Search for a Method

The Media of Enlightenment

By the time we arrived in the village of Mayakkurichi a large group of people had already gathered in the main square around two young Arivoli Iyakkam volunteers who were standing under the diffuse light of a streetlamp. The women and children of the village were sitting on the ground in a circle. The teenage boys and men were all standing a few meters behind them in the darkness, or sitting on the verandas extending from nearby houses, forming an outer ring. No one noticed as Karuppiiah and I walked up after leaving our motorbike under a banyan tree off to the side of the square. They were all listening attentively as the young woman in the center read aloud from a thin pamphlet. She shouted in Tamil, “I’m no longer willing to live as a doll in your doll’s house [pommai viṭu]. I’ve had enough of this life!” I immediately recognized these words as the final lines of the Arivoli Iyakkam’s adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, which I had read before at the main office back in Pudukkottai. After a short moment of silence, the crowd broke out into applause. The Arivoli volunteers then proceeded to ask the assembled audience what
they thought of the story and whether it was right for Nora to have left her married home. They received a very wide range of responses, some negative but many sympathetic, all from the women who formed the inner circle of listeners. The men of Mayakkurichi stood in the shadows, watching and listening to the discussion from afar.

This public performance of the nineteenth-century Norwegian playwright’s text had been organized by volunteer teachers as part of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam, the “people’s reading movement.” Since the mid-1990s, when this mode of activism began, a whole generation of villagers had come to empathize with Nora’s dramatic struggle and eventual disillusionment with married life through such public recitations. In the words of Tamilcelvan, who was part of the group of writers who worked to translate this play and other stories, “The flesh and blood of Ibsen’s letters, written over one hundred years ago, were brought back to life in the very soil of our villages. Toiling villagers came to know world literature through the teardrops they wept for Nora” (2004b, 83). Although no one was crying at the performance of A Doll’s House that I had just caught the end of, the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam did, in fact, mark a moment when “world literature” was brought to the villages of Tamil Nadu in a way that it had not circulated before. Other well-known stories that were translated, adapted, written up into pamphlets, and read aloud in hundreds of villages across the state include simplified versions of Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables and Leo Tolstoy’s “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” But it should not be terribly surprising that texts from the European canon were used in this fashion by the Arivoli Iyakkam. This was, after all, the “Enlightenment movement.” The people’s reading movement also borrowed from modern Tamil fiction as well as folktales, and these textual traditions too had to be bent and reshaped to fit the vision of enlightenment propagated by the literacy movement. What was really at stake in the development of materials for the reading movement was therefore not only a matter of translating classics of modern English, Norwegian, Russian, or French literature into a new language.

The Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam’s true significance lies in the search to devise an innovative genre of modern literature, or, more precisely, what Walter Benjamin would call a new “function . . . within the literary relations of production” (1978, 222). The artists who worked in the
movement developing these texts and modes of performance were already aware of extant traditions of reciting epic texts like the *Ramayanam* aloud in villages and they had become more aware of the role of recitation in schooling through their earlier efforts. They were also trained in the critical traditions of socialist realism that are espoused by the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association, to which most of them belonged. However, the mode of literary production they had adopted for this form of activism consisted neither of a continuation of existing modes of storytelling, religious or otherwise, nor of a simple importation of realist genres that had already been formulated elsewhere. The context of Arivoli Iyakkam activism demanded something new: a literary practice that would be adequate to the movement’s pedagogical goals of raising critical consciousness of wider social realities while adhering to the space of experience and textual habits that defined the world of villagers. This was to be a literature for, and of, the rural poor of Tamil Nadu. The search for a method in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam therefore provoked engagement with some of the most vexing questions facing politically engaged artists anywhere in the world.

In the present chapter, I explore how the search to develop a new social function for literature in the people’s reading movement speaks to these broad questions about the mediating roles of literary genre, performance, and language more generally in political activism. Whereas the beginning phases of Arivoli education, discussed in the previous chapter, consisted of a relatively unreflective insertion of Paulo Freire’s pedagogical method into the Tamil context, the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam represents a more creative moment in pedagogical design, when activists and authors devoted sustained consideration to their methods and to the social dimensions of language in pedagogy. Looking back on the failures of the earlier Arivoli Iyakkam primers to elicit the intended reactions among students in the movement through “generative words,” for example, their designer, Dr. Madasamy, told me, “The early primers were too heavily loaded with messages. Be it the intellectuals who were so concerned with raising consciousness or the government officials who just want to transmit development plans. None of them thought of the linguistic or cultural work involved. It was as if we just picked out words from a dictionary! That had to change.” Over the
course of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam, Madasamy, Tamilcelvan, and their colleagues came to devote a great deal of thought and care to the problems of textual habitus and linguistic performance, beyond the level of words and “messages.” Language had ceased to act as a window onto social reality or as a simple means for the transmission of knowledge, as it was conceived in Arivoli’s introductory pedagogy. Language came alive, and instead became a productive element of social reality through reading aloud.

**Literature in the Service of Activism**

The literacy movement was remarkable for its capacity to mobilize creative writers and dramatists in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam. Artists from regions across Tamil Nadu came together to translate literature from around the world, to transpose classics of Tamil fiction into a different linguistic register, and to collect and collate folk tales and proverbs. Once collected and transformed, these texts were published as small pamphlets for reading in villages. Many earlier efforts had been made to translate texts from the European canon into Tamil, most notably by the modernist master Pudumaippithan (2000, 2002, 2004), who also revolutionized the language of Tamil fiction in the 1930s through his experiments representing regional spoken dialects in his own short stories. Prior efforts had also been made among Marxist authors to mine Tamil textual traditions for critical social thought, such as N. Vamanamalai’s (1966) attempts to trace a history of materialism in Tamil folklore and literature in the 1960s and ’70s. But the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam was the first movement of its kind to draw on these earlier efforts in the service of making a modern literature specifically designed for people who had limited or no formal education. It was this ambitious project of creating a new genre of village literature that provoked a set of practical, aesthetic, and political questions that earlier efforts had never confronted.

The first problem faced by writers working in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam concerns the wide gap, mentioned in the previous chapter, that separates most forms of written Tamil from that which is spoken
by villagers. Tamil has often been characterized as a “diglossic” language because of the formal and ideological differences between what is considered to be the “high” literary variety and the “low” language of everyday speech (Britto 1986; Ferguson 1959). Although similar distinctions exist in many languages, the high variety, known as centamīl (refined Tamil), is especially revered in Tamil Nadu, in part because of twentieth-century nationalist efforts to “purify” the Tamil language of Sanskritic and English vocabulary. Bernard Bate (2009) has recently shown how centamīl became the language of a new Dravidian politics marked by the rise of a modern oratorical aesthetic that harkens back to a glorious Tamil past. The learned speakers of the Dravidian movement brought this language to the stage for the first time in the mid-twentieth century, and parties like the DMK have since enforced its value through regimes of schooling and public culture that are saturated with the values of ethnolinguistic nationalism instantiated in the use of centamīl. Everything else is generally considered to be koccaittamīl (vulgar Tamil) or kōṭuntamīl (broken Tamil), especially the varieties spoken by villagers in places like Pudukkottai.

The writers who participated in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam decided, in contrast to the writers of the Dravidian nationalist movement, that composing and teaching using the standard written varieties that had been shaped by this language ideology would not only be difficult—most villagers are not very familiar with centamīl vocabulary or its grammatical rules—it would also reinforce a form of cultural hegemony that denigrates the very language spoken by learners in the movement. The maintenance of a diglossic hierarchy within language offended the Marxian political sensibilities of the authors of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam, despite their broader sympathies with the populist struggle against caste domination and with the socialist ideals professed by major Dravidian parties. In their literature, the Arivoli writers therefore sought to represent verb endings, vocabulary, and expressions as these are spoken by the learners themselves and not as they would be taught in schools, where centamīl is the only register worthy of writing. Village speech patterns would thus provide the basic material of literature, and even Tamil short stories used for the movement would have to go through an “intra-lingual translation” (Jakobson 2000, 114) process as they entered the field.
of village literature.³ Speech would have to be rendered in writing, and written Tamil itself would be remade in the process.

The second major issue that arose in the search to create a literature for the movement had to do with the act of reading itself. There was already a fairly long history of experiments with rendering spoken Tamil in modern fiction, by the Manikoṭi group of the 1930s, for example, and more recently in Dalit literature of the 1990s, where even the voice of narration is written in regional and caste dialects.⁴ Most of these authors had also been critical of the Dravidian nationalist efforts to impose archaic literary norms onto modern prose. But existing forms of writing in which spoken language is represented were all expected to be read silently, a habit that expanded greatly in the early twentieth century around the novel, and which continues as the norm among middle-class readers of all sorts of texts today (Venkatachalapathy 1994, 2012).⁵ The Arivoli authors, on the other hand, were seeking to design pamphlets for rural workers to be read aloud in large groups. Like the oral performance of A Doll’s House described above, Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam readings were to be something like a dramatic performance, where one or two volunteers or neoliterate learners would animate a text and an audience would listen. The activists would then ask questions and engage in a dialogue with villagers about the story. Speech would therefore have to be reduced to writing, as described above, only to reenter the sphere of orality in recitation.

Reading in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam was a public event, not a private act of silent consumption. For authors of the movement who were themselves accustomed to participation in the public sphere through silent reading and writing, this shift to an aural, performance-based form of writing required innovative modes of narration for reading aloud, a strategy that had never been pursued before in the realm of modern creative fiction. In the words of Tamilcelvan, “Developing reading materials to read aloud in villages for villagers themselves demanded that we create a new language. Whole books would have to be grasped through the ear” (2004b, 76). It is in this regard that writers in the movement would have to reconsider the role of literature in the formation of a public sphere. Reading literature aloud with the aim eliciting discussion at the reading event forced writers out of their previous assumptions about silent intellection, and hurled them into new engagements with the history and materiality of language.
In their search for a literature adequate to this task, the writers of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam would eventually turn to practices of reading and storytelling that are as firmly rooted in the villages they sought to transform as they are in the forms of modern prose that these writers had been trained to read and produce. They would have to relearn the narrative arts from villagers themselves, and the classics of world literature, as they were reshaped for oral storytelling, would become unmoored from their roots, their origins irrelevant to rural listeners.

The aura surrounding “high” art that led authors to bring literature like *A Doll’s House* to Tamil villages would hold only for the authors themselves, for example, not for those they sought to engage in critical conversation. As villagers were brought into the world of books, they would eventually become authors themselves, joining Ibsen and other modern masters in supplying narrative materials for the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam. In the words of Benjamin (1968, 232), describing Soviet efforts of the 1920s in his famous essay on art in the age of mechanical reproduction, in the creation of a worker’s literature “the distinction between author and public” would eventually lose its “basic character.” The struggle to create a literature that would dissolve existing hierarchies within language, as well as the boundary between authors and readers, in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam in fact resonates in interesting ways with some of the classic debates in Marxist literary theory for reasons that are both historical and ideological. I now turn to the literary theory that artists and activists of the Arivoli Iyakkam actually engaged with to understand these resonances in more detail, before returning to the reading movement’s history and practice.

**The Progressive and the Real**

The Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association (Tamilnadu Murppokku Eḻuttāḷar Caṅkam) is the forum where intellectuals of the Arivoli Iyakkam first developed their theories of aesthetics, language, and politics. This organization, which was founded in 1975, is closely affiliated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and their desire to create a literature in the service of revolution reflects the Leninist-Stalinist orientation of this party. The Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association
now boasts approximately ten thousand members in districts around the state, and their aesthetic and political principles have remained remarkably consistent in their defense of socialist realism. We have already begun to get acquainted with the thought of the president of this association, S. Tamilcelvan. He and other well-known writers of the Left who participated in the Arivoli Iyakkam put themselves in the difficult position of working closely with government bureaucrats in the context of this NGO-based mass social movement in the service of what they would sometimes jokingly refer to as “revolution on the government tab.” But it was not only the middle-class leadership of the movement and widely recognized artists who were involved in the progressive writers group. Most of the serious full-time Arivoli activists I knew in Pudukkottai were active participants, whether they were published writers or not.

In cities, towns, and villages across Tamil Nadu, meetings of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association provided the context for critical discussions about literature and films, as well as more general debates on key political issues. In the small, agricultural market town of Alangudi, about six kilometers from his village, for example, Karuppiah rented a small room on the rooftop above a small groundnut warehouse that served to house the local branch of the association. Next to the entrance to this room was a sign announcing its occupant to be an “Arivoli artist.” It was here that he and Neela met with other like-minded rural intellectuals from nearby villages. On almost any evening, at about six or seven o’clock, a small group of men and women would gather on the terrace next to this small room to chat after the day’s work had been done, while children from the houses next door periodically climbed up to the rooftop terrace to look on. Those who dropped by included local schoolteachers interested in talking about literature and younger neighbors who came to talk about the latest film or to share poetry they had written. Some of the better-known published authors in the local branch had jobs in Pudukkottai Town, working for NGOs or in government offices. They would come by about once a week or so.

What these people from a range of backgrounds all had in common was an interest in the relation between the arts and society and a commitment to Left politics. The latest Tamil films, for example, would be analyzed in terms of how they depicted social problems such as caste or
gender domination, and whether they could be read as taking a “pro-
gressive” (murpōkku) stance on these issues. Short stories published in the
weekly literary magazines were subject to the same style of critique. This
was the stuff of everyday debates and discussion. Once a month, the off-
ficial Alangudi branch meeting would be held on the terrace just outside
Karuppiyah’s room, where members of the association would discuss up-
coming regional meetings and plan events such as the yearly all-night art
festival they organized at one of the main crossroads in Alangudi. When
any of the authors in this branch published a major work, the association
would organize both an official book-release function to celebrate, as well
as a more intimate critical reading-group meeting to address flaws in the
work. I was also recruited to give presentations to the local branch, both on
my Arivoli research and on important books in the English-speaking acad-
emy that had not been translated into Tamil. When Jacques Derrida died
in 2004, for instance, I was asked to participate in a group discussion on the

Figure 7. Karuppiyah and Neela in the room where members of the Tamil Nadu
Progressive Writers Association and their friends would meet in the small
town of Alangudi. Photograph by the author.
influence of his work, which was made known to those who participated primarily in the form of secondary interpretations in the Tamil literary press. The progressive writers group of Alangudi, therefore, acted as an important point of circulation among a wide range of people and ideas, introducing rural Tamils to the wide world of Left thought and especially the aesthetic concerns of Marxism.

Throughout the course of the Arivoli Iyakkam, it was the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association that also served as the intellectual center for thinking about how to devise a new literature for the rural poor. It is in this context the authors of the movement would have to wrestle with the question of how literary theory relates to activism, and more specifically what it means to create a literature grounded in “realism” (yatārttavātām) for Tamil villagers. For example, I once went with Neela to a regional meeting of the progressive writers in the city of Tiruchchirappalli and we listened to the president at the time, Arunan, as he warned his fellow writers and activists not to “fall under the spell of language’s power to intoxicate [moliṆuṭāya māntikā caktiyin mittu eluttālarukkulḷa mayakkam]. . . . The progressive writers must defend realism from such influences,” he continued, “and assure that social problems are represented as problems in literature to give new inspiration to our Left social movements, not as beautiful stories to entertain and beguile.” Neela was deeply sympathetic to this line of argument. The task of activists in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam, and more broadly in the literacy movement, as she explained to me on the long bus ride home after the meeting, was to reconcile the defense of realism with the needs of the movement. “So many of these high modernists [ātinavīṇāvātīkaḷ],” she said, “they think that art is for art’s sake, or for their own self-aggrandizement. But all these trends and styles, they do nothing for the common people. How will these stories help in giving consciousness to people? Even I find it difficult to read them,” she continued, with that curious mix of humility and self-confidence that I had already come to appreciate over the course of our long afternoon conversations at the room in Alangudi.

Villagers like Neela and Karuppiah had, in fact, come to the question of socialist realism in literature through their activism in the Arivoli Iyakkam. It was when they joined the literacy movement as young adults in the early 1990s that they were first exposed to the progressive writers movement. This is also around the time when Neela took up her vocation as a
writer, which she saw as part of her broader activist project. Her first book, *Pāmara Taricaṇam* (A Darshan of Common People) was published in 2002 with help from her friends and colleagues at the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association, and it consists of a series of essays reflecting on the people she had met in villages across Pudukkottai as an activist in the literacy campaigns. Through these essays, many of which had been published before, and through poems and short stories written in the Left literary journals, Neela eventually entered the larger Tamil literary world. She now publishes regularly in the literary journal of the CPI(M), *Cemmalar* (Red Blossom), as well as in more popular weekly magazines like *Āṇanta Vikātan* (Happy Entertainment), which is not political and is widely read in middle-class homes around Tamil Nadu. I learned through our long chats in Alangudi and through weekly visits to her home nearby that Neela credits her mother with turning her into a writer, because she was a great storyteller even though she never attended school. Neela often felt the burden of representing the voice of women and the rural poor at literary meetings, even those of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association, the organization that claimed to be writing for this class of people through their commitment to socialist realism.

What writers like Neela would often refer to as the other “icanṭakal” (“isms”), like surrealism, expressionism, symbolism, and postmodernism, are commonly criticized in progressive writers circles precisely for their elitism, their distance from the concerns of common people, and what is taken to be their incompatibility with the will to use literature in the service of politics. I had first learned about these critiques of avant-garde literatures through meetings at the Alangudi room, where this was a very common topic of conversation, and through some of the regional progressive writers meetings I attended with Neela and Karuppiah. But it was only after immersing myself in the theoretical literature published by the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association, especially the proceedings of their triannual state-level meetings, that I came to understand the deeper history of their antagonism toward literatures that focus too heavily on the form of language itself, at the expense of providing narrative criticism of social reality.

The core intellectual framework drawn on by this group of writers is indebted to the theory of socialist realism developed by the Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács. In a series of polemical essays
published in the 1930s while he was living under Stalin’s auspices as an exile in Moscow, Lukács developed a forceful critique of the European literary avant-garde, accusing them of a “fetishistic dismemberment of social reality,” with their focus on internal psychological states and experimental modes of narration at the expense of portraying the world of social relations realistically in its “totality.” In a passage that is often quoted and paraphrased by leaders of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers, for example, he writes, “If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface” (2001 [1938], 1037). Developing a theoretical framework based on the critical distinction between the immediate surface of experience and a deeper objective reality that is available for reflection by the politically tendentious author, Lukács went on to denounce the high modernist turns taken by many of his fellow Marxists. It was this very argument warning of the “intoxicating” power of linguistic form that was being echoed in the speech Neela and I had heard in Tiruchchirappalli.

The well-known and influential All-India Progressive Writers Association had already been established in the 1930s, under the leadership of the Urdu writer Sajjad Zaheer, well before the Tamil group. Earlier efforts to produce a Left literature in Tamil in the Kalai Ilakkiya Perumaniyam (Literary Arts Forum), associated with the then-undivided Communist Party of India, may also have served as models (Sivathamby 1978, 43). But it is perhaps because of rivalries among political parties of the Left and the ongoing Soviet influence on the CPI(M) that the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association eventually took up the Lukácsian literary theory of socialist realism as their own, with only small gestures toward Indian antecedents. In any case, a canon for the Tamil progressive movement was assembled by drawing on Lukács’s narrative, including his celebration of Balzac and Tolstoy, Soviet socialist realist classics such as Maxim Gorky’s The Mother, which is widely read by association members in translation, as well as earlier Tamil social reformist authors, like the revolutionary nationalist poet Subramanya Bharathi. This is the history of progressive literature that the activists working with the Arivoli Iyakkam like Neela have in mind when demanding that a literature for the movement must be adequate to the task of social critique.
Over the course of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam, however, the authors of the Progressive Writers Association found that the forms of realism that they had been taught to use in their own writing had been developed through literary genres, such as novels and the short story, that were largely irrelevant to the unlettered villagers they hoped to address. More specifically, these genres were not up to the task of being read aloud. They would therefore have to rethink realism altogether in their search for a village literature. Whereas these authors had always tacitly assumed a model of engagement based on private readership and public discussion of literature and politics, the literacy movement forced them to reconsider their very techniques. The textual production of a public would still be mediated by print in this context, but it required a language that oriented itself toward forms of embodied performance and aural uptake. This is precisely the kind of “linguistic and cultural work” that Madasamy argued had been neglected in the Arivoli Iyakkam’s early primers, and it is a question that had not been anticipated in the theories propagated by the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association.

Activist writers eventually drew on the previously existing practice of reading stories aloud in villages in a language that was easy to recite in their search for a method. Tamilcelvan explains this strategy in his memoirs in the following manner: “There is a tradition in our villages of reading the stories of Vakramadithan, Alli Aracani Malai, and Nallathangal aloud and singing from books written in large type. The Arivoli Iyakkam took up and recovered that tradition by giving it a new shape” (2004b, 76). The writers of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam therefore drew on this practice of reading aloud and inserted their own stories, many of which were drawn from the realist canon they were familiar with. But, as I hope to show in the following pages, this was not simply a case of “new wine in old bottles,” to invert the familiar metaphor. Something more complex and more interesting was at stake in the effort to lend a new social significance to reading aloud. To leave the analysis of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam at the level of form and content would be to miss the new languages and novel social relations of performance that emerged through these experiments in “recovering” a tradition.

It is in this regard that Benjamin’s (1978) orientation to thinking about the “author as producer” is helpful insofar as it demands that we focus on what he calls the “position” of the work within the “social relations
of literary production,” instead of limiting evaluation to whether a work takes a critical “attitude” to the social world. Writing in the context of the realism debates of the 1930s—the very same set of arguments that had led Lukács to develop the theory of realism that would serve as the aesthetic philosophy the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association—Benjamin thought that the question of literature’s political content had been artificially counterposed to that of its literary quality, or its form, by his fellow Marxist theorists, including Lukács. He argued, instead, that attention to “literary technique provides the dialectical starting point from which the unfruitful antithesis of form and content can be surpassed” (ibid., 222). Paraphrasing Marx’s well-known argument that philosophy had thus far only interpreted the world instead of changing it, Benjamin also believed that a wholly “new language” must be constructed in the creation of a literature adequate to the task of socialist politics: “no technical renovation of language, but its mobilization in the service of struggle or work—at any rate, of changing reality instead of describing it” (1999, 733). The question would then no longer be whether a story was critical at the level of linguistic representation, or what is oftentimes glossed as “content,” but rather how an act of storytelling itself fits within and transforms social relations of cultural production.

In what follows, I argue that this is a position that some of the progressive authors of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam who were previously concerned exclusively with questions of critical realist content would eventually come to take. They did so, not necessarily by reading Benjamin, but through their own search for a literature that could be used in the service of activism. They did so in pursuit of that elusive ideal of “unifying theory and praxis” (Jay 1973, 4) that is shared across a wide swath of thinkers working in a Marxian tradition that includes both the literary debates of 1930s Germany as well as those of 1990s activism in Tamil Nadu. For writers like Tamilcelvan, for example, who were first committed to questions of realist literature as formulated in the Progressive Writers Association, and who only later came to literacy activism, spending so much time in villages with learners and rural activists turned their world around. In his memoirs Tamilcelvan reflects on the theory of realism in light of his experience of activism: “Were the books we gave to people in a form that would allow them to grasp reality? If education is meant to reflect reality, is it a real mirror? My head spun when we
would discuss these things in literary circles. Is literature a mirror of the times that could reflect social life \[ilakkiyam camāka vālvaip pirapalikkum kālattiṅkannāṭiyā\]? These are some of the many questions he had been debating with his fellow progressive writers for years before becoming an activist and coming to the conclusion that “it was only in Arivoli that these literary questions could be answered. What is the point of reading and writing reality \[yatārttattai vācippatum elūtuvatum etarkkāka\]? To change it \[atai māravaṭarkāka\]” (2004b, 27). The authors of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association who took part in activism would have to rethink the political efficacy of realism altogether.

Cultural Dimensions of Literary Activism

While living in Pudukkottai, I took a trip down south to visit Tamilcelvan at his home. He lives in the rural town of Pattamadai, which is known throughout India for its fine, handwoven mats, and located just up the river from the district center of Tirunelveli. I had been reading his serialized memoirs about his Arivoli activism in the literary journal \[Tīmtarikiṭā\] (Drumroll) for several months. I was also beginning to read his short stories with help from my Tamil teacher, many of which are set in the dry countryside of southern Tamil Nadu. Within the field of Marxist politics, Tamilcelvan is known as someone who has a special sensitivity to questions of culture, history, and literature. In the wider literary world, many people I had talked to recognized his awareness of these issues, but then went on to question why he should be so devoted to the progressive writers group and a form of Left politics that has so consistently turned a deaf ear to questions of culture and even denigrated those who fall prey to the “intoxicating” powers of language. I was therefore eager to interview him and to ask more pointed questions about his views on Tamil literature and the problem of devising an activist literature.

Tamilcelvan lives in the Brahman quarter of Pattamadai, the \[akirakāram\], despite not being a Brahman himself, because it is near the school where his wife works as a teacher and because they had found a beautiful old, traditional Tamil house there. Walking up from the bus stop on the main road of this small town, I asked where the author Tamilcelvan lives, and I was guided by a young boy to a recently whitewashed house
with a dramatically sloping tile roof sheltering the front veranda and an open courtyard in the middle. Tamilcelvan was sitting at a desk in the shade of his office, a room just off the veranda entrance, writing something on his computer and surrounded by tall piles of books. I noticed that on top of one of these stacks sat open a photocopied version of Clifford Geertz’s collected essays, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. As I walked in, Tamilcelvan looked at me and smiled, “You’re an anthropologist, right? I just got a copy of this from one of my friends in Madras.” He told me that he had been reading widely in cultural theory, and this book had been recommended to him as an essential text by a professor who teaches folklore at a nearby university. I dropped my backpack on the floor, and Tamilcelvan immediately suggested that we go out for a stroll through Pattamadai and have a cup of tea at the local tea shop.

Walking in the late afternoon sun in the schoolyard along green paddy fields by the banks of the Tamiraparani River, he began to explain how his whole orientation to literature, culture, and language transformed dramatically as a result of his work with the Arivoli Iyakkam. The son of a famous playwright and literary figure, Tamilcelvan had worked as an officer in the postal service until taking early retirement to devote himself to literature and politics. There was one incident in particular that was etched in his memory as the moment he understood the political importance of the Arivoli Iyakkam. He was still working at the post office at the time, when a group of Tamil language activists gathered around the building shouting, “Down with Hindi, long live Tamil! [inti olika tamil valka!]” The post office, a central government of India institution, bore signs written in Tamil, English, and Hindi. One among the group of sixty protesters had brought a ladder and climbed it in an effort to smear tar on the Hindi lettering, while the others encouraged him by shouting their anti-Hindi slogans. Once this young man had climbed the ladder, he looked down and asked his fellow language activists which part of the sign was written in Hindi. It seems that this devotee of the Tamil language could not read, and so could not tell the difference between Hindi and Tamil script. “For the following months, I felt terribly guilty. Here we were singing songs of praise to our language when so many people could not even read it,” said Tamilcelvan as we sat down for a cup of tea.

It was just around this time that organizing began for the Arivoli campaigns of the early 1990s. Tamilcelvan was contacted by the
leadership of the Tamil Nadu Science Forum in his capacity as a writer to help provide pedagogical literature for the movement. Every district had a literary figure who was called on to help. In Pudukkottai, it was the Tamil teacher and poet Muttu Nilavan, who had risen to national fame because of his song celebrating the women’s cycling movement. “In Tirunelveli, they called upon me,” Tamilcelvan said. “But I didn’t have much experience working with this type of literature. I had already developed a style of writing village stories. My style was realist, but I had never really thought about writing for common people. I wrote about villages and common people quite a lot, but never for common people.” His experience of writing for villagers would forever change his orientation to literature.

When we returned to Tamilcelvan’s house, we sat down in the shade of the front veranda to discuss his Arivoli Iyakkam experience in more detail. “Within a few months of trying to teach the Arivoli Tipam primers, we soon realized that this was not going to work. We fought hard to begin the lesson with paṭṭā and paṭṭi, but as Madasamy, their designer admits, we did not think about the language. There was no spoken language in the early primers.” When I asked how that began to change, he told me that it was only when preparing longer texts for those who were already learning to read that the problem became clearer. The first attempts to construct longer texts in Tirunelveli District, where Tamilcelvan was working, were a series of short pamphlets designed to narrate Indian history in four parts, from the onset of colonialism to the story of Indian nationalism in southern India. The final small book focused on “Freedom Fighters of Southern Tamil Nadu,” narrating the story of well-known local heroes like the chieftain Vira Pandia Kattabomman, who resisted the British army, later to be immortalized in folktales as well as one of the classics of Tamil cinema. He remarked that “it was an interesting challenge to write history for those who had never gone to school.” But Tamilcelvan explained that the more immediate problem in this phase of the Arivoli movement was that posed by government officials. Soon after taking office, the new Tirunelveli District collector called him to his office with a complaint. “The books and pamphlets that you are publishing are all of one ‘type’ (using the English word). You need to stop teaching these history books and tell villagers about government development plans” (Tamilcelvan 2004b, 56). Shocked that this IAS
officer did not understand what they had been trying to accomplish with the Arivoli Iyakkam, Tamilcelvan was not sure how to respond.

Instead of narrating history or simply writing about development plans, Tamilcelvan gathered a group of writers to start a monthly publication consisting of short fictional stories written in simple language for neoliterates. This magazine, named Cāral (Driving Rain), like its counterparts in other districts is where the artists of the progressive writers group who had been recruited for the literacy movement first started their experiments in writing prose in the language of village speech. As I asked him about the language commonly used in Tamil literature, Tamilcelvan explained what he saw as a long-standing prejudice against the language that people generally speak. “This is a *power* politics, a *cultural* politics,” he argued, switching briefly from Tamil to English for emphasis, “and it was only through my experiences in Arivoli that I came to realize the depth of this disdain and the damage it has done. We have to break this [aiṭikkanum].” He reflected on the fact that he too had been guilty of this in his own attitudes, and then argued that just as the Tamil nationalist movement had revolted against the dominance of Sanskrit, what is needed now is a new linguistic revolution against the hegemony of “high” centamiḷ̐ written varieties of Tamil. “We need self-respect for the spoken word [pēccunāṭaiḷḷu cuyaṟṟamiṟṟai],” he told me, invoking the early twentieth-century self-respect movement against caste and gender domination.

But his attempts to mirror reality, mimetically this time in the form of spoken language itself, led to more confrontations with the district administration. After a few issues of Cāral had been released and circulated, Tamilcelvan was called back to the collector’s office, this time to meet with the officer in charge of maintaining the purity of Tamil language. He was asked why their literature did not conform to the standards established for schools, and he was told that all further publications that were written under the aegis of the Tamil Nadu state government would need to be approved by an officer from the Department for the Development of Tamil before publication.

Creating a People’s Literature

By the mid-1990s, the Arivoli Iyakkam was shifting modes, from running as a Total Literacy Campaign focusing on basic letters, words,
signatures, to addressing the issue of continuing education for those who had learned simple reading and writing skills in the first phase of the movement. This shift meant that the Arivoli learners’ circles would be fewer in number and smaller in size than the initial lessons. “But,” Tamilcelvan explained, “it also meant that this was the time to broaden our focus not just on literacy education, on teaching people to sign their names. . . . This was the time to address problems facing society as a whole.” The literature that developed in this phase would eventually be published by the Tamil Nadu Science Forum and the All-India Science Network (BGVS), not the state government or government of India, and it marks some of the most interesting experiments in trying to develop a literature that would be appropriate to a village readership while remaining true to the Left politics that the progressive writers were charged with fostering.

It was in this series of small books, written in large letters, that the writers of the Arivoli Iyakkam began to translate stories from a range of literary traditions into simple, spoken Tamil. The pamphlets prepared for the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam included adaptations of classics of Tamil fiction, such as Pudumaippithan’s “Caṅkut Tēvaṇī Tarmam” (Sangu Devan’s Dharma), which had been renamed “Muttācci.” Other stories printed in Science Forum pamphlets were adaptations of classics from other languages, like *Les Misérables* and “How Much Land Does a Man Need.” All these stories were chosen because they address the questions of poverty and survival in some respect or another, although not all of them were as didactic as Tolstoy or Hugo. O. Henry’s “The Last Leaf,” for example, tells the story of a young girl who was sick with pneumonia and decided that she would die when the last leaf fell from the tree outside her window. A poor artist living next door decided that he would brave terrible weather the night he was sure the final leaf would fall, to paint a leaf on the tree and thereby give hope to the young girl. The artist himself died in the process, but his masterpiece saved that girl’s life. Many of the Science Forum pamphlets were also aimed at questions of religion. Another story published as a pamphlet and read aloud in villages tells of how a stone mile marker by the side of the road came to be worshipped as a deity, illustrating the means by which everyday objects come to be imbued with religious significance by humans.
The search for a new language in which to present these materials involved a great deal of experimentation. Writers of the movement would compose a rough draft of a story they wanted to use in the movement, and then go out in the evenings to a village that was participating in the reading movement and try it out. They would ask the villagers assembled to listen and then ask them which parts of the story were interesting or difficult to understand. Over the course of the following days, adjustments were made to the language in order to make the text more readable in consultation with other authors who were similarly involved in creating this new literature. This process could take several weeks of trials in various villages. It was through these experiments that a certain tension emerged between the desire to produce a literature in the regional dialects that villagers speak and the recognition that reading aloud requires its own special forms of language. Although all the authors involved in these efforts shared in the commitment to avoid standard written Tamil as it is taught in schools, they found that pamphlets written using purely spoken Tamil were more difficult to read aloud, and that the use of this language was even deemed inappropriate in some contexts. The desire to create a realist literature for Tamil villagers led them to focus on using realistic language, in an attempt to mimetically reproduce the sound of village Tamil on the written page. But the villagers who gathered regularly to listen to stories being read aloud in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam would often ask why activists used *kōṭuntamil* (broken Tamil) or village speech in their reading materials. It seems that even when spoken aloud, the detour through writing demanded a language that was quite different from earlier efforts to render the spoken in written form. The authors of the movement would have to devise a language that was specifically designed for reciting aloud.

In 1996 the authors of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam established a main office in the centrally located southern city of Madurai, called the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS) Resource Center, where they would meet to discuss these issues and to learn from each other’s efforts to devise a new language. The center was so named after the all-India network of science activists that I have described in chapter 1. Writers from all around the state would regularly travel by bus to meet at the BGVS Resource Center office, where they were given guidance by some of the luminaries of the Tamil folklore movement, like Ki. Rajanarayanan, who also participated
in these experiments himself by writing an adaptation of *King Lear* set in rural Tamil Nadu. It was only after several experimental runs in different villages and a series of meetings critiquing the work that illustrations were added. Two thousand copies would then be printed up in Madurai and distributed through the Tamil Nadu Science Forum and Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association networks across the state. These pamphlets were then sold to local activists in villages for one rupee per pamphlet, about the price of a cup of tea.

**The Turn to Folklore**

Much early experimentation in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam had to do with the language of reading—that is, how to tell the story. As the search to develop a new genre of literature for villagers expanded in scope, however, writers in the movement became increasingly interested in studying the techniques and themes in stories told by Arivoli’s village learners themselves. Still sitting next to me on the veranda in front of his house, Tamilcelvan explained, “We wanted to give them world literature and lessons about exploitation. We wanted to lift their consciousness with these stories. But people have their own calculations [kanakku]. They’ll only put up with our talk for so long, then they’ll stop coming to Arivoli classes to go prepare for the village festival or go take care of their fields. People have their own calculations about what to do, when, and it took us a long time to understand.”

It was under the leadership of Madasamy and Tamilcelvan that the office that had been established in Madurai to discuss literary technique for the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam eventually turned into a research center. Activists started collecting sayings, proverbs, riddles, tales of gods, and other folklore. They had trained a group of Arivoli volunteers at the resource center to read a story aloud, like the one about how a milestone turned into a god or the adaptation of *King Lear*, and then, after discussing it, they would ask one of the learners to tell a story they knew. These stories would be written down and brought back to the BGVS Resource Center in Madurai, where a substantial collection had developed. As their archive increased in size, many among the Arivoli Iyakkam movement leaders grew enthusiastic about the possibilities of fusing technique and theme by finding narrative material that could be turned into pamphlets
to be read aloud among these stories, thus finally dissolving the distinction between author and public.

Tamilcelvan looked out from the veranda into the fields under the dimming sky while telling me how they established this research center for the BGVS working group that had been publishing pamphlets. Night was falling. “People already have a critique of their social situation buried in their folktales and in their proverbs,” he explained. He then shared a favorite colavaṭai (adage) that he had learned over the course of his work in the villages of Tirunelveli to give me an example.

\[
tattippōṭṭa roṭṭi
\]
\[
poṟaṭṭippōṭa nātiyillai.
\]

The roti that is cooking has no one to flip it.

These short, staccato lines manage to communicate a whole world of suffering through the metaphor of desiccation: like a burning chapati that has been left on the cooking stone without being turned over, the poor have been created and cast onto this earth without any protection. “Think of the knowledge in that, how sharply it is phrased! There are hundreds like this, and there are new ones coming up all the time,” Tamilcelvan continued, switching to English again for emphasis, “where you can see social criticism. It’s there in stories about village gods too. There is a history behind these gods. They are not like those at the big Brahmanical temples.” But these forms of critical consciousness had not been recognized by those on the Left who thought that it was their job to bring consciousness to the countryside. He included himself in this group, telling me that it was the Arivoli Iyakkam that had helped him understand this.

Tamilcelvan brought me inside from the veranda, turned on a light and went to open the door of the metal cabinet sitting to the side of his office. He took out several boxes full of papers. “This is some of what came out of our project,” he told me while taking out these materials. The papers piled up in those boxes contained hundreds, maybe thousands, of stories, proverbs, and songs. Arivoli volunteers who participated in this project had also made maps of where the shrines to gods were located in villages and they had kept notes about which communities propitiate which deities. The writers of the Makkal Vacippu movement had published
some reading materials from this archive through the BGVS, including a collection of stories about “Witty Women” (Putticãlì Penkal, 1996) and a collection of adages and riddles, titled “Tongue without Bones” (Elumpillãta Nãkkãu, 1999). But other stories that they had collected in the literacy movement would be published only later, in a set of pamphlets called “A Guidebook Series for Socio-Cultural Activists.” Unlike the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam pamphlets, these guidebooks were not necessarily to be read aloud. They were intended to sensitize activists of the Left to connections between politics and the sphere of cultural production that are often overlooked.

The guidebook that Tamilcelvan had written based on this archive was specifically about the role of religion in the cultural life of the rural poor. It is called “Village Gods: Our Allied Front” (Nãttãr Teyvankal: Namatu Nêca Añi, 2003). In this book, Tamilcelvan makes the argument that many local gods that inhabit villages represent a form of critical consciousness that exhibits some parallels with secularism. The stories of these gods should be thought of as resistance to the modes of cultural hegemony (punpãttu mõlõtikkattai) reproduced in more institutionalized religious settings, be they Saivite, Vaishnava, Christian, or Muslim. Tamilcelvan writes in this book that these stories provide a vantage point for an imminent critique of caste and gender domination, from within folklore itself. This critique may not be the same as that of science, but it is nevertheless important for activists of the Left, especially those in the Tamil Nadu Science Forum, to respect the forms of reason that inform these narratives, rather than dismiss religion altogether. This book draws both on anthropology and his own experience collecting and reading stories with villagers, through a series of stories about gods who came about because of the violence of humans toward each other, to show the forms of historical consciousness that are manifest in village folklore. Tamilcelvan ends with the argument that “these village gods are not there for us to use as instruments, we must rather understand them as our natural allies in our struggle against oppression” (2003, 30). While I sat reading and taking notes from this handbook and other files he had collected from the BGVS research project, Tamilcelvan moved to the kitchen and started to warm up some dinner. I then joined him at the table. He told me that his latest project was writing a cookbook for rural men, who do not normally cook
if they live with women, based on recipes he had been collecting. After eating, we went to sleep, and I took a bus back home to Pudukkottai the following morning.

Tamilcelvan’s story, as he told it to me that day in Pattamadai and as he was writing at the time in his memoirs, was that of a seemingly endless search for techniques of storytelling that are adequate to the Marxist theory of class struggle he held as foundational. I have told his story in some detail because I think it is representative of a range of authors who sought to engage with villagers through the medium of literature, and furthermore because he is, in fact, at once a talented storyteller and activism theorist. The desire to find that perfect fit, a mode of narrative production that would revolutionize the villages they had become intimate with and transform activists themselves into a conduit for critical energies that already existed, was a source of consistent unease for middle-class writers like Tamilcelvan. More often than not, his reflections took the form of questioning and self-criticism for failing to live up to what he must surely have understood to be rather utopian goals. But his search never ceased, even when, shortly before I met him, he decided to take his literary activism in a different direction as he withdrew from the literacy movement to devote himself full-time to his work with the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association. Tamilcelvan remains a prolific author as president of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association, and his more recent pamphlets include an introduction to the history of Left politics and basic Gramscian theory for working-class readers, called “I Like Politics” (Araciyal Enakkku Pitikkum, 2004a), as well as his cookbook for men.

In their efforts to expand what Koselleck (2004) would call the “horizon of expectation” among Tamil Nadu’s villagers through a refiguration of existing “spaces of experience,” the authors of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam succeeded to a large extent in devising truly innovative genres of literature and new modes of literary production. “Revolution on the government tab” might not have been in the cards, and there will always be severe social and material constraints on literature’s capacity to mobilize the rural poor. But similar efforts to forge a people’s literature are continuing in Tamil villages today, as a new generation of activists draw on this literary genre. Apart from the literary genre they developed, the authors of the early phases of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam also left a trail
of theoretical reflections, a set of practical guides for fellow travelers, and perhaps most important, a general model of activism based on a sort of textual reciprocity.

It was precisely this model of activism that defined the search for a method in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam that would continue to animate the efforts of people like Karuppiyah and Neela in Pudukkottai. These two were among the young volunteers who read texts aloud to large groups in the late 1990s and reported back to the authors about how the readings were received in villages. During the time of my fieldwork, in the early 2000s, they had become authors in their own right, representing a generation of villagers who were forever changed by the model of activism Tamilcelvan had helped devise. Let us now turn to some of their engagements with using literature in the service of activism in an attempt to understand the lasting effects of this model of activism and the complexity of this project in action.

The Practice of Reading in Katrampatti

Back in Pudukkottai, Karuppiyah decided to hold small-scale Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam reading events in the village of Katrampatti for the group of Dalit women he had been working with. These learners had gotten about six months into their lessons when they began to set aside one night every week from studying the normal primers to read a story and discuss it. After fifteen minutes of practicing their signatures and writing out the name of their village, the group would be rewarded with a storytelling session. Everyone in the group preferred listening as someone read aloud to struggling with the script. Sometimes Karuppiyah would read the stories to the group himself, and on other occasions he would ask one of the three young women who acted as the local Arivoli volunteers to do so. These events were not as large as the reading of *A Doll’s House* we had seen before in Mayakkurichi, a reading that must have attracted at least thirty listeners. But the reading sessions that were incorporated into lessons in Katrampatti did seek to include other interlocutors, not only the women who were taking literacy lessons and the Arivoli volunteers. Everyone from the small village was called to come enjoy and discuss the stories. It was mainly the younger children
who also participated, while some of the older men of the village would sit off to the sides and listen in.

Karuppiah began these efforts by reading stories from a new series of pamphlets that he had collected at the Arivoli Iyakkam and Tamil Nadu Science Forum offices in Pudukkottai. The stories that he and the volunteers read from these pamphlets were borrowed from a range of literary traditions, as earlier Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam efforts had been. The first set of stories they tried out with the Katrampatti group, for example, included comic tales from North India of the Mughal emperor Akbar and his minister Birbal, bringing folklore from other regions into the mix, along with European and Tamil short stories. Watching Karuppiah’s efforts and learning about the earlier Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam trials, I had begun to collect the original pamphlets that had been published by Tamilcelvan and his team. After a series of visits to Science Forum members across Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry, I had managed to collect most of the forty or so publications they had issued over the course of the 1990s, and Karuppiah soon switched from the new pamphlets back to these for storytelling. He found that the original pamphlets were more suited to the aims of raising critical awareness than the newer ones were, and he held a certain fondness for that time in the movement, when anything seemed possible.

On several occasions, after reading these stories aloud to the group, Karuppiah tried to elicit other stories from the women of Katrampatti in response. He hoped to make use of my recording equipment to capture these stories as a contribution to the larger project that had begun earlier under the leadership of the Madurai research group. But the women of Katrampatti always claimed that they were not good storytellers and that he should ask his own aunt, who was known by all to be an expert in this domain. The learners in this group always preferred to reciprocate through song. Sometimes Neela would come to take part in these events and she would trade songs, mainly lullabies and work songs, with the women from Katrampatti. She too had taken a deep interest in village folklore as a result of her activist work and her engagement with fellow writers in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam like Tamilcelvan. While they never managed to record stories in the context of Arivoli lessons, several critical discussions about social conditions that would have been of interest to the writers of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam did take place as a result of these reading
sessions. However, these arose in a fashion that could not have been anticipated by the authors of the texts. Here, I present two examples from Katrampatti.

On Leaving Home

Among the pamphlets I had managed to track down from the original Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam experiments, Karuppiah especially liked one that consisted of a collection of Tamil tales, drawing on a moral folk literature somewhat akin to Aesop’s fables. These stories were already known to most listeners, but the pamphlet presented them in such as way as to elicit discussion from the literacy group with a series of questions about the fable after the main text. He decided to try these very short tales out in Katrampatti.

One evening, after nearly half an hour of practicing signatures and writing out the first words in the literacy primers, Karuppiah began the reading lesson, “OK, shall we read a story?” Karuppiah proceeded to read the first short story in the collection aloud to the group of women and children who had come for the lesson that evening. This was a story about a village householder who is determined to leave his family in pursuit of spiritual awakening, becoming an ascetic renouncer and living in the forest. The renouncer decides that he must get a cat because mice are eating away at his loincloth, which is his only possession. But in order to keep a cat, he needs to secure milk to feed the cat, and so he decides to get a cow, which, in turn requires someone to keep it and take it out grazing, eventually leading him to ask a man to come tend to the cow. Finally, the man keeping the cow demands that his family come to live with him, or he will not be able to tend to the cow, which was required for the milk, to keep the cat, which would keep away the mice, landing the renouncer right back where he started in the world of householders and material possessions. Even though the pamphlet Karuppiah was reading from had been written in a language meant to be read aloud, he did nevertheless feel the need to reword some phrases or ideas using the local village language normally used in storytelling. His tone of voice would also change when rewording, slipping into an intimate drawl when directly addressing his listeners. It seems that even when reformulated for reading aloud, stories need to go through a further “intralingual translation” in the act of telling
itself. While he was reading the story, several listeners said that they had heard it before.

When the tale was finished, Karuppiah read the final lines from the pamphlet, “You tell [nǐṅkalē collünkāl]. Is it all right to leave your wife and people to go live as a renouncer?” Then, switching into the voice he used when talking to the group, he asked, “Then? What do you think? [enna nǐṅkekkiṅṅka?]” Those who had gathered for the reading quickly responded in agreement that it is not. On this point, there was not much debate. Several women did go on to point out, however, that sometimes life in the village could become so unbearable that it was tempting for people to leave and go off on their own. But it was not religious renunciation that they had in mind. What had animated their reflections on the need to escape village life was a desire to go to somewhere where caste would have less of a bearing on their identity and where greater opportunities were available. The option to reject the social world and to follow the spiritual path of an ascetic was far more remote for women than it was for men, in any case.

In one of the most explicit critical comments on local caste dominance I had yet heard in Arivoli Iyakkam lessons, one of the learners, Racamani, turned to me and declared, “This place is no good! [ūr ceriyille!] There is nothing for us here [onṟumēyille]. My two sons have already moved to Chennai and I want to go join them. I need to get out of here. As soon as I’ve given Thangammal to get married, I’m leaving,” she said, referring to her twenty-two-year-old daughter, who had already fallen asleep, too tired to attend lessons that evening. Her fellow learners appeared a little surprised that she should be so forthright in front of outsiders. But they understood the sentiment very well. Almost every one of the Dalit families in Katrampatti had sent their boys to find work in Chennai. When I asked Racamani why she wanted to leave, a number of other learners joined into the conversation, agreeing with her that work in the fields was too sporadic and that there was no progress in the village of Katrampatti. They mentioned the fact that they had no cremation ground because the dominant Kallar caste would not let them use their old one. Govindammal also chimed in, “What do we get paid here? My son works with computers and makes good money in Madras. But I’m too old to go anywhere [enakkku vayicāyippōccu]. I’ll just stay here. Let the children go [puliṅkayellā pōkattum].” This was the time of the village
festival and many of the young people who had grown up in Katrampatti had come back home from Chennai for a short holiday, to visit their families and have some fun. It appeared as if many had asked their parents to join them, and thoughts of moving to the city were weighing on many people’s minds.\footnote{12}

Karuppiiah contributed little to this conversation, and many of their comments were addressed to me, not him. But he was clearly saddened by their condemnation of the village, whose improvement he had put all his energies into as an activist. He had not anticipated this reaction to his question about leaving one’s family, which was aimed at provoking discussion of the role of religion in making life decisions. For the women of Katrampatti, any thought of leaving the village would be motivated by the desire to join one’s family in pursuit of a better life. The pull of city life for the Dalit residents of Katrampatti was something Karuppiiah was already very familiar with through his experience, even if it was not something he would normally discuss with the women who came to Arivoli lessons. He was, in fact, friendly with many of the young men who had gone to Chennai in search of a better life, and he would see them there regularly when he visited. Some of the young men that he would relate to as an “անհանդ” (older brother) worked for a taxi service that had been started by his childhood friend from Kovilpatti, and some were trying to find work in the film industry. Karuppiiah would eventually try to enable the literacy group to solve the problem of the cremation ground by getting them to write a petition. But on this occasion, the frank discussion of how bad the village is for those he hoped to come closer to through literacy lessons disturbed him. It was a direct indictment of caste relations, and furthermore, it seemed to contain the underlying claim that there was little scope for the improvement of local conditions of oppression for Dalits. Karuppiiah went on to read another story from the pamphlet, remaining much less animated than usual throughout the rest of the Arivoli lesson.

On Defying Tradition

The second event of reading I would like to describe took place in Katrampatti several months later, during the rainy season, and it illustrates how the context of the literacy lesson itself can be more important than the
text being recited in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam. The rainy season is a
time of extra work requiring the women from Katrampatti to put in long
days in the fields, and it is also when flu viruses are most troublesome.
A number of the women had been complaining to me about their body
aches for a few days, and lessons had been canceled for nearly a week be-
cause of weather conditions. But the sky cleared one day, and they had
promised Karuppiyah on their way to the fields in the morning that they
would be ready for class at about nine o’clock in the evening, after cooking
dinner and putting their children to bed. Although Karuppiyah normally
led the literacy classes in Katrampatti, he was feeling ill that day, so it was
up to Neela to come and conduct the class and to read a story aloud from
one of the older pamphlets I had been collecting.

I met Neela at the bus stop near the temple entrance in Kovilpatti on
the main road, and we went up the dark dirt road that leads through the
rice fields to Katrampatti together by motorbike. On our arrival, all
the women who were participating in the literacy classes were already
assembled, sitting on the damp ground under a streetlamp next to the
small, empty room built to store a public television set that someone
had stolen long ago. They had been called to come by the volunteers.
In addition to the regular group, two young women visiting from a
neighboring village had joined the class that evening. The lesson began
as usual, with Sumathi, one of the young local village volunteers, sing-
ing some Arivoli songs about the need to send children to school. The
women then started practicing their signatures. Some of them had to
practice on the wet mud with their finger because they had given the
small slates and chalk that Karuppiyah had earlier distributed to their
children for use at school.

Neela then suggested that they turn to storytelling, and she started to
read aloud from “Kāycca Maram” (Fruit Tree), the adaptation of King Lear
that had been prepared for the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam by the author
and folklorist Ki. Rajanarayanan. About one or two minutes into the story,
Neela looked up and saw half her audience falling asleep in front of her. It
was already getting late and everyone had put in a very hard day of work.
Realizing she would not get far with the reading, Neela closed her book
and started to ask questions of the two visitors to the literacy circle that
night, trying to place them socially by asking which village they belonged
to. Through her questioning, she learned that they had come to deliver
news of the death of their maternal uncle, who once had connections to Katrampatti. The two young women went on to describe the unusual funeral that followed the old man’s demise, where the eldest daughter of the deceased defied tradition by lighting the funeral pyre, instead of a male relative lighting it as it was traditionally done. Sensing an opportunity to liven up the meeting, Neela asked the others who had gathered if it was right for her to do so, taking into account the fact that she had no brothers and she was especially close to her father. If the tragic story of children who abandoned their parents that she had tried to read aloud was not keeping her listeners’ attention, Neela thought that this story might be of more interest.

Everyone began to wake up and involve themselves in the heated debate that ensued. Some fought for the daughter’s right to light the pyre, while others argued that was simply wrong, no matter what other changes in women’s social position had been taking place. The two visitors, who supported a woman’s right to play a ritual role usually reserved for men, invoked the principle of equality between the sexes. They told Neela and the others how they had been discussing gender in their Arivoli Iyakkam classes back home and they saw no reason why the tradition cannot change. But this argument made no impact on those who said that such behavior simply goes against the rules of “cāstiram” (Sanskrit, śāstra). “You can’t just go around doing what you want,” Govindammal reasoned. Eventually people began asking questions of me about the United States, and whether such a thing would be done there. After clumsily responding with an explanation that in the United States, as in India, women’s roles in society had changed dramatically over the past thirty years, I was told that U.S. women were not civilized in any case (nākārikām illāma) because they walked around with their hair loose, they didn’t wear bindis on their foreheads, and there was no affection between people as there was in Indian villages. The United States they had seen in films on television was clearly not an attractive model to follow.

Once the debate had lost some steam, Neela decided to draw the meeting to a close. She never managed to finish the story from the pamphlet that she had started reading. Neela took her leave, and I gave her a ride back to the bus stop on the main road. While we were waiting for the bus to come take Neela back to her village, I felt the need to apologize for the fact that the group was unresponsive to the reading. But she was not
disappointed at all. “Look at all the important things that we discussed! Gender equality, the power of religious belief, and we are able to learn about America because you are here. To get them to speak about what they think, that’s a politics too, right? [atuum oru araciyal illaiyä?]” She then repeated something she had told me over a year before, shortly after I had met her, a phrase that had stuck with me ever since, and that I have already mentioned in the introduction to this book. As the bus was coming to a stop in front of the temple gate, she said, “We get all these books and instructions from big people in Chennai and Madurai. But we need to run this movement according to the mud of this place [inta maŋ tavunta maṭiri inta iyakkam naṭakkannum].” Having summed up her position on activism through the idiom of agriculture and the quality of place once again, Neela got on the bus and went home.14

I was already aware of the fact that the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam had collected folktales and proverbs from learners, and I had seen interesting stories emerge from casual conversation at Arivoli Iyakkam lessons before; but it was only at this point, well into my fieldwork, that I came to fully appreciate how the vigilant activist could turn what appeared to me as a failed lesson into an opportunity. It turns out that Neela had, in fact, taken note of how this reported story spurred critical conversation in Katrampatti. She had been keeping a diary of such conversations, some of which would reappear in her short stories. When I saw her at the main Arivoli office two days later, she told me that she would be using what she had learned that night from the two visiting Arivoli students to initiate similar discussions in some of the other Arivoli circles she visited regularly by telling them about the woman who defied tradition by lighting the funeral pyre. Whether or not the story ever made it into print, it appears that a new pedagogical text had been born that evening.

The Social Lives of Texts

The two episodes I have related from Katrampatti illustrate the degree to which the lives of artistic works escape authorial intention, a well-worn theme in poststructuralist thought. They illuminate, more specifically, the specific social mediations conditioning the trajectory of what linguistic anthropologists refer to as “entextualization,” the process of uptake
and subsequent recontextualization of discourse that allows for the cir-
culation of texts and the formation of publics around texts (Bauman and
Briggs 1990; Silverstein and Urban 1996). The story about the renoun-
cer, which Karuppiiah read out, had been taken out of the context envisioned
by the Madurai research group that had collected it elsewhere and pub-
lished it. The story had been reinserted by the women of Katrampatti into
a critique of local caste relations, and tied to a desire that seems to have conflicted with Karuppiiah’s. His aim was certainly not to provoke a dis-
cussion on leaving the village. In the second case, the story that Neela had
intended to read was replaced with another one that grew out of questions
she posed to the two visitors that evening, sparking a debate that could not have been anticipated. The text that emerged, the story of an unortho-
dox ritual, would subsequently be recontextualized in later literacy lessons
with the aim of producing similar effects. I do not know how well Nee-
la’s strategy worked. But it is not for these reasons that we should deem
the massive efforts that went into producing a literature for the Makkal
Vacippu Iyakkam irrelevant.

That a certain underdetermination of effective meaning is built into
the process of textual production and circulation is something that the
authors who worked with the Arivoli Iyakkam had become well aware
of, especially those with personal experience teaching classes. Any activist
with experience teaching and reading texts in a village soon became very
conscious of the fact that learners come to lessons with their own histories
and orientations to textuality that will condition uptake in ways that cannot
be known ahead of time. The fact that texts gather new meanings as they are reanimated across contexts was, in fact, at the heart of the desire
on the part of activists to bring Ibsen’s text, for example, to a “recovered”
habit of reading aloud that had been built over generations around a rather
different textual corpus, purposefully allowing what Neela referred to as
the qualities of “this soil” to continuously muddy the clarity of Arivoli’s
Enlightenment project. A particular form of reflexivity among activists is
born of such experiences, when learners reframe such a text by making it
relevant to their concerns. Activists and authors would thus repeatedly ex-
perience the limits of authorial intentionality in their attempts to provoke
a prescribed set of reactions to the stories they read.

What writers were pursuing in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam was a
methodology that could incorporate this fact of textual underdeterminacy
into their creative practice, and so learn from experience in search of a performative genre that would provide room for public argument. They had moved from a theoretical commitment to realist description, as the self-evident stance a politically engaged progressive author must take, to a position of active participation through forms of textual mimesis and reciprocity. The methods they developed over the course of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam would, in the end, more closely resemble the dialogical ideal that they claimed to be pursuing in the basic primers than earlier methods had. A context had certainly been created through this movement for activists to learn more from their fellow villagers and for new stories to arise as materials for instruction, thus pushing against, if not dissolving, the deeply entrenched distinction between author and public that Benjamin had long ago hoped would fade away. But that “degree zero” of communication with the subaltern, a true unification of theory and praxis, would always remain elusive for the authors involved, pulling the movement and motivating experimentation. The writers of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam could never understand such transparency as a realizable goal, even when it fueled their desire, motivating new attempts at mediation. 15

Nor was it the case that writers like Tamilcelvan or Madasamy finally found forms of social critique that would be adequate to their own vision of the political in the stories they collected in villages and then reproduced as printed texts, or even in the discussions that ensued in literacy classes as a result of these experiments. Reading aloud and discussing stories like that of the renouncer, or trading adages and riddles, could only act as a performative context to bring people into a dialogue. But all the artists of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Association, including Neela and Karuppiah, remained committed to radical political change and to forms of social knowledge that are, in some important respects, incommensurable with the textual traditions they rediscovered and engaged with through the reading movement. A full entry into the field of politics, as these writers and activists understood it, would require villagers to join the progressive writers, the Tamil Nadu Science Forum, or perhaps even parties like the CPI(M). Like the village gods described in Tamilcelvan’s guidebook, then, the stories and modes of reading that emerged in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam could not be used as “instruments” in the project of Enlightenment. These texts and techniques of mediation were perhaps better approached as allies, or friends.
Against Resolution

Much energy in the critical theory of language has been spent emphasizing the irreducibility of poetics and social contexts of performativity as integral to any language use. These elements of communication are inherent to the very materiality of language, enabling discourse to circulate, and not mere appendages to a referential “meaning” or logos that would precede them. This common line of argument is nicely summarized by Slavoj Žižek: “What the tradition of Enlightenment dismisses as a mere disturbance of ‘normal’ communication turns out to be its positive condition. The concrete intersubjective space of symbolic communication is always structured by various (unconscious) textual devices that cannot be reduced to secondary rhetoric” (1994, 10). But it is only recently that researchers have begun to explore the question how this division between the material and the ideal, and corollary distinctions between the poetic and the referential, have come to be so salient in the first place.

Some point to Lockean empiricism as the origin of this particular set of semiotic problems, while others argue that a language ideology that divides the world of language into fleshly matter and divine spirit has deep ties in Protestant theology.¹⁶ Webb Keane (2007), for example, suggests that the materiality and poetic qualities of language have posed serious problems for theories of agency in traditions of thought indebted to what he calls a Christian modern “semiotic ideology.” More recently, Bate (2010) has examined how nineteenth-century missionaries incorporated Tamil poetics with great difficulty within a distinctly Protestant orientation to textuality in an effort to create a new public sphere in the bazaars of Ceylon and southern India. In this chapter, I have built on these analytical efforts to understand how such problematics arise in efforts to remake the world through an examination of how those working with the political Left’s post-Enlightenment ideology of communication have wrestled with the question of language’s materiality. I have also sought understand what this might mean for the theory of realism as social critique. Like the missionaries before them, the literary Marxists had to do a lot of “linguistic and cultural work” to find media and techniques adequate to serve a cause that was nevertheless quite different, even if it was similarly invested in the question of human agency.
I have therefore focused on a series of realizations, experiments, and realignments that took place over the course of the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam in an attempt to understand the role of texts in activists’ efforts to provoke political action. We saw how this reading movement started out as an attempt inspired by the ideals of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association to bring modern Indian history and realist world literature to the soil of Tamil villages. It had since turned into an ethnographic research project of sorts. The emergence of a new reflexivity among activist authors regarding the roles of language and culture was the result of sustained experimentation with the mediating potentials of literary form in the service of activism. However, this was not a turn to the dominant vision of ancient Tamil language and culture that is propagated by the leaders of Dravidian nationalism. Activists drew instead on a certain cosmopolitan ethos, despite the sometimes dogmatic aesthetic and political leanings of the literary association they belonged to, that allowed them to engage with forms of community and culture that escape the nationalist desire to render these forms as identity. But not all activists in the Arivoli Iyakkam were equally enthusiastic about the new modes of literature and narration that resulted from these experiments.

Those leaders in the Arivoli Iyakkam who were critical of the turn to engage with folklore and village storytelling methods in the movement began to question the value of attaching too much importance to questions of “culture.” The search for appropriate learning materials within the history of Tamil textuality, the latter group argued, had obscured the larger mission of Enlightenment that the Arivoli movement had been charged with. One of the founders of the Arivoli Iyakkam in Pondicherry, Dr. Sundararaman, for example, argued for a literature that was more directly political and more oriented toward a discussion of practical issues. “I was very concerned with questions of livelihood,” he told me when I interviewed him at his home after telling him about my visit to see Tamilcelvan in Pattamadai. He continued, “And very bothered about messages regarding poverty and exploitation, while some in the movement were going on about folklore and collecting stories. You see, there is the spice of the food, but it is not the food. Salt perhaps, but it’s not rice, you know? I was trying to give them rice. I’ve always been concerned with livelihood, life and death issues. We can’t take this cultural angle too far.” The nutritious
core of politics and scientific knowledge, he argued, had been obscured by what he understood as the outer decorative garb of “culture.”

Whereas Sundararaman had been supportive of the effort to render stories like *Les Misérables* in a form that could be read by villagers, because it addressed issues of poverty quite directly, he questioned the value of incorporating forms of folklore that had no immediate pedagogical value at the level of politics. When I asked him about what this argument meant for the Arivoli Iyakkam, he continued, explaining his own decision to leave the literacy movement to focus on what he saw as the more concrete realm of political activism around health issues among the poor: “In a sense, the movement needed these tensions, and when the tensions died, so did the movement. So at the time when it was resolved in favor of a particular approach, I think the campaigns had lost their steam. And I myself was against the approach and I never came back.” Sundararaman’s objections to taking culture too far are indicative of an aspect of Marxist materialism that would, perhaps paradoxically, limit engagement with the very materiality of language in the process of political activism, not unlike the problem of language that had been posed by missionaries before. But Tamilcelvan and others who were also working in the Marxist tradition would likely share his focus on the importance of “tensions” within the movement, as sources of intellectual and practical propulsion.

Back in Katrampatti, where a different set of tensions were still emerging between Karuppiah and the women of the Arivoli Iyakkam learners circle, the conversations that emerged around literacy lessons nevertheless raised some important social problems for public discussion. One of these issues, which Karuppiah had decided could be tied back to the project of literacy, was that of the cremation ground. They still had nowhere to cremate their dead. Although not a direct result either of lessons taught through the basic literacy primers or the stories he read aloud to them in the Makkal Vacippu Iyakkam experiments, the discussions surrounding the lack of a cremation ground for the Dalits of Katrampatti inspired Karuppiah to work toward writing a petition to the collector, demanding a remedy. The final months of Karuppiah’s efforts as an activist with the women of Katrampatti were therefore devoted to this project. If they spent nearly a year learning to read and write, being exposed to Arivoli’s pedagogy, Karuppiah hoped that it would now be their turn to write back to the state, and solve a very pressing social problem. It is back to these efforts, which I described briefly in the introduction of this book, that we now turn.