recuperate “traditional” notions of women’s power. Tracking shifts back and forth between idioms of agency tells us much about the sleight of hand that allows earlier feminist critiques of economic exploitation to be folded back into the ongoing construction of gender stereotypes. But in this chapter I ultimately argue that the Arivoli movement was, in fact, successful to the degree that it developed a third mode of social action: what one might call “reciprocal agency,” through which women paradoxically participated in a movement designed to foster a sense of autonomy out of a sense of obligation, or duty, to activists themselves. By paying attention to modes of initiating social action that cannot be reduced to a universalist understanding of individual agency nor to assertions of traditional feminine virtues, we can perhaps understand better how women are mobilized by development programs that can also lay claim to being social movements.
Much of what is at stake in the difference among models of women’s empowerment has to do with differing models of sociality itself. I have noted in the previous chapter how much of Arivoli Iyakkam activist labor was devoted to encouraging people to think and act in terms of large-scale social formations that would transcend the worlds of villages, castes, and kinship. To this end, activists commonly invoked an all-encompassing vision of “society,” referring to the form of consciousness they sought to produce as a “camūka pārvai” (social perspective). But what was at stake in these efforts is not just a matter of encouraging people to think in relation to larger scales of belonging. Building a camūka pārvai just as importantly entails a new understanding of what it means to belong to this more inclusive group. Everyone, men and women, belongs to this “modern social imaginary” as contemporaries on equal terms (Taylor 2004). A number of authors have noted the manner in which the modern concept of society has replaced divinity as the ontological ground of human existence in post-Enlightenment thought, at once natural to humans and instituted by humans. It is this relation between the social and the question of human agency’s power to institute a particular vision of the social that is forced into the foreground when thinking about an activism that invokes the concept of society in the name of women’s “empowerment.” Such a vision of society was important for activism largely to the degree that it could be worked on as a field of action, once made aware of itself. To develop a camūka pārvai was to be made aware of one’s capacity to change the world in which one lives. It was to be responsible to large-scale, gesellschaftliche modes of indirect relation that could be apprehended only through forms of theoretical reasoning, and it is ultimately to become a historical actor. As such, this form of social consciousness was intimately connected to the very process of becoming literate in the Arivoli Iyakkam. Instructing people to think through such abstractions was no easy task, however, and this particular form of cultural work in Arivoli activism was often supplemented by other visions of empowerment.

In the process of inculcating such a social perspective among their fellow villagers, activists faced problems that demonstrate how contradictions in post-Enlightenment thought reveal themselves with particular clarity in postcolonial contexts. The conceptual vocabulary available for this exercise in abstraction, building a camūka pārvai (social perspective),
is tied precisely to those regimes of filiation and sociality, frequently rendered as “community,” “caste,” or “sex” in a range of discourses, that the encompassing concept of “society” was meant to overcome. That is, the abstracted concept of society contends with existing forms of sociality and existing vocabularies of belonging. In the words of Sudipta Kaviraj (1997, 92), writing about a related set of issues around the ideas of public and private in postcolonial Calcutta, “concepts do not enter an empty unmarked conceptual space. They have to affect the operation of established practices and their implicit conceptual structures.” There were both established practices and established conceptual structures similar enough to the Arivoli Iyakkam’s version of a social perspective to pose a problem of disambiguation for activism—a problem of which version of society, or camukam, was actually being imagined and instituted. Analysis must therefore not only take the details of a variety of feminist practices seriously but must also elucidate the variegated textual fields into which discourses on women have inserted themselves in order to assess their political significance.8

In response to problems posed by the work of abstraction required to develop a “social perspective,” another strategy developed to motivate women’s participation in the Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam was to emphasize the virtues of Tamil womanhood, such as women’s putatively superior power (shakti). This model of agency also depends on a certain form of reification characteristic of the ongoing construction of a tradition. Insofar as the construction of women’s power (shakti) was developed as part of a self-conscious strategy of mobilization, this process also tended to force new reflections on the part of activists concerning those aspects of Tamil womanhood and sociality that are conducive to “empowerment.” When shifting attention to how learners in Arivoli articulate their own perspectives on mobilization, however, we learn that village women did not necessarily respond directly to abstract calls to inhabit a social perspective on gender or to embody the virtuous qualities of shakti. Women took part in the Arivoli Iyakkam in response to calls from particular people: activists and volunteers, who were either from their own villages or from neighboring villages, people who might well be asking them to perform according to the abstract models of agency I have just outlined.
This insight into the personal quality of address allows us to revisit vexing questions of agency and docility from a different perspective, that of *reciprocity*. Signatures and microcredit loan repayments in this idiom, for example, might be conceived of as return gifts from groups of villagers to activists, even if these gifts nevertheless act to build a new relationship between village women and large-scale structures of power. Reciprocal agency is a form of social action that is not about personal choices, indirect relationships to the abstractions of social theory, or individual desires; nor is it about adherence to tradition, some preexisting community, or the constraint of desire. Rather, this form of agency is essentially interactional and collective, unleashing social forces that are immanent in the field of activist mobilization, and not reducible to the binary trap of freedom versus cultural constraint. But this formulation, too, remains quite abstract at this point in my narrative. Let us turn to a thicker ethnographic narrative to give flesh to these claims. I will begin with attempts to build a social perspective, then move on to a description of the ways in which the virtues of Tamil womanhood were employed in the movement, before returning to this last argument regarding reciprocal agency.

**Learning Gender: The Social as Malleable**

One day I accompanied the Arivoli Iyakkam activists Neela and Ramalingam to the village of Tuvarappatti, just outside of Pudukkottai Town, for a “gender awareness training” session that they had decided to organize as part of the Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam. They had chosen this village for their training session because Ramalingam had already been working with many of the young women for nearly one year. The Arivoli Iyakkam office, in conjunction with the rural development office, had already established a tailoring training center in this village. The young women whom Ramalingam had recruited to join the tailoring program, and who would now attend the gender awareness training, were all in their late teens and early twenties. They had all joined self-help groups to contribute the money they earned doing tailoring work to a collective bank account. After one year these groups would be eligible to apply for a loan to buy sewing machines of their own. None of the trainees had gotten
married yet. Most had gone to school until the tenth standard, though at least two among them had dropped out of school much earlier and were thus not completely at ease with writing. The reason for their meeting that day, however, had little to do with literacy or training in practical skills. The training session, Neela explained to me, was rather meant to give “vilippunarvu” (consciousness) regarding “penkalota culnilai” (women’s situation).

Ramalingam had already asked the local Arivoli volunteer, another young woman from this village, to have the trainees assemble by the panchayat office by ten o’clock in the morning. The panchayat office was housed in a medium-sized concrete building sitting next to a temple of the god Vinayakar in the center of the village, next to a dry water tank. By the time we arrived, five of the trainees had already gathered at the office and the volunteer told us that the others were on their way. The training was to be held inside the office, which had a large central room. While waiting for the rest of the trainees to arrive, Neela and Ramalingam started to prepare. They had put up an Arivoli Iyakkam banner that had been painted by Karuppiah for the occasion and they also nailed a poster they had taken from the literacy office to the wall. When everyone had arrived, Ramalingam asked the trainees to sit in a circle on the floor of the unfurnished room. He began the session by introducing Neela, whom only some of the women had met before. I had already met all of them through earlier visits to the tailoring center. He then asked all the attendees to introduce themselves by telling us their names, how much schooling they had had, and what work they did, so that Neela could get an idea of whom she would be talking to. While one of the young women was attending college in town, most responded, “I’m simply at home,” implying they had no formal jobs.

After introductions, the first activity of the training session, led by Ramalingam, consisted of getting the trainees to talk about the different varieties and amounts of work men and women are expected to perform. He began by distributing white chalk to everyone. He then asked them to draw a giant circle on the concrete floor of the panchayat office. Having drawn a circle the trainees were then asked to draw and number twenty-four tick marks around the edge. These would represent the twenty-four hours of the day. Ramalingam then divided the young women into two groups. One group was to use red chalk to divide the
day into activities that women do, including all forms of work, rest, eating, and so on. The other group would do the same for men. They were asked to divide the clock using their chalk and write out what each chunk of time was normally devoted to. The young women worked on this task for a good fifteen minutes, discussing among themselves what they did over the course of the day. Their fathers and brothers served as reference points for what a typical man’s day would look like. For the sake of simplicity Ramalingam had asked them to focus on a typical farming family, because having to take into account people who went to work in town, still a minority even in this village that is close to Pudukkottai, would bring in unneeded complications. Once they had finished their respective time maps, Ramalingam and Neela called for their attention and began a discussion.

Neela began by asking the trainees who had mapped a typical man’s day to walk everyone through their map. The day began quite early with manual work in the fields such as plowing or supervising transplanting, followed by some time at the local tea shop reading the newspaper and discussing politics with neighbors. After a late breakfast at home men often took a nap during the hottest part of the day. They would then do some lighter work in the fields such as shifting irrigation patterns by damming sections of irrigation ditches to assure an equal distribution of water. This was followed by more social time at the tea shop in the evening and an early bedtime.

The other group was asked about their day next. The typical woman’s day, once mapped in this manner, clearly consisted of much more work and much less time socializing. Women’s days started earlier than men’s with the fetching of water from the local well. This was an especially arduous task in this village where all the nearby wells had run dry and where a government-supplied public faucet connected to a water tower worked only for one hour in the morning. They often had to cook both in the morning and in the evening, in addition to helping out in the fields. Women would also be doing some sort of housework, such as peeling tamarind pods or winnowing rice, while the men slept in the middle of the day, and then again well into the evening after many of the men had gone to sleep. These were the times during which women socialized, while also working. All this did not include the fact that they were also always responsible for younger children, a constant task that
the young trainees also mentioned in their report. Although the young women seemed genuinely surprised at the difference in time spent working once quantified, when asked why it was this way, they unanimously responded that it is simply because “we are women and they are men.”

This response gave Neela the opening she had been looking for. She proceeded to ask every one of the young women who had gathered to describe when they first began to sense that they were different from their brothers and the boys around them. Responses from the trainees all tended to focus on late childhood and early adolescence. For example, one of the women said, “I used to be free like the boys to go out and play. There was no difference. Then after I became of age [referring to her first menstruation], my mother told me that I had to stay away. After that I was not to go out, I had to help her with cooking at home.” Others remembered how they would be sent out to graze the goats while their brothers were allowed to play cricket with their friends after school. Another sign of difference that the young women remembered was when they were first told by their mothers or fathers that they should be “vetkam” (shy) in front of boys, “or others will talk.” Neela then asked them about other differences, such as the practice of men and boys eating before the women and of women eating in the cooking area rather than out in front on the veranda like men. Neela had been writing a list of everything the young women had said regarding differences between boys and girls that only became apparent later in childhood and into the adolescent years.

She repeated the list, and then, using a distinction that has been foundational for a number of feminist visions of agency, at least since Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (2011 [1949]), Neela proceeded to try to explain that these differences were in fact socially constructed rather than natural. She asked everyone what the word “pālinam” (sex category) means, “pālinam enmāl enna?” The word pālinam is a compound of two roots: pāl, the root used to refer to gender classification in language or to sex, and inām, the Tamil equivalent of the Sanskrit jāti, which can be used to refer to any natural kind or category, though it is often used with reference to caste, especially in official contexts requiring “pure” Tamil forms. Like caste or any natural kind (jāti), such as plant or animal varieties, villagers would normally refer to the “pen (female) jāti” in
everyday colloquial speech. However, paliṇḍam as the word for sex category would have been familiar to most of the trainees from school or from any number of official forms or applications, such as those they would have had to fill out in order to join tailoring class, for example. One of the trainees responded that paliṇḍam is the “difference between men and women” (ānkaḷ penkaḷ vēṟṟaṭu). Neela then clarified saying that the differences they had all been listing were in fact “camūka paliṇḍam” (social sex category, or gender), adding the modifying word camūka, an adjective meaning “social,” as Nila was trying to use it in this context.

Neela was marking a very important conceptual distinction using a word, camūka, the adjective form of camūkam, that in other contexts might also have referred to caste or more broadly to community. Official forms or even everyday talk might refer to someone’s camūkam just as one might refer to one’s jāti or inṟam. However, Neela was using this adjective in the different sense of referring to the social, a sense of this word that the trainees who had gone to school would have been familiar with from their “social science” (camūkaviyai) classes, for example. Once again, we can see in this encounter the layered epistemological difficulties facing Arivoli activism. The very efficacy of Arivoli activism relies on wresting words from the vocabulary of caste and community—relational and “natural” forms of belonging that presuppose no choice or exertion of will—in order to invoke a more universalizing principle of “society,” something that everyone belongs to equally, once realized in its highest form, and that can potentially be remade. This is what activists mean when arguing that people must develop a “camūka pāṟvai.” To think in terms of being a member of a camūkam, in this sense, is to transcend restrictive, historically contingent, and for that reason arbitrary, contexts and interests.

The differences that the trainees had listed between men and women, Neela explained, were the product of a social situation (camūka cūṟnilai). “Paliṇḍam” on the other hand, refers to differences in our body, she told them. “So, for example, it is because of your paliṇḍam that you menstruate. But it is because of your camūka paliṇḍam that you do the amount of work that you do.” Neela went on to argue that gender norms had in fact changed over time. She used the example of women now riding mopeds and scooters, whereas in the past, in their mothers’
generation, women would not even have ridden bicycles. Ramalingam then spoke and reminded them of the great changes that had occurred in the district as a result of the Arivoli Iyakkam’s earlier efforts. Neela asked the young women to give some more examples of their own to illustrate the distinction. The young women who had gathered for the gender awareness session illustrated that they were well aware of recent historical changes and listed other examples, such as the fact that it was now possible for a woman to become the chief minister of the state or even prime minister of India. But they showed no signs that they had been convinced that this sort of historical change turns on the conceptual distinction between *pālinām* and *camāka pālinām*. It would take a more prolonged exposure to the feminist discourse on gender for this distinction to carry the weight it did for seasoned activists like Neela. Nevertheless, the distinction had been drawn and the young women who attended certainly came away with a vivid mental map, an objectification, of the different labor regimes to which men and women are disciplined to accept as normal.

With this lesson, Neela and Ramalingam began to draw the meeting to a close. They asked the local volunteer to lead the group in singing a song that was written down in the Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam handbook that they had distributed to the trainees. The first lines go as follows:

_Fear, shyness, devotion, and modesty, these are mere words of ingratiation. Is this a woman’s duty? To be just a thing like a desirable parrot? (Accam nāṇam maṭam payirppu ākiya corṭakal veṭum paṭapppu Iccai kilivāy pōkap porulāy iruppatu tāṇā peṇ pōṟppu?)_

In this, the most recognizably feminist song in the Arivoli corpus, the four classical virtues of Tamil womanhood—*accam, nāṇam, maṭam, payirppu*—are not celebrated; they are held up as empty ideals. The time for these norms of social identity has passed, the song suggests. They are but hollow form. The young women sang along, and after thanking Neela and Ramalingam for their presentation, started back to their homes.

Much like the consciousness that everyone needs for total literacy described in the last chapter, Neela and Ramalingam described their intentions with this meeting to be a giving of “vilippunarvu” (awareness) and a
“camūka pārvai” (social perspective). The exercise in mapping gendered work schedules consisted of promoting what Bourdieu (1977) would call a “synoptic view” of everyday life, objectified in chalk so that it could be held up for critical reflection. It is important to note that such a totalizing perspective, as if from outside, is by no means restricted to social scientific practice. Such means of objectification are also used by activists in political practices that seek to critique the naturalization of gendered divisions of labor, as we have just seen. This strategy consists of breaking with experience to argue that what Neela referred to as “women’s situation” can in fact be transcended and changed. Their presentation was premised on the potential for a relationship of equality to men in the universalizing terms of humanism, which I would argue is a product of their intellectual formation in the science movement. The promise of transcending restrictive social contexts fits in neatly with the promise of transcendence through scientific knowledge of the natural world that has long been promoted by the Tamil Nadu Science Forum.

What was at stake in the familiar distinction between sex and gender that Neela tried to impress on these young women is a particular model of agency. To understand that gender is socially constructed, Neela argued, was to understand that the differences the young women had listed were not inherent, but rather open to change through the exertion of a subject who has been made aware of her freedom and power to engender change. This theory of agency relies on what scholarship has identified as an understanding of autonomy that ignores the ultimate reality of the very social processes through which gender and agency are constructed, or other modalities of freedom and self-making (Mahmood 2005; Mohanty 1991; Povinelli 2005). This variety of activism, in which the abstract “social” is invoked as a generalizing term, must nevertheless encompass the particular social formation of subjects. Apart from explicitly feminist critiques of gender, literacy pedagogy was more broadly intended to act in similar ways, to wrest subjects from restrictive contexts, while denying the more concrete social relations that would define the pedagogical encounter from the perspective of learners. This is a transcendence premised on a notion of individual personhood as some quality that exists somehow prior to the particular social relations that bind one to others. This is not a self that is the product of accumulated transactions, specific relations to kin, to affines,
to the qualities of the soil of one’s village, to the local deity, or more generally to one’s *camūkam* in colloquial uses of the term.

But developing an ethnographic critique of the normative liberal individualism that sits at the core of many modernizing movements and feminist projects presents anthropology with a particular set of problems. Many of the alternative models of personhood that previous generations of anthropologists have developed to account for the conduct of rural social life in Tamil Nadu have tended to draw either on an Indology that would paint the Indian villager as the mirror opposite of an (already reified) egalitarian individual (e.g., Moffat 1979) or on a mode of ethnosociological analysis largely derived from McKim Marriott’s (1990) argument that Indian persons are best understood as “dividuals,” made up through transactions of “coded-substances.” Since this time, work on the contested quality of caste relations and on the effects of violence in molding ethnic identity has certainly opened the field to more politicized approaches to the Tamil person (Daniel 1996; Kapadia 1995; Mines 2005; Pandian 2009). Studies of colonial governmentality and its modes of reification have also inspired new approaches to the postcolonial social life of bureaucratic categories of sociality and personhood (Dirks 2001; Scott 1999). Anthropology can no longer point with the same ease to some coherent Tamil “culture” as a means of explaining what are, in fact, overlapping and competing models of sociality and personhood that are already at play in villages, even prior to interventions like the Arivoli Iyakkam. Although the young women who attended the session described above certainly are, in some meaningful senses, the product of accumulated transactions and of specific relations to kin and to gods, they are equally produced through their intensive engagement with the categories of a governmentality that has sedimented itself in the practices of everyday life in rural Tamil Nadu. We have seen, for example, how the ubiquitous categories of “*camūkam*” or “*iṇam,*” through which people speak of social formations, are used in official survey forms that the young women from Tuvarappatti would have been used to filling out or even administering themselves. The use of such terms and ideas to identify people in official contexts must also certainly affect the pragmatic uses of these terms in other contexts.
To continue and move beyond this earlier work, I am seeking to develop ethnographic accounts of the very processes of entextualization that allow categories like “camūkam” to circulate and rearticulate with a number of discursive formations, ranging from everyday speech about castes in a village, to government surveys and textbooks, and on to progressive feminist attempts to inculcate a “social perspective” on sex and gender. New values for such concepts are produced at every step of this process, through the very act of recontextualization, which is not to say that concepts are empty or infinitely malleable. To speak of “camūkam” as the imaginative means by which one can learn to inhabit an enlightened consciousness is certainly different from invocations of this category in explanations for why a young woman should marry one person as opposed to another, for example, even if there is a certain stickiness to the concept such that the latter usage sometimes bleeds into the former. Following Bakhtin, we can see how, as it circulates, “each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (1981, 293). It is through the very interplay of past contexts of use and new attempts at rearticulation that we can understand the difficult epistemological work of Arivoli Iyakkam’s cultural politics. I now turn to investigate the ongoing stickiness and rearticulation of a few other key concepts in the discourses on gender and Tamil culture, concepts that are more closely identified with womanhood itself. In the following cases we will see how it is the very aura of tradition that adheres to the concepts at hand that is attractive to Arivoli activism.

Of Shakti and Kōlams: Objectifying and Praising Tamil Femininity

If the four classical attributes of “fear, shyness, devotion, and modesty” mocked in the Arivoli Iyakkam song above are not qualities of Tamil womanhood that activists found appropriate to the movement’s vision of progress, what are the qualities attributed to women that were valued in such a movement, and how did activists go about fostering these qualities? Among the most ubiquitous concepts associated with femininity that were positively valued and taken up in Arivoli Iyakkam activism was that
of feminine power, or cakti (henceforth I will use the more familiar Sanskritic form, shakti). Women’s putative greater capacities for self-sacrifice and social service are, in fact, also connected to this broader concept of feminine power. As in the SUTRA women’s organization in northern India described by Kim Berry, symbols of shakti have been harnessed to an imagination of national development in the Arivoli Iyakkam to craft a “hybrid feminist discourse” (2003, 87). Idioms of agency that celebrate women’s virtue in the literacy movement consisted of a recuperation of “tradition” for modernist ends. In order to understand exactly how the literacy movement harnessed and objectified womanly virtues associated with the Tamil tradition, let us turn to a brief description of a typical outreach exercise in the Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam.

One evening, early on in my fieldwork, I accompanied Murugan, an older man who worked closely with the literacy movement as a field-worker in the rural development office, to a relatively remote village in the southern part of Pudukkottai District. On the ride out from town in a government-owned jeep, Murugan explained that we would be visiting self-help groups for two reasons that night. One was to determine what these women might be able to produce for sale at the government-owned handicrafts store in Pudukkottai. He explained how some groups make pickled limes and mango, some make craft items, and some just buy a cow and sell the milk. Recently there was a big drive to teach self-help groups how to make and market their own bath soap. He explained, “I’m from a village myself, so I understand what works and what doesn’t. It’s my job to give them motivation, and to teach them how to sell it. The development office will give them the supplies and training.” The second reason for our visit was to encourage these groups to start holding literacy lessons at least once a week when they met as a self-help group. He told me how his office had been working very closely with the literacy movement in recent years and that members of self-help groups would all need to know how to sign their names in order to secure a loan. They would also need numeracy skills that they could learn through the literacy movement.

On arrival we met with a group of twenty women who had recently formed a self-help group. After introducing himself, Murugan proceeded to introduce me to the group as a researcher from the United States who had learned to speak Tamil. He told them, much to my surprise and
dismay, that I was going back to report to my advisers at the university on their “progress” (*mun¯n¯er¯ram*) and on the development of literacy and women’s progress across the district. As he was talking, the local Arivoli Iyakkam volunteer handed him a notebook that served as an attendance roster for the group. She also showed him their account book, explaining that each member of the group had been diligently contributing fifty rupees per month and they were ready to ask for a loan. Murugan looked down at the book and said, “I see your group’s name is ‘Jhansi Rani.’ That’s a very good name.” He then looked over the rest of the book very quickly, saying, “OK, OK, OK,” and looked up at the group. Murugan started asking the group questions about their economic ambitions. They appeared eager to apply for a bank loan, but remained unsure about the prospect of starting their own business. Murugan suggested they try making pots to sell at the store in Pudukkottai because they were from a part of the district that is well known for pottery. When they replied that plastic had replaced pots for carrying water, he explained that the development office hoped to revive the tradition of using simple disposable teacups made of clay. He explained how they have to help build a market for these things by telling them about self-help groups in North India that had begun selling traditional village jewelry on the Internet. The women he was talking to would never have used computers, but they might well have heard of the tremendous business opportunities that are available through computer communication. Seeing that the group remained skeptical, he said they might want also to think about producing homemade soap, and that they should discuss this with their local Arivoli volunteer and with local NGOs that were similarly engaged in microcredit projects.

But, he said, they would all have to learn to read and write before starting a business like that. He told them how he had noticed a few thumbprints in the group’s attendance book and that the bank they hoped to secure a loan from would find this unacceptable. They would also all need to learn how to handle money and hence work on their numeracy skills. He then handed the group a stack of literacy primers, with the title “Shakti” written in bold on the cover, and told the volunteer to make sure that they start lessons, at which point he invoked the virtues of womanhood, not the four classical virtues, but a related set more amenable to Arivoli activism:
Women know how to measure just enough masala and salt to make food taste just right. You know how to draw beautiful kolams [rice flour designs], how to keep your house and gardens clean. Women work harder than men and they save money for family needs. So you can easily learn to read and write. Truly, women’s power [cakti] is limitless. . . . I came from a very poor family in Ramnad and it was all due to the strength [cakti] and toil [ulaippu] of my mother, who raised my sisters and me, that I now have a government job. This is why I work for women’s equality [camam] to men.

In Murugan’s speech and actions, we can see many of the major themes that characterize a form of activism that is “hybrid” in several senses. First, the work of literacy activism is tied to that of promoting a micro-credit-based development strategy, one aimed more at alleviating poverty through local entrepreneurial initiative than at engendering critiques of structures of economic distribution. The work of enumerating populations and training these women to think in terms of how they could “help themselves,” for example, seems like a rather far cry from the sorts of radical politics that motivated the founders of the Tamil Nadu Science Forum, discussed in the previous chapter. Second, and more important for the questions I pursue in this chapter, we can see how “working for women’s equality to men” entails an invocation of their difference from men, insofar as Murugan argues that “women’s power [cakti] is limitless,” allowing them to work harder than men and to lead a more disciplined domestic life. Here, Murugan draws on a discourse that attempts to fuse aspects of the feminist critique of male dominance with qualities of womanhood that are widely taken to be traditionally Tamil.

The kolam that Murugan had mentioned in his little speech was among the symbols of women’s capacity to maintain domestic discipline and auspiciousness that were often used in Arivoli activism. These rice-flour designs, often complicated, repetitive, and maze-like, can be found in front of the doorway of just about any South Indian house in the morning. Women draw kolams every day at the crack of dawn. Through the course of the day they disappear as people walk in and out of the house. Kōlams are not in themselves particularly sacred, although they may be drawn in front of offerings to deities for worship on certain ritual occasions. On collective festive occasions such as the village temple festival, and in the Tamil month
of mārkalī (December/January), women often draw more elaborate designs that include bright colors. Insofar as they are not drawn if there has been a recent death in the household or some other tīṭṭu (serious pollution), these quotidian products of embodied, feminine craft can be interpreted as signs of domestic auspiciousness and of the power of women to maintain auspiciousness.

Self-help groups would be recruited to draw kōlams for any literacy movement event or even for special Arivoli celebration of public holidays like Deepavali or Independence Day. However, Arivoli kōlams operated a little differently than their quotidian models. An everyday skill that is usually taken for granted as “what women do” was revalorized by virtue of being tied to the end of proclaiming women’s capacity to participate in development through self-help groups and literacy lessons. The kōlam pictured below (figure 2) is typical of Arivoli kōlams in its incorporation of the National Literacy Mission’s emblem around the edges, bringing the state home, as it were. The Tamil text below the design, also made from rice flour, reads “Arivoli House.” At the center of the kōlam are two women.

Figure 2. An Arivoli kōlam drawn by activists and learners in front of a volunteer teacher’s house as part of a mobilization drive in Annavacal, Pudukkottai District.
The medium of the *kōlam* itself and the mode of life it is connected to are an important part of the message. Part of the performative power of Arivoli *kōlams*, for the outside observer as well as for the Arivoli literacy activist, is also a product of the historicist imagination and the objectification of tradition. It is derived from the very use of a quintessentially traditional and feminine everyday craft of domesticity to deliver literacy as a universalizing Enlightenment and liberation, celebrating the coexistence of dual temporalities and the palpable tension thereby produced in a distinctly modernizing mode. Consider the following lines of a song sung at many Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam mobilization functions: “*kōlam poṭum kaikalükku āṅā poṭuvatu kaśtamā?*” (Do the hands that draw a *kōlam* find the letter “A” difficult?). Using an argument very close to that Murugan had been using with the self-help group, the song both proclaims difference (the verse aimed at men is about tractors) and argues that it is *through* their embodied skills that women can be incorporated into the world of literacy and into the Arivoli movement.20

In their attempts to localize the drive for women’s empowerment, activists were aligning ideas about tradition and womanhood in a modernizing fashion familiar from studies of nationalism (Chatterjee 1989; Sarkar 2008). Drawing on the texts of anticolonial nationalism in Tamil Nadu, especially Subramanya Bharathi’s early twentieth-century nationalist devotional poetry, Arivoli activists often invoked women’s “cakti” as a resource in building a modern India. Activists frequently sang Bharathi’s songs of praise to *tamiḻttāy* (Mother Tamil) and *pārata mātā* (Mother India) at Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam meetings. Both an Indian nationalist and a devotee of the Tamil language itself, as embodied in the feminized character of *tamiḻttāy* (Ramaswamy 1997, 194–204), Bharathi had proved to be especially important for those who would localize discourses on radical Enlightenment. Neela and Karuppiah, for example, often discussed the gender politics of Bharathi’s poetry in their room in Alangudi, trying to reconcile what they had learned through their exposure to the feminist movement with his celebration of women’s virtues as a “*pattini*,” a wife whose fidelity is exemplary.21 In this idiom of agency, it is by virtue of their womanly qualities, and their *difference* from men, that women were argued to be the true leaders of national development.
The “feminine virtues” of self-sacrifice and productivity, that are effects of women’s shakti, were also taken up by activism. In a quote prominently displayed on the “Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam Volunteers Handbook” and on Arivoli office walls, for instance, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi asserts women’s centrality to the health of family and nation, “A man’s education will be of use only to him. But a woman’s education will be of use, not only to her family, but also to her whole people.” It is women’s putative selflessness that makes their education particularly important to the familial and national good in a nationalist discourse that imagines the Indian nation itself in feminine terms as Bhārat Mātā (Mother India) (Goswami 2004; Ramaswamy 2001, 2003). In the idiom of cultivation, it is women’s productive powers that must be unleashed through literacy, as in the equally prominent verse by the Tamil poet Bharathidasan, written in large letters on the outside walls of the Arivoli Iyakkam office in Pudukkottai: kalvi illāp penkal kaḷar nilam (Women without education are saline earth). Education is the ingredient that would allow women to properly fulfill their roles as producers, using what Leela Dube (1986) has identified as a ubiquitous South Asian trope identifying womanhood with the productive earth.

These invocations of women’s greatness naturalize certain gender ideologies in the service of “empowerment.” But activists’ use of such idioms did not consist of simple tactical deployments of an already existing tradition. Such uses of select tropes associated with womanhood should be interpreted in terms of the continued constitution of tradition in feminine terms, and under conditions of an encompassing modernizing ideology. Tradition in this idiom is not an obstacle in the race to become modern, but rather serves as a resource in a future-oriented project of development. This is how women’s purportedly traditional virtues make them more appropriate leaders than men in the new development regime. Discourses on women’s empowerment circulated across a cultural field fraught with tensions and unresolved contradictions, rearticulating with a range of interdiscourses. We might say that the Arivoli Iyakkam movement as a whole was fundamentally ambivalent about how it framed the question of women’s agency—whether it celebrated women’s virtues or denaturalized gender distinctions in the service of equality. The broader self-help-group movement that provided the immediate context for Arivoli mobilization
in the 2000s also sat at the conjuncture of a number of discursive regimes, including science activism, international feminism, Indian and Tamil nationalist discourses on the “woman question,” and neoliberal models of entrepreneurship.

**Investing in Shakti**

Late in the 1990s, in the wake of the first phases of the Arivoli Iyakkam, nongovernmental activist organizations, including the Tamil Nadu Science Forum, organized a number of self-help groups. International private banks, such as the Mumbai-based ICICI Bank, later followed the lead of NGO activity and government development programs in organizing their own microcredit self-help groups among village women, recognizing that they can provide a better rate of return than individual loans made to (predominantly male) farmers. Over the course of the 2000s the rural self-help-group movement expanded exponentially. Some Arivoli Iyakkam workers needing supplemental income while government honoraria were not forthcoming, like Neela, were also beginning to be employed by banks to organize groups and to maintain accounts. Several thousand groups had formed in Pudukkottai District with hopes of receiving small loans for the ostensive purpose of starting a small business. Even if it is not clear that these “microbusinesses” generated any serious income, it appears that as result of joining these groups, women were sometimes more likely to control parts of the household economy and that they would borrow from the self-help group’s fund rather than going to the local money lender.23 These bank groups, in addition to those organized by the literacy movement itself and by various NGOs, formed the target population for the first phase of the Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam.

We must place the Arivoli Iyakkam’s adoption of the *Cakti* (Anadamurthy and Harikumar 2001) literacy primer for some six months in 2003 at this moment of conjuncture.24 Although the *Cakti* primer was eventually replaced in the second phase of the Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam on the grounds that it was too difficult for use as an initial primer, a quick look at the *Cakti* literacy primer will help make more sense of the aesthetics and even the disciplinary techniques of a rather neoliberal feminism. This
idiom of activism incorporates both a critique of dominant gender paradigms and an emphasis on women’s *shakti* as keepers of domestic and national health. Both idioms of agency that I have outlined above can be used in the service of a turn toward empowerment understood as increased financial responsibility. The first word one learns to recognize in *Cakti* literacy training is “money.” Using an ostensibly Freirean critical pedagogy of generative words to promote critical thinking—to be explained in detail in the following chapter—this primer has replaced criticism of the class order prominent in the earlier *Arivoli Tipam* primers designed by Science Forum activists with a language of making-do and saving money. Lesson plans combine literacy training with narratives that emphasize women’s equality, the importance of saving money in a self-help group, and the virtues of environmentalism, sanitary living, and household economic planning—in which the woman is in charge. These sorts of materials often present a rather negative view of working-class men as prone to drink and unnecessary expenditure. Lesson 7, for example, on “savings” (*cēmippu*) and “expenditure” (*celavu*), depicts a woman keeping track of family income and expenses while her husband and daughter look on. It is they who must learn from her how to manage financial life in the new economy. The story below the picture ends with the moral, “Savings are good for the house and the nation” (*cēmippu vittukku nāṭṭukku naṇmai tarum*).

By lesson 12 in the *Cakti* primer, literacy as training for entrepreneurial leadership in a microcredit group reaches its most explicit form. There is an exercise in which the learner is asked to rate herself on her “leadership qualities.” This practice of abstraction in which one’s “thriftiness,” “honesty,” “virtue,” and “family management” skills among others are to be rated and calibrated into a scale of four divisions, ranging from “none” to “some” to “good” to “very good,” is precisely how banks and development agencies would rate women for creditworthiness and efficiency. Through literacy pedagogy women would ideally also learn to subject *their own lives* to such calibration. This exercise exhibits the general pattern of using literacy lessons as a context for self-objectification. But the social identity presented for inhabitation here is not only that of citizenship but of a distinctively gendered, neoliberal variety of citizen, able to care for her family and self and to measure her success along a rational scale of values provided by the book.
Figure 3. Lessons from a revised version of the Arivoli Tipam primer (A) and from the Cakti primer (B) depicting women’s responsible savings habits. Reproduced with permission from the Tamil Nadu State Resource Centre.
Such operations on the self have been discussed by scholars under the Foucauldian rubric of “neoliberal governmentality” (e.g., Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Sharma 2008). These scholars emphasize the productive role of techniques that would regulate conduct by calculated means that cut across the domains of society, the state, and the family. Akhil Gupta (2001), for example, has provided an ethnographic account of how these modes of self-regulation operate in the context of the Integrated Child Development Service Programme in villages in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. He describes visits by government officers much like Murugan’s visit that I have described above. Gupta also accounts for subtle modes of resistance by villagers to disciplinary attempts made in this development program. While the villagers in his account claim that the arrival of a child-care center marks an exciting change in their village and they have become accustomed to visits by state officials looking over the attendance rosters at this center, it is not at all clear they have internalized the ideals of child care that the program has promoted. Similar reactions could be found among those who were participating in the Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam in Pudukkottai. There is little evidence that learners in the movement had effectively taken up these forms of self-measurement and self-government any more than they had the first lessons of the Arivoli Tipam primer aimed at inducing class consciousness (which I describe in detail in the next chapter). It is not because literacy primers attempted to create neoliberal, feminine subjects that we can assume that such subjects had in fact been created in rural Tamil Nadu. In order to account for how self-help groups did nevertheless meet and hold literacy lessons, even if the actual content of these primers might not have been taken up as the authors had intended, I would now like to turn the learners’ perspective on the Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam.

Reciprocal Agency: Mobilization in Response to a Call

The Arivoli Iyakkam and the larger self-help-group movement that it had both begun and then relied on for recruits in Pudukkottai successfully created conditions in which a need was being felt among most women for at least minimal literacy. According to the district literacy office, between 2003 and 2006 over ten thousand women had participated as learners in
the Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam in some fashion or another. To this degree, Neela’s claims in the previous chapter are correct: that when put in positions where they would be made to feel ashamed of leaving a thumbprint, people will understand the need to learn to sign their names. But how was this need to learn to sign one’s name articulated by the women who had joined self-help groups and literacy classes in the Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam?

An answer to this question began to emerge for me only when I met with a group participating in the Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam’s first phase in the village of L.N. Puram, just five kilometers down the road from where I was living in Kovilpatti. This group had first been organized by Neela in her capacity as an ICICI Bank self-help-group coordinator. I had already met this group once before at the beginning of their literacy lessons eight months earlier, and I had come to know the local volunteer teacher, Hemalatha, quite well through Arivoli Iyakkam meetings in Alangudi and Pudukkottai Town. This group began as a self-help group and had already received a loan to start a small business even though not all of them knew how to read and write. They had been preparing mango pickles from their own trees and selling them at the local store. The group, named “Mother Tamil” (tamil¯ tta¯y), was in the process of trying to market their pickles on a larger scale. By the time of my second visit with the group, they had all learned how to sign their names. They were among the most motivated literacy groups I met with during my fieldwork.

My visit first began with the local volunteer asking learners to show off their newly acquired skills. The group claimed to have finished the whole Cakti primer within six months, a feat few other literacy groups could boast of. They had been using the Ar¯ ivoli T¯ıpam primer simply to practice reading and writing the script. When I asked them which primer they preferred, they seemed rather indifferent. Perhaps they were not used to such questions regarding preference. Then one of the learners told me that the Cakti primer was difficult because the reading passages were very long and the script was written in a small font. Ar¯ ivoli T¯ıpam was better, she said, because the words were fewer and bigger. This was a consistent complaint I had heard about Cakti, and it is for this reason that the primer was eventually abandoned by Pudukkottai’s literacy movement. Even when pressed by my questions, however, these women expressed indifference about the content of either primer.
I then started asking them why they joined the literacy program. Again, I had asked the question in such a manner that did not seem particularly interesting. Hemalatha again asked them why it is important to learn to read and write, but no one responded.

It was only when I asked one of the more talkative learners, whom I will call Cintamani, about her education prior to joining the literacy group that she gave me a sense of why she had joined in the first place. She had gone to school for a couple of years as a child, but said that she had forgotten everything since then. The following is from a recording of this conversation:

C: Then once I joined the group, so Arivoli came right? So then, OK, it became important to sign my name [ceri kaiyelattu pōta vēṭṭiya vanticcu]. Before that, our signature was useless.
F: So you wouldn’t sign before?
C: We would sign [pōṭuvōm]! What would we sign for [etukku pōta pōvōm]?
Who would call us to sign our names [nammalai yār kaiyelattu pōta kūppitturāka]? After we joined the group, only then we learned how to sign well. After Arivoli came [atukku pirpāṭu arivoli vanticcu] I read and write a certain amount. I only read Tamil script. I don’t read too much.

For Cintamani, it was the “call” to sign her name that seems to have motivated her sense of the importance of literacy. She explains her need to sign and her own actions as a response to this call. She has thus given us a sense of how a context has been created in which more and more women feel the need to learn how to sign their names, if not necessarily to become fully literate. But Cintamani was also telling me something more.

No one had ever bothered to call these women before in this fashion, and it was the call itself that seemed to matter to her. The Tamil verb that Cintamani had used, “kūppitu,” which I have provisionally translated as “call,” could just as well be translated as “invite.” It is the word that one would employ when inviting a guest to a wedding, for example, or when a woman is “called” by her natal family to return home for a festival. To “kūppitu” someone in this fashion is actually to put them in a position of obligation. It can be done most effectively by someone of relative social proximity, like Neela, who had “called” or “invited” this group to come to sign their names so that they could open an account. Neela was
probably more successful with this group than Murugan had been with the group described above, for example. Neela lived nearby and she had been working with this group for over a year. Cintamani and her fellow group members had taken it as their duty to respond to her invitation (in addition to economic incentives). In describing the formal invitation to join a self-help and literacy group and to sign her name in this fashion, Cintamani was in fact drawing on a language of reciprocity common to other domains of life.

As I talked to Cintamani and the other learners in L.N. Puram more that evening, they repeatedly spoke of a “kattāyam,” a responsibility—literally, a “tying”—binding them in a relationship to the bank and to the literacy movement. For example, another group member said, “We have a kattāyam to put our signatures and to deposit [kattu] money at the bank.” The bank would give them loans and the literacy movement would give them primers and training. It was their responsibility to reply; they would sign their names, return money, and so fulfill the obligations of a relationship. Just as woman is “tied” (kattu) to her husband and his family in marriage, these women had entered into an unequal relationship of exchange. The very same verb, kattu, to bind or tie, is used to refer to the acts of depositing money (panam katratu) and to be given in marriage (kattikkotukkiratu). These are both relationships of mutual obligation. Writing about “mutuality” in the caste-based division of labor in a Tamil village, Diane Mines describes lower-caste families as “‘attached’ or ‘tied’ (kattu) to certain [upper-caste] families” such that they have certain “responsibilities (kattāyam or poruppu) to those families or to the ār [village] as a whole” (2005, 64). This model of mutual or reciprocal responsibility contrasts with other modes of exchange, such as “taṇam” (from the Sanskrit dān), through which faults or inauspiciousness can be transferred to service castes (ibid., 68–69; Raheja 1988).

The women who had gathered for literacy class that evening had used this very language of unequal reciprocity, which is by no means limited to talk about caste or marriage, to talk about how they now had a “kattāyam” to sign their names, to pay (kattu) money into the collective account, and to attend literacy class. Other such responsibilities that would be called kattāyam might include fulfilling your community
duties by performing certain rituals at a temple festival, or fulfilling your wifely duties to your husband and his family, for example. Any labor that must be done in response to such a call might be called a “kaṭṭāyam.” To break a kaṭṭāyam is to sever a relationship, such as when Dalits refuse to play their ritual role in temple festivals (a common mode of protest in Tamil Nadu). While not socially equal in any respect, these types of reciprocal relationships do not emphasize absolute subordination or the transfer of negative qualities as a taṅam might (Mines 2005, 79, 99). The kaṭṭāyam is nevertheless quite different from the sort of agency exercised by a sovereign subject such as that imagined in the gender-awareness session that Neela had led among the younger and more highly educated women of Tuvarapatti.

Cintamani and her fellow group members had talked about writing their signatures on an official form using this language of unequal but reciprocal binding, and I would argue that women feel the sense of obligation or responsibility to respond more than men. Men somehow did not feel bound to respond in the same way when called, especially in a world where a certain “bullish” resistance to authority is so highly prized (Pandian 2009). While men certainly feel a sense of kaṭṭāyam in numerous contexts, they had not responded to Arivoli’s calls to participate out of a sense of kaṭṭāyam. When I asked Karuppiah about why men had been difficult to mobilize as learners, he responded by telling me that men have “head weight” (talai kanam), meaning that their sense of self-importance is stronger than that of women and that they are less likely to listen to others. He and others who had worked for a long time as activists would often remark that there was something about the very newness of the public events carried out in the Arivoli Iyakkam that women responded to in a way that men did not. Having been socialized to respond to an invitation, but never invited to sign their names, the L.N. Puram self-help group found the fact of being directly addressed as members of a group and not as someone’s wife or mother quite significant. Women also probably had more to gain in terms of social power by responding, but the sense of responsiveness at the root of mobilization seems to me to resist interpretations that would focus either on rational self-interest or appeals to traditional values. Nor does the idiom of “docility” quite capture what was happening in the Arivoli Iyakkam.
As I have already mentioned, the very fact of holding Arivoli group meetings in public spaces was constantly invoked by villagers, especially women, when asked about changes that have come about as a result of the movement. Much of the Arivoli Iyakkam was really about occupying public space in response to a call from trusted activists, illustrating the degree to which social-movement politics work through affective connections (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Staiger, Cvetkovich, and Reynolds 2010). Neela had become a “big sister” to the women of L.N. Puram and so could not be ignored when she asked them to hold lessons and to sign their names. The Mahalir Arivoli Iyakkam was indeed founded through categories of governmentality that had taken on dimensions that could not be anticipated through a simple theory of governmentality. In the words of Partha Chatterjee describing a different struggle among slum dwellers, “the categories of governmentality were being invested with the imaginative qualities of community, including its capacity to invent relations of kinship, to produce a new, even if somewhat hesitant, rhetoric of political claims” (2004, 60). One of the less noticed effects was the fact that a whole generation of women can now sign their names, even if they can do very little else by way of reading and writing. 28

Concluding Reflection on Interpellation and “Self-Help”

Interpellation was effective in the Arivoli Iyakkam primarily because it could invoke this sort of sense of responsibility among women only when a fellow villager whom members of a self-help group had come to know quite well over the years, someone like Neela, was doing the calling. Perhaps “interpellation” is not even an appropriate term to characterize women’s responses to being repeatedly called in such a fashion. Arivoli activism derived power through a form of address that is structured somewhat differently than Louis Althusser’s (1994) classic model of interpellation. In his essay on ideology, Althusser develops an important argument about the capacity for state ideologies to be reproduced through the production of docile subjects across a wide set of social domains, ranging from the family, the church, the trade union, on to the
political party. In this limited sense, he anticipates Foucault’s argument about the socially dispersed nature of what would later be called “governmentality,” and he helps us understand how state power is inscribed in ritual behavior, extending deeply into the realm of the “private.” But Althusser’s most powerful and memorable image of how such modern subject formation operates at a quotidian level is that of an anonymous policeman calling someone on the street. The person who has been so hailed, or “interpellated,” turns around, recognizing that it is he who has been called, and it is indeed the fact that interpellation is speech addressed to a stranger that makes this example of an imaginary identification with the state so powerful.

In contrast, Arivoli worked precisely through modes of address that are more fundamentally mediated by direct interpersonal relationships, often through idioms of kinship, and not by impersonal agents of the state as in Althusser’s classic allegory. Neela had been cultivating a relationship with the L.N. Puram self-help group over the course of years, coming at least once a week by bus to visit, chat, and share meals with these women. Murugan’s visit to the self-help group in which he extolled the virtues of Tamil womanhood would probably not have had the effect of binding women to the movement, unless he was someone they had come to know and to feel obligated to. Successful hailing of this sort is built over time, through repeated visits and not through the logic or even the emotional pull of a quick speech given by someone who has just arrived by jeep from Pudukkottai Town. Even when calling people to work for the betterment of abstractions like “society,” or when encouraging women to draw an Arivoli kōlam, Arivoli volunteers had begun to realize that women were, in some deep sense, responding to them as known people and fictive kin, and not necessarily as representatives of a social movement or government program.

Tamilcelvan is among those intellectuals of the Arivoli movement who had come to understand how his activism worked through such direct personal relations of reciprocity. Such an understanding, he explains in his memoirs, could come only when he had begun to question his own presuppositions about personhood and social action by learning from those he sought to mobilize. “Through their very life-breath, these villagers melted the impurities in our [his and his fellow activists’] hearts, without having
learned the trickery of the world we had learned to inhabit” (Tamilcelvan 2004b, 24). Tamilcelvan, whose method had once been to make “thumbprints” feel guilty for not participating in the story of national progress “and to use that feeling” (18, see also chapter 1), learned through experience that the women who attended Arivoli classes did so for a very different reason:

It was only through visiting again and again and developing intimacy with villagers that I understood: they joined Arivoli without a single guilty feeling in their hearts. They came to study only because our Arivoli volunteers came day after day to call on them, and our Arivoli volunteers themselves had become children of the village [ūr]. It was only after a very long time that we understood that people were coming to lessons, out of the kindness of their hearts, to help us. (24–25)

The Arivoli Iyakkam managed to mobilize tens of thousands of villagers because these women were responding to a call from young activists, who had become like children of the village, by attending lessons. We can see here that the “help” being given is to the activists themselves, not from some “self” that exists prior to the relationship that had developed through repeated calling in this fashion. The gap between the Arivoli Iyakkam and the villagers it sought to educate that activists consistently commented on had as much to do with senses of personhood and social action as it did with senses of place and time.

But it is not only the literacy movement that attracted learners through such hailing. Women are increasingly bound in a new relationship with a wide range of bureaucratic institutions, including the state, banks, and other NGOs, through direct personal relationships. We can thus also appreciate the degree to which governmentality and statecraft, in this context, worked through the devolution of calling/inviting functions perhaps more than through the dissemination of literacy primers like Cakti. This was a devolution of the capacity to establish “kaṭṭāyam” to people in institutions (banks and state development bureaucracies) that operate at an extravillage and even extraregional level. It was the fact of being called rather than the content that seemed to matter to most women in the Arivoli Iyakkam. Massive social changes are thus
wrought through accumulated acts of personal hailing, but the more specific capillary power to form liberal, self-measuring subjects remained underdetermined and relatively thin at the ends. We will now turn to see how more radical visions of empowerment were equally subject to underdetermination in the practice of literacy pedagogy. It was through this sort of self-help group and this very sense of obligation that Karuppiah, whom we met in the previous chapter, was eventually able to organize literacy lessons in the village of Katrampatti, just across the fields from his home.