

easy to dismiss such an action as an intentional political strategy, such an analysis would be superficial. How do we then account for the 'Hindu mentality' which thinks up such strategies in the first place?

35. The personal pronoun *I* in this sentence is deceptive in that the entity it describes in the first instance would be different than the entity it describes in the second. *I* in co-operation is different from *I* in individuation—constitutionally different, and not just in the multiplicative power of co-operative effort.

Empire, Nation and the Literary Text

SUSIE THARU AND K. LALITA

In 1910, when Bangalore Nagaratnamma reprinted the classic *Radhika Santwanam* (Appeasing Radhika), she was quite certain why she wanted to make the work of the eighteenth century Telugu poet Muddupalani available to the reading public again. 'However often I read this book,' she wrote in her preface to the new edition, 'I feel like reading it all over again.' And as if that were not reason enough, she added, 'Since this poem, brimming with *rasa*, was not only written by a woman but one born into our community, I felt it necessary to publish it in a proper form.'¹ As a *rasika* Nagaratnamma considered *Radhika Santwanam* to have achieved that rare balance of form and feeling: it was filled to its brim but not a drop spilled over. Even Muddupalani's harshest critic, Kandukuri Veereshalingam (1848–1919), who had grave reservations about Muddupalani's character, and considered her work perverse, had been forced to admit, 'There is no doubt that this woman's poetry is soft and melodious, and that she is a scholar, well-versed in the literature of Sanskrit and Telugu.'²

Nagaratnamma had first found mention of Muddupalani in an eighteenth century commentary on the Thanjavur period of Telugu literature. The authors had spoken about her as a well-known *ganika* in the royal court at Thanjavur and had quoted some extracts from her most famous work, *Radhika Santwanam*. Interested, Nagaratnamma had tried to get hold of the complete text and managed with difficulty to locate a printed copy. It was poorly produced and difficult to read. Friends who learnt of her quest sent her another copy with a *vyakhyanam* or commentary appended, but it is only when she finally laid her hands on a palm leaf manuscript that she realized what a perfect creation it was: 'as adorable', she writes, 'as the young Lord Krishna.'³

The pleasure of the text was the principal basis for the new

edition, but Nagaratnamma was also dissatisfied with the editing and the printing of a version of Muddupalani's poem that had been put out in 1887 by Venkatanarasu, a linguist and associate of the Orientalist lexicographer, C. P. Brown. Venkatanarasu had not only excised the *peetika* or the autobiographical prologue in which Muddupalani traced her literary lineage through her grandmother and her aunt, and gave an account of her scholarship and her not inconsiderable standing as a poet in the Court of Pratapasimha, who ruled over the Thanjavur kingdom from 1739 to 1763. He had also omitted the *charanam* or the concluding couplets of several poems and had left out other poems.⁴ Besides, the printing was poor and they had made several orthographic mistakes.

Nagaratnamma, a *ganika* herself, was a distinguished scholar, a musician and a patron of the arts and she approached her editorial task with confident professionalism and admirable feminist partisanship.⁵ She compared the published version with the manuscript and prepared a new version. But neither she, nor her publishers Vavilla Ramaswami Sastrulu and Sons, who were spoken of by Krishnaswami Aiyangar, Professor of Indian History and Archaeology at the University of Madras, as one of the oldest and most reputable publishers in Madras, 'doing very useful work by issuing correct editions of Telugu and Sanskrit classics', could have been quite prepared for the furore that followed the publication.⁶ *Radhika Santwanam* had already aroused some controversy. Kandukuri Veereshalingam, father of the social reform movement in Andhra and a novelist himself, had, in his definitive history of Telugu poetry, scornfully dismissed the poet. He had described her as 'one who claims to be an expert in music, classical poetry and dance' and had declared both the artist and the work improper. 'This Muddupalani is an adultriss,' he wrote, 'Many parts of the book are such that they should never be heard by a woman, let alone emerge from a woman's mouth. Using *sringara rasa* as an excuse she shamelessly fills her poems with crude descriptions of sex.' This should not surprise us, he adds, 'because she is born into a community of prostitutes and does not have the modesty natural to women.'⁷ He had no doubt that the poem was pernicious.

Nagaratnamma chose to respond equally sharply. Perhaps,

she wrote, Veereshalingam considered modesty as natural only to women.

He can denounce a poet, calling her a 'prostitute' and claims that she fills her poems with 'crude descriptions of sex'. But, if that is so, it should be just as wrong for men who are considered respectable to write in that manner. But [as everyone knows] several great men have written even more 'crudely' about sex.⁸

Her spirited defence was of little avail. The government translator, Goteti Kanakaraju Pantulu, angered, we are told in the appendix to a later edition of *Radhika Santwanam*, by the fact that he had found his second wife reading a Vavilla publication, also declared that parts of the book were objectionable. Once he had translated the sections he considered objectionable into English, the British government was convinced that the book would endanger the moral health of their Indian subjects. In 1911, Police Commissioner Cunningham seized all the copies and charged Nagaratnamma's publishers with having produced an obscene book.

The order met with considerable resistance. The publishers sent up a petition denying the charge which was also directed against eight other classics they had reprinted, though *Radhika Santwanam* was, in the eyes of the law, clearly the most objectionable of those works. Peri Narayan Murthy, a well-known lawyer, who like Vavilla Venkateshwara Sastrulu was also involved in nationalist politics, argued the case for the publishers. It was 'unduly straining the language of Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code,' they wrote, 'to suggest that ancient classics that have been extant for centuries could be brought within the meaning of the section.' The petitioners respectfully submitted that 'classics in all languages and in all lands contain passages similar to those that are now complained of, and would come equally under the purview of the section, if construed in this manner.'⁹ Other pressures were also brought to bear on the government. A conference of pandits and scholars held under the auspices of the Telugu Academy submitted a resolution to the government. 'Such proceedings were inexpedient and undesirable and highly detrimental to the preservation and progress of Telugu culture',¹⁰ they declared.

Despite these efforts, the petition was dismissed, as was the

plea that the case should be heard by a judge who knew Telugu and could read the texts for himself. The British government banned the books. As a concession the publishers were allowed to bring out totally expurgated editions of some works; others could be reprinted with the offensive sections deleted; however all copies of *Radhika Santwanam* were to be unconditionally destroyed. The tree of Telugu literature, Nagaratnamma's publisher commented, had received an axe-blow.

Much to the chagrin of the government, the books clearly continued to circulate. On 3 March 1927, the Vavilla Press in Tondiarpet as well as their bookshop in Esplanade was raided again. The police also raided the Vavilla bookshop in Rajamundry and managed to track down two readers in Sriakulam who had ordered copies by post. In an indignant letter of protest written shortly after the raids Venkateshwara Sastrulu agreed that copies were being circulated. But he had taken care, he pointed out, to sell unexpurgated editions only to scholars. Versions that were being commercially circulated had been modified as required by the government. Each of these works, he argued, had been 'written centuries ago and it would be a travesty of justice if they were regarded as coming under the purview of Section 292 of the Penal Code.' Prof. Krishnaswami Aiyangar endorsed these claims. 'It is possible that the extreme purist may take exception to a verse here and a verse there,' he commented, 'but having regard to the genius of these languages such a complete expurgation would be impossible without sacrificing the substance of the work. . . . It is hardly necessary to do so, however, as these passages hardly jar upon Indian feelings or sentiment.'¹¹ All the same, the colonial government banned the books again. It is interesting that in the petition that they filed in response the publishers make no mention of *Radhika Santwanam*, although they contest the seizure of the other works.

Exactly twenty years later the ban was rescinded with the support of Tangaturi Prakasam, who had just become Chief Minister of Madras State. It had been a battle, Prakasam said, for pearls of great beauty to be replaced in the necklace of Telugu literature. Permission was also granted for Nagaratnamma's edition of *Radhika Santwanam* to be republished and the Vavilla Press brought out a new edition in 1952.¹²

When in the late eighties, our curiosities aroused by the persistent dismissal of Muddupalani's work in most contemporary Telugu literary histories, we searched for a copy of the poem, it was not easy to locate one. Critic after critic assured us that her work was obscene and that it was simply not worth perusing, though when pressed they would admit that they had never actually read the text themselves.¹³ We were working on a collection of women's writings: 'Is this the kind of thing you are looking for?' we were scornfully asked. Students and teachers of Telugu literature, even those sympathetic to women, invariably echoed the critics. A remarkable consensus had rendered the work itself redundant. The ban on *Radhika Santwanam* had been lifted with the winning of Independence. But that symbolic release of Telugu culture from imperial bonds could hardly address the political economies of gender and of literature—in the main, but also of caste and class—which ensured that the work continued to be decreed out of existence ideologically. Few challenges have yet been addressed to the subtle strictures of that regime.

II

Radhika Santwanam provides us an entry—unsanctioned, illegitimate and therefore also subversive—into many of the major ideological conjunctures of the last 250 years of Indian history. This text and its author have been effectively relegated to the marginalia of cultural history and excluded from the literary canon, but remain nonetheless to structure the strategic closures of both institutions. Almost as if by design, Muddupalani's person, her writing and the misadventures of her text provide us a perspective with which it becomes possible to tease apart and display the *processes*, at once partial and overdetermined, through which cultural authorities were fashioned and secured as they were drafted into the emerging historical projects of empire and of nation. In the sections that follow we trace the changing political economies of gender, caste and class, serviced in turn by changes in literary taste as well as by altogether new notions of the function of literature and the nature of the literary curriculum.

III

There is little evidence to suggest that Muddupalani's work was attacked or dismissed in her own times. The autobiographical prologue conventional in poetic works of this kind indicates that she was a well-known poet and scholar, also accomplished in music and dance, and that her work was admired in the courtly circles of her times. Muddupalani records with pride that though it was not customary for male poets to dedicate their works to a female mentor, several works had been dedicated to her. She writes of her beauty and her learning with the directness and self-confidence of one who has never been required to be apologetic or coy and records instances when she expressed her appreciation of the work of other artists with substantial gifts.

The Thanjavur court, which provided the context and the audience for Muddupalani's compositions, was famous for its patronage of the arts. Music, dance and literature flourished as did painting and sculpture. The elaboration and codification of the *sadir* style of dance, reputedly at its height during this period, is associated with the Thanjavur court. *Sadir* was based on the *adavu* technique which emerged around the fourteenth century and was the dance form that was recreated in the 1930s and 1940s as the classical dance form, Bharata Natyam.¹⁴ The *javalis* and *padas* of the great musical composer Kshetrappa and his school date back to this period. *Radhika Santwanam* itself was among the later works in a period spoken of as the golden age of Telugu literature. Many of the kings in this powerful southern dynasty were poets themselves and records suggest that there were several eminent literary women at the court. Ramabhadramma and Madhuravani, for instance, both composed poetry in three languages and were experts in *astavadhanam*. Ramabhadramma was also a historian and left behind accounts of the political and military events in Raghunadhanayaka's reign. She documents the presence of several women composers in the court. As we mentioned earlier, Muddupalani herself traces her poetic lineage through her grandmother and her aunt who were both well-known poets. Unlike the non-Muslim, upper-caste family women in her time, as a *ganika* she would have had access to learning and the

leisure to write and to practise the arts and the stimulation derived from a community of artists and *rasikas*. Obviously the esteem in which Muddupalani was held, and the acclaim her work received, can be attributed as much to the social and professional contexts she could draw upon, as to her own accomplishments.

By Muddupalani's time the culture of the Thanjavur court had grown into a singularly composite one, embryonic in many ways of the miscegenation that might be regarded as the beginnings of a national culture. It drew on important traditions of court and religious culture in Tamil, Telugu, Persian and Marathi. As a dancer Muddupalani would have practised her art in the courtyard of the famous Bruhadishwara temple. The Thanjavur rulers were the principal patrons of the temple in which Chola traditions of sculpture and dance that dated back to the ninth century functioned with renewed authority in the communities of artists and philosophers sustained by the temple. The Telugu rulers of the Thanjavur had originally been part of the Vijayanagar empire which was at its height in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Texts preserved in the Saraswati Mahal library also suggest the cultural influence of the Bahmani courts of Bijapur. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Maratha empire had extended to these southern regions and the Telugu rulers of Thanjavur were displaced by a Maratha dynasty.

Though traditional historiography would have it otherwise, developments in language and literary form suggest that some quite radical changes were taking place in the society Muddupalani lived in. Scholars invariably comment on the diction of her poetry which subtly shifted the rhythms of classical Telugu verse closer to those of the spoken form. Other writers in her period appear to have been extending courtly forms and conventions in different ways. No doubt nourished also by the social and political changes associated with the medieval movements of artisanal rebellion that began in these areas around the eighth century but extended well into Muddupalani's times—the Alvars and Nayanars (of what is present-day Tamilnadu),¹⁵ the Virashaivas (of Karnataka and Andhra) and the Varkaris (of Maharashtra)—was the growth of a literature, secular as well as spiritual, that extended the contexts of

courtly literature as it drew for its themes on the everyday lives of the artisanal classes. The movements brought into the scope of literary language a whole new technical vocabulary based on their expertise.¹⁶ Another Telugu work from the same period, *Ramalingesvara Satakamu*, dealt with the evil deeds of landlords, and its satire was described by a contemporary reader as 'so delicate and sure that it could be the stroke of a goldsmith's hammer'.¹⁷ Secular prose narratives had also begun to make an appearance.

Radhika Santwanam itself was a *sringaraprabhandam*, a genre associated in the history of Telugu literature with the Thanjavur era. Epic poems in this genre usually retold, with significant transformations of plot, atmosphere, theme and world-view, the story of the divine lovers Radha and Krishna. The principal *rasa* evoked was *sringara*. Muddupalani's composition, which uses an informal diction and captures moods and tones of voice with a rare humour and subtlety, is one of the formally and linguistically more sophisticated works in the genre. But what must have drawn Nagaratnamma to her work, and what continues to strike us today, is Muddupalani's subversion of the received form. Conventionally in such literature the man is the lover, the woman the loved one. Krishna woos and makes love to Radha. Sushil Kumar De in his history of the Vaishnava faith points out that the *gopis* are always represented as women without desire. Radha is depicted as waiting for Krishna and even longing for him, but the narrative has as its focus his pleasure.¹⁸ Not so in *Radhika Santwanam* where the woman's sensuality is central. She takes the initiative and it is her satisfaction or pleasure that provides the poetic resolution. With a warmth unmatched in the later poetry Muddupalani celebrates a young girl's coming of age and describes her first experience of sex. In another section Radha, who is represented as a woman in her prime, instructs her niece Iladevi in the art and joy of love. She encourages the younger woman to express her desire and recognize and place value on her pleasure.

Some of the most startling and unusual verses in the epic, however, come from the verses that give it its title. Radha is portrayed as a complex, psychologically rounded character; though she encourages the liaison between Iladevi and Krishna, she is herself in love with him and cannot bear the

separation. She calls him names, accuses him of ignoring her and demands that he keeps up his relationship with her. Krishna responds warmly and appeases her with sweet talk and with loving embraces. What makes the work so radical and even provocative in the twentieth century is the casual confidence with which it contests commonly accepted asymmetries of sexual pleasure, its legitimation of female desire and its endorsement of a woman's right to pleasure. As a literary text *Radhika Santwanam* transgresses today as much in its address and the subjectivity it legitimates for its women readers, as in its themes.

IV

What made a work that was unusual but relatively uncontroversial in its time, so dangerous and unacceptable two centuries later? When Nagaratnamma reprinted the poem in 1911, a century and a half after it had first been written, Victoria was Queen of England and Empress of India and major shifts, political and ideological, which affected literary production and consumption—and women's place within these institutions—had taken place. As the British established commercial and military authority over India during the second half of the eighteenth century, the old rulers were overthrown and centres of trade and administration such as Thanjavur lost their importance to the new port cities. By 1799, all revenues from the Thanjavur kingdom went to the British. Those driven to destitution as a result of the changes were principally artisans and craftspeople; but poets, musicians, architects, scientists and indeed scholars of all kinds who depended on the patronage of the courts were deprived of a means of sustenance. Large numbers of women artists, mainly from troupes of wandering singers and dancers who depended on wealthy households for patronage, but also court artists like Muddupalani, were driven into penury and prostitution.¹⁹ What was to become the new vernacular literature was produced mainly by an English-educated urban middle class.

Important ideological changes that discredited such women artists as Muddupalani were also taking place at the same time. Increasingly over the nineteenth century the respectability of

women in the newly emerging middle classes was being defined in counterpoint to the 'crude and licentious' behaviour of lower-class women. Decent (middle-class) women were warned against unseemly interaction with lower-class women (who were also, of course, lower-caste women); and especially against the corrupting influence of the wandering singers and dancers whose performances were not only laced with bawdy, but included social satires and criticism and maintained a healthy disrespect for authority. In fact the sculpting of this new respectability was one of the major tasks taken on by the social reform movement which set out to transform a traditional society into a modern one. Artists such as Muddupalani who had been respected figures in artistic circles came to be regarded as debauched and their art as corrupting.

A similar process of class differentiation, on the basis of (among other things) redefined sexual mores for women, had taken place in Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the new bourgeoisie inscribed its identity on the bodies and souls of women and the proper lady was born.²⁰ In India, however, the middle-class woman's propriety was also to be vindicated under the glare of the harsh spotlight focused right through the nineteenth century on what was described as the moral degeneration of the Indians. Bureaucrats, missionaries, journalists and western commentators of various kinds filed sensational reports about Indian culture and made authoritative analyses of Indian character, which was invariably represented as irrational, deceitful and sexually perverse. The ultimate thrust of these descriptions was usually quite clear: the situation in India was so appalling that it called out for intervention by rational and ethical rulers. The British seemed to have no difficulty in persuading themselves (and the huge profits remitted to imperial coffers no doubt hastened the process) that India was the white man's burden and that their government was essential to its salvation.

Equally important to our understanding of what made a work so well regarded in the mid-eighteenth century unacceptable in the twentieth, is an appreciation of the new curricular and ideological services literature itself was being pressed to perform. British administrators and political thinkers, Thomas Macaulay, Charles Trevelyan and John Stuart Mill

among them, were agreed on the need to shape an Indian subject who would not only be able to understand their laws but also appreciate and desire their government. 'The greatest difficulty the government suffers in its endeavours to govern well, springs from the immorality and ignorance of the mass of the people . . . particularly their ignorance of the spirit, principles and system of the British Government,' one administrator reported.²¹ 'The natives must either be kept down by a sense of our power or they must willingly submit from a conviction that we are more wise, more just, more humane and more anxious to improve their condition than any other rulers they could have,' another observed.²²

Educators and administrators were both convinced that Indian literature contained neither the moral nor mental cultivation that was so essential if good government was to be desired and appreciated. Only carefully selected and suitably taught works of English literature, which were spoken of as embodying a 'secular Christianity',²³ could be entrusted with the fine-grained transformations of thought, emotion and ethical sensibility necessary if the moral and political authority of the British was to be recognized and a sense of public responsibility and honour develop. Having declared that no vernacular literature existed which would be adequate to this task, or worthy therefore of the name of literature, the government also took the responsibility of promoting the development of suitable literatures in the regional languages.²⁴ Readers critically trained to 'appreciate' such carefully selected 'canons' would necessarily have found not only *Radhika Santwanam* but also the culture and the society that sustained its author reprehensible. Gradually, as the new powers staked their claims over the land and over the minds of the people, not only individual works, but whole literary traditions were marginalized and delegitimated.

Colonial restructurings of gender and the curricular institutionalization of literature both worked to undermine the authority of Indian literatures and undercut the societies that gave rise to them. On the face of it Orientalist scholarship, which 'retrieved' and put into circulation many classical Sanskrit and Persian texts, would appear to have reauthorized Indian literature and reaffirmed an Indian tradition. But as

any careful study of women's literary activity in this period will demonstrate, it was a highly restructured version of the past that emerged in the Orientalist framework. Scholars like Max Mueller popularized the idea of an idyllic Aryan community which was a learned, highly disciplined and ascetic one, governed by a sacred (and priestly) order. After this golden age, they argued, Hindu civilization had declined. Historians have pointed out that the Indian past reconstructed and re-empowered by such scholarship was not only the idealized paradise untouched by the disturbing changes that were taking place in European society that conservative Romantics longed for, but an essentially *brahmanic* one in which Indian society and its history was reduced to what could be found in the ancient sacred texts.²⁵ One of the consequences of this high brahmanic image being reaffirmed in the context of a history which was written as one of decline was the marginalization of more recent literatures, the literatures that emerged from historically changing, non-brahman and secular contexts, and consequently also much of the literature produced by women. Since these literatures often treated divine figures such as Radha or Krishna, as Muddupalani did, with familiarity or irreverence, and undermined traditional hierarchies of caste and gender, Orientalist scholarship found little place for them in its schemes. Or, as Venkatanarasu and Brown did when they reprinted *Radhika Santwanam* in 1877, these works were trimmed, recast and critically mediated to conform to the Vedic ideal before they were recirculated. It is interesting that these editors excised not only the verses they considered sexually too explicit or obscene, but also the *peetika* or colophon in which this woman poet, from a 'lower' caste, traced her female lineage and spoke with confidence unusual in later times about herself and her achievement as an artist.

There are yet other dimensions to this conjuncture. The cultural history of the nineteenth century is commonly presented in a classic Enlightenment narrative as a battle between the social reformers (who are considered as modernizers and as charged with the interests of women) and the traditionalists (portrayed as opposed to the interests of women and the 'lower' castes) who call for the preservation of social and aesthetic traditions. Figures such as Nagaratnamma and the

cultural forces she represents, who are neither 'modern', nor traditional in the sense that the modernizers represented tradition, are obscured by these categories which also reduce the complex forces at work to a simple dichotomy between the progressive and the reactionary.

V

Publishing initiatives such as those of Bangalore Nagaratnamma and the Vavilla Press as well as the protests that followed the ban would have been difficult to envisage outside the contexts created by the nationalist upsurges of the early twentieth century, epitomized in the Swadeshi movement (1905-8). Both Vavilla Ramaswami and Peri Narayan Murthy, the lawyer who argued the case, had actively supported the movement. *Swadeshi* was demonstrably as much a cultural as a political contest to represent, repossess and inhabit a territory that had been meticulously and systematically alienated under colonial rule, and enfranchise an 'Indian self'. Colonial formulations were critically confronted in various domains as the imaginative contours of the country were refashioned and nationalist aspirations articulated. History was reinterpreted, existing religious festivals charged with passionate new meanings and new ones invented. Scholars mounted a critique of the curricular urgencies of colonial education and artists turned to indigenous traditions for inspiration. The battle (as Tagore's famous novel *Ghare Baire* so vividly confirms) was as importantly one for the bodies and souls of women. Enshrined anew in the literature that elaborated and extended *swadeshi* concerns, was an upper caste woman, often a widow, whose 'traditional' virtue—no longer a personal attribute but a national one—had the power to hold the nation together and guarantee its purity and strength.²⁶ Under the shadow of this powerful new female figure that was to maintain its imaginative hold for many decades, few others survived.²⁷

In the public records of Madras State, both 1911, the year in which Nagaratnamma's edition of *Radhika Santwanam* was published, and 1947, the year in which the ban on the book was finally rescinded, are marked by major events in what had come to be known as the 'anti-nautch' campaign. The

campaign, begun in the early 1890s by western-educated social reformers, was given a great deal of publicity in the media. Activists wrote extensively against what they considered the degradation of women and the major threat posed by 'nautch girls' to the purity of family life; they demonstrated outside the homes of those who continued to support private performances and repeatedly petitioned the Governor and the Viceroy. Finally, in 1911, a despatch was issued 'desiring nationwide action to be taken against these performances'.²⁸ The often splendid public rituals in which girls were dedicated to the deity in the temple declined with this despatch. But it was only in 1947 that the bill first introduced in 1930 by Muthulakshmi Reddi, prohibiting temple dedication, was actually passed. During the 1920s and 1930s, with the support of the Self Respect Movement generally and Muthulakshmi Reddi—who was herself the daughter of a *ganika*—and E. V. Ramasami Naickar in particular, the campaign took on a more radical and democratic form, demanding that the *devadasis*' right to their property be protected, their marriages be legally recognized and their children be entitled to all the rights of those born 'legitimately'. By contrast, reforms that concerned upper-caste women—child marriage, widow remarriage, dowry—received only reluctant and tardy support from landed groups who formed the backbone of the Congress. All the same, undeniably set up as norm, even in the discourses of the Self Respect Movement, is the virtuous domestic woman.²⁹

The 1920s and 1930s saw the delegitimation of the *devadasi* as artist and the extradition of her dance from the temple as much as from the household of the private patron. Almost simultaneous, however, was the retrieval and recreation of her art, and especially of the now much-maligned *sadir* performance in a new, more 'pure' mode as the national dance form, Bharata Natyam.³⁰ Rukmini Arundale and her painstaking work at the *Kalakshetra* is commonly credited with this achievement, but initiatives to 'revive' (a singular euphemism here) this dance tradition were supported by the Congress and the Theosophical Society, both of which were predominantly brahman, and drew on the cultural nationalism of thinkers such as Coomaraswamy, Tagore and Havell.³¹ Arundale herself had been selected and groomed by Annie Besant and other leaders

of the Theosophical Society to be the chosen vehicle for the 'World Mother', and emerged in the 1930s, strongly backed by the Theosophical Society, as a 'public figure in the field of dance and "national" culture in general [and as] . . . the champion for India's renaissance in the arts, specifically Bharata Natyam, its women's ancient spiritual heritage.'³²

The precise composition of this national tradition in the arts bears further analysis. Padma Subrahmanyam, an established scholar of Bharata Natyam and a dancer herself, introduces her scholarly treatise with the claim:

Dance was only part of drama in Ancient India. But drama itself was mostly danced. There was hardly any bifurcation between these arts in the true Hindu theatre. Like the Hindu religion which is itself a fusion of the Aryan's *Vedic yagna* and the non-Aryan's *Agamic puja*, the Hindu theatre also took the form of a homogeneous presentation of dance and drama. Dance seems to have been a favourite sport with the Dravidians and non-Aryans, while drama with its literary beauty was the Aryan's love. . . . The Aryans seem to have freely incorporated the art of *Nrta* [dance] into their *Natya* [drama].³¹

She concedes that the dance form known today as Bharata Natyam is 'neither *natya* in its true sense nor does it faithfully follow Bharata'³² and that in fact until the 1930s it was referred to as *sadir*;³³ further, that in its subsequent development it emphasized only the forms associated in the *Natyashastra* with *lasya* or pliant grace, which is in that treatise set up in contrast to *tandava* or forceful grace.³⁴ All the same she has no doubt that there is an underlying unity to all Indian dance which can be traced back to Bharata's classical treatise: 'To one who has read the *Natyashastra* all the so-called major styles of India appear like different shades of the same colour.'³⁵

As an art form, Padma Subrahmanyam writes, *sadir*, which was based on the fourteenth century *adavu* technique, had been appropriated into a degenerate Vaishnavite culture³⁶ and 'the higher philosophical and religious content of the dance forms were replaced by a blatant sensuous approach.'³⁷ If the 'shock treatment' of banning the dance in the temples had not been given, 'followed by the votaries of art venturing to polish it and rename it Bharata Natyam we would have lost a gem just because it was thrown into the slush.' To Bharata and the

Natyashastra she attributes a quite unambiguous function in the revival of the art:

From the state of prohibiting ladies from dignified families even witnessing the art, the pendulum has now swung to the other extreme where the practice of the art has become a status symbol. How did the magic take place? Perhaps the main strategy was the association of the name of the great sage Bharata with the art. The same content and form of the *sadir* got re-established in the name of Bharatanatyam.³⁸

Sunil Kothari attributes the revival more to the personal charm and the chaste aesthetic sensibility of Rukmini Arundale:

Endowed with great beauty, possessing great taste and high aesthetic sensibilities, she removed the unpleasant elements from dance. She . . . devised . . . *padams* with spiritual import and contributed in removing the stigma of eroticism. Bharata Natyam no longer remained base or vulgar. In that context it was necessary to bring back its devotional fervour.³⁹

For Arundale herself, this dance was a part of 'India's basic philosophy . . . a classical art [whose] classicism endures in the village, in the temple, in folk dancing, in group dancing, dance dramas and individuals.'⁴⁰ Within the span of twenty years *sadir* had been transfigured into a deeply embedded, pervasive, almost mystic force that helped to form the spiritual basis of nationhood.

VI

Readers might still want to ask why, if the ban on *Radhika Santwanam* was rescinded in 1947 and the book reprinted in 1952, copies were so difficult to find when we looked for them in the late 1980s.⁴¹ Why is it, they might still want to enquire, that the book continues to be condemned by literary critics? The lifting of the ban imposed by the British was clearly a nationalist act. But the interests of empire and of nation, and the ideologies that ground them, are not always so clearly in contradiction. Issues that the book and its history raise, of gender, caste, class and literary or aesthetic quality or taste, continue to remain controversial.⁴²

The story of Muddupalani's life, her writing and the misadventures of *Radhika Santwanam* could well be read as an

allegory of the enterprise of writing, and especially women's writing in India, for it raises many of the questions that frame literary production and consumption today. These include questions about the *contexts*, structured and restructured by changing ideologies of class, caste, gender, empire and nation, in which women wrote, and the conditions in which they were read; questions about the *cultural politics* that determined the reception and impact of their work; questions about literary taste and the literary curriculum; questions about the resistances, the subversions, the strategic appropriations, in brief, the *engagement* that characterizes the subtlest and most radical of women's writing. In Nagaratnamma's efforts to reprint Muddupalani's poem we encounter not only an episode in the unwritten history of feminist criticism in India, but also the hitherto invisible questions of the woman reader and her requirement for the literary text. That the story should take in the historical span of modern India is a bonus. Patriarchies, reconstituted in the interests of Orientalism, imperialism, the Enlightenment and nationalism among other forces, provide the horizon in which the cultural politics of this text might be appreciated.

NOTES

1. Bangalore Nagaratnamma, 'Afterword', in Muddupalani, *Radhika Santwanam*, edited by Bangalore Nagaratnamma (Madras, 1910), 80, iv.
2. Kandukuri Veeresalingam, *Andhra Kavula Charitramu* (The History of Andhra Poets), Vol. 3: *Adhanika Kavula* (Modern Poets) (1887; reprint, Rajamundry, 1950), 142.
3. Bangalore Nagaratnamma, 'Foreword', in *Radhika Santwanam*, ii. The palm leaf manuscript is no longer available, even in the Saraswati Mahal Library in Thanjavur that houses a great many of the manuscripts produced at the Thanjavur court.
4. Some of the poems excised from the Venkatanarasu and Brown edition have been translated in Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, eds., *Women Writing in India*, 118–20.
5. Nagaratnamma founded the annual Tyagaraja festival in Tiruvaiyyur and endowed the *samadhi* on the banks of the Vaigai where it is held. Her own much smaller *samadhi*, relatively uncared for when we visited it early in 1990, faces that of the great poet saint.

6. Krishnaswami Aiyangar, Note appended to Government Order no. 335, Home Public, Confidential, dated 22.4.27: 'Petition of Vavilla Venkateshwara Sastrulu, Sanskrit and Telugu Publishers, estd. 1856.'
7. Veereshalingam, *Andhra Poets*, 143.
8. Nagaratnamma, *Mundumata*, iii.
9. Cited in Petition dated 22.4.27.
10. Cited in Petition dated 22.4.27.
11. Petition dated 22.4.27.
12. Muddupalani, *Radhika Santwanam*, edited by Bangalore Nagaratnamma, with an 'Afterword' by Vavilla Venkateshwarulu (Madras, 1952). The focus of the afterword is entirely on publishers—on their nationalist commitment and on the battle they fought on behalf of Telugu literature. Nowhere in that account is Nagaratnamma mentioned at all.
13. Yandamuri-Satyanarayanarao's comment is an exception: 'These epic poems are well formed works, complete with all the nine rasas. If we look at them with our present view of women, they might appear low and unrefined. That is the inadequacy of our culture, and not that of the epic or the poet' (*Saradadwajam: Thanjavur Rajulakalamloni Telugu Sahitya Charitra* [Hyderabad], n.d., circa 1970), 231.
14. The codification of *sadir* is popularly attributed to the Thanjavur brothers whose main work may be traced back to the early decades of the nineteenth century. However, Padma Subrahmanyam argues that many of the problems of dating developments in the dance form and in musical scores can be solved if the consolidation of *sadir* is attributed to composer-choreographers such as Kasinatha who were associated with the Nayaka rulers and particularly with Pratapasimha (1739-63). *Bharata's Art: Then and Now* (Madras, 1979).
15. See Vijaya Dabeja, *Antal and Her Path of Love* (Albany, 1990) for a useful account of the Alvar saint Antal and her poetry.
16. In a celebrated appeal made after the sixteenth century Telugu classic, *Hamsavimsathi*, was banned in the early twentieth century, the publishers pointed out that 'the stories therein describe twenty different handicrafts and professions and are intended to give the readers a picture of the life and manners of the sixteenth century. This work is most valuable as a storehouse of rare technical terms and expressions pertaining to the trades and occupations which have become partly the vocabulary of the Telugu language.' Government Order no. 355, Confidential, dated 22.4.27. 'Petition of Vavilla Venkateshwara Sastrulu, proprietor of V. Ramaswami Sastrulu and Sons, Sanskrit and Telugu Publishers, estd. 1856.' National Archives, Madras.
17. K. M. George, ed., *Comparative Indian Literature*, 1 (Madras, 1984), 307.
18. Sushil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, 379; cited by Ranajit Guha in *Subaltern Studies VI* (Delhi, 1989), 258-9.
19. Muddupalani herself, we were told in Thanjavur, was forced to move to the royal court at Mysore.
20. The role played by India and the colonies in the shaping of what

- came to be regarded as *the* English character and Englishness in general is only beginning to be systematically researched. We are grateful to M. Chandrika who has in the course of her research on the Mutiny of 1857 and the representations of the Rani of Jhansi greatly extended our appreciation of the interplay between the two countries in the second half of the nineteenth century.
21. W. Frazer to the Chief Secretary, Fort William (now Madras), 25 September 1828, H. Sharp, *Selections from Educational Records*, 1 (Calcutta 1923): 13.
 22. Minute of J. Farish, 28 August 1938, cited in B. K. Boman-Behram, *Educational Controversies of India: The Cultural Conquest of India under British Imperialism* (Bombay, 1942), 13.
 23. Gauri Viswanathan, in 'The Beginning of English Literary Study in British India', *Oxford Literary Review*, 9 (1988): 2-26, quotes the evidence of Thomas Macaulay and Charles Trevelyan, *Parliamentary Papers*, Great Britain, vol. 32 (1852-3).
 24. For a more extensive discussion of this strand in the genealogy of Indian literature, see Susie Tharu, 'The Arrangement of an Alliance: English and the Making of Modern Indian Literatures', in Svati Joshi, ed., *Rethinking English* (Delhi, 1991).
 25. See Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?', in Sangari and Vaid, *Recasting Women*, 27-87.
 26. For an extended discussion of this new figure and its politics, see 'The Twentieth Century: Women Writing and the Nation', in Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, eds., *Women Writing in India: Volume II: The Twentieth Century* (New York, forthcoming).
 27. K. Lalita has argued that Gurajada Appa Rao's *Kanyasulkam*, written in 1892 (second modified version, 1897), which satirizes the anti-nautch campaign, presents an alternate view of the nation with the dancer Madhuravani and other dispossessed classes at its centre. Gurajada's writing challenged the hegemonies being constructed which is no doubt one of the reasons why the play, and indeed Gurajada himself, was marginalized in critical canons until he was 'retrieved' by the Progressive Writers' Association in Andhra in the 1940s.
 28. Amrit Srinivasan, 'Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20: 44 (1985).
 29. A good measure of the effect the anti-nautch movements had on the self-image of these women artists is the contrast between Muddupalani's and even Nagaratnamma's confident initiatives and the self-recriminatory posture of Muvalur Ramamirthammal in her fascinating *Dasikal Mosavalai* [The Tricks/Ploys of the Dasis] (Madras, 1936). 'The reform campaigns forced the devadasis to acknowledge the moral supremacy of *grhasta* values', Amrit Srinivasan comments in 'Reform and Revival'.
 30. See Kumkum Sangari, 'Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti', in *Occasional Papers on History and Society: Nehru Memorial Museum and Archives*, Second Series No. 27, for a related discussion of gender and

nationalism. Also Mihir Bhattacharya, 'Rabindranath Tagore and the Oriental Woman: A Reading of *Chaturanga*', paper presented at a seminar on Literature, Society and Ideology in the Victorian Era at Jadavpur University, March 1987.

31. Among them the freedom fighter E. Krishna Iyer, a brahman and a practising lawyer who toured the south singing the patriotic songs of Subramanya Bharati and, after 1925, taking on female roles and dancing in the *sadir* style. In 1931 Krishna Iyer precipitated some of the most acrimonious battles with the Self Respect Movement over the issue of dance. See Sunil Kothari, 'History: Roots, Growth and Revival', in Sunil Kothari, ed., *Bharata Natyam: Indian Classical Dance Art* (Delhi, 1979), 23-9.
32. Srinivasan, 'Reform and Revival', 1874-5. Rukmini Arundale's reminiscences of her beginnings are well worth quoting. After attributing the development of her aesthetic sensibility to Besant's enthusiasm for the beauty of ordinary people and everyday objects in India, she writes: 'In those days no one thought of an Indian woman dancing. I had just seen Anna Pavlova and I was full of inspiration. It was in 1925 and we were all travelling together. I remarked that I would like to dance. Everyone around me was shocked and said, "What an idea!" She [Annie Besant] smiled and said, "I think it will be a wonderful idea, Rukmini dancing." In 1928 before I even studied dancing I was asked to produce a variety entertainment... for the 1st of October, her birthday. She brought many of her friends... I produced Tennyson's Guinevere as well as the little temple scene of Kwan-Yin, the Chinese World Mother.

'My art movement began on her birthday. On my programme we printed the names of the actors and Mrs Besant's recitation. My first earning went to the animals and to the poor whom she loved and whom I love.' *The Annie Besant Centenary Book*, cited in C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar, *Annie Besant* (Delhi, 1963), 94.

The nexus between nationalism and internationalism as it emerged in the aesthetics of the early twentieth century is as evident in Padma Subrahmanyam's statement: 'If one finds the trace of any alien [she had been told in the USSR that her dance seemed to be influenced by their ballet] or even the varied Indian styles like Kathakali in one movement and Manipuri in another and Orrisi in yet another in my dance, it is because of my tapping the main source of the fountainhead of all these so-called styles [Bharata's *Natyashastra*]. Padma Subrahmanyam, *Bharata's Art: Then and Now* (Madras, 1979).

31. Subrahmanyam, *Bharata's Art*, 3-4. Sunil Kothari echoes the sentiment: 'The Aryan and the Dravidian cultures merged harmoniously in the classical art form like Bharata Natyam.' *Bharata Natyam*, 23.
32. Subrahmanyam, *Bharata's Art*, 11.
33. *Ibid.*, 75-8.
34. *Ibid.*, 11.
35. *Ibid.*, 36.
36. 'The Nayakas were Vaishnavites, and by their time the "Radha-

Krishna" movement had taken deep and pervert [sic] roots... *Madhura bhakti* was used as a camouflage to kindle and enjoy debased morals. This unfortunate trend had already infected the dance field beyond cure.' Subrahmanyam, *Bharata's Art*, 75.

37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, 76.
39. Kothari, *Bharata Natyam*, 28.
40. Rukmini Devi Arundale, 'Spiritual Background', in Kothari, *Bharata Natyam*, 16.
41. We have, after combing through libraries in Hyderabad, Rajamundry, Vetapalem, Madras and Thanjavur, located a copy each of the 1887, 1911 and 1952 editions and learnt about the possible existence of a paperback edition put out in the early 1970s. As already stated, neither the original palm leaf manuscript nor any copies of it are available even in the Saraswati Mahal Library which houses the literature and the other documents from the Thanjavur period.
42. See for example the response of D. Chandrashekar and A. Usha Devi to an article by K. Lalita on *Radhika Santwanam, Udayam*, 29 July 1990. The article appeared in two parts on 17 June and 27 June 1990.