



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 12. Issue 4. 2025 (Oct-Dec)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

**Unsung Tamil Woman Leader Manalur Maniammal for a Global Audience:
Translation of Rajam Krishnan's *Padhaiyil Padhindha Adigal***

Dr. S. Chitra

Principal, Government Arts College, Ariyalur, Tamil Nadu, India

✉ Email: chitranaresh@gmail.com

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.12.4.42](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.12.4.42)



Article information

Article Received:28/09/2025
Article Accepted:03/11/2025
Published online:13/11/2025

Abstract

This paper deals with recuperating the 'hidden' histories of women through literature and proclaims them to the present society. Rajam Krishnan's *Padhaiyil Padhindha Adigal* (Footprints on the Path) revisits the pre-independent period through this biographical fictionalized narrative and retrieve the obscured history of the woman leader Manalur Maniammal. This Tamil biographical novel was first serialised in 1991 and then published as a novel. It traces the life of Manalur Maniammal, a woman communist leader who fought for the rights of farming labourers, industrial workers, sweepers and scavengers. She dedicated her life for the upliftment of the poor and marginalized communities of the East Thanjavur district in Tamilnadu. Regrettably, despite her brief association with the Indian National Congress and the Communist Party, both major political parties failed to acknowledge and appreciate her significant contributions towards uplifting the marginalized communities in the Thanjavur district. In fact, during her life time they actively hindered her remarkable development as a political leader in the pre/post-independent India. As a result, her contributions remain unacknowledged in the history of this nation.

Through the exploration of Maniammal's obscured history, Rajam Krishnan celebrates the act of uncovering marginalized narratives that have been overlooked in the annals of a nation's history. Translating the novel into English draws national and global recognition to such hidden histories of women leaders. The translation gives regional insights into the Tamil society of that period where gender and caste discrimination intersects throughout the text. While Brahmin orthodoxy and male-centred political parties stifle Maniammal, the landed Zamindars and factory owners stifle the farmhands and labourers respectively. Maniammal challenges all these authoritarian institutions. The multi-layered forms of imperious hierarchies at the personal, political, cultural and Socio-economic level is seriously examined throughout the text. The challenges in exploring these layers through translation is examined in a detailed manner.

Keywords: Manalur Maniammal, Tamil Woman leader, hidden history, dominant, marginalized, farming labourers.

The title of the novel *Padhaiyil Padhindha Adigal* by Tamil woman novelist Rajam Krishnan when translated into English reads "Footprints on the Path". History in general and historiographers in particular capture details of grand narratives of any nation. India is not an exception to this. The pre- and post- independent period and the anti-Colonial freedom struggle in particular are devised in such a way that most of it had been personality-driven, especially patriarchal in nature. Women as leaders had been focused but scarcely are they represented as major forces to reckon with. Women leaders at the regional level with indomitable will had been neglected or silenced in the history of this great nation. Recuperating such repressed voices becomes the focus of Rajam Krishnan's biographical narrative *Padhaiyil Padhindha Adigal*.

Rajam Krishnan's decade long passionate research of the forgotten woman leader Manalur Maniammal begins when she first listens to her name in folksongs sung by farmhands in villages of Eastern Thanjavur. She excavates the history through an arduous process of meeting Maniammal's relatives, her political supporters and friends who worked with her on ground bringing major changes in the farming labour practices of Eastern Thanjavur. Maniammal embraces communist ideology to champion the cause of the agriculture and factory labourers and also to fight caste discrimination.

Maniammal had lived with the farmhands and the lower caste people in their tenements educating them and sensitizing them in health and hygiene issues. She also had risked her own life fighting the powerful Zamindari/feudal system which exploited the labour of these lower caste people. Such a remarkable career of a woman leader is brought to light by Rajam Krishnan by reconstructing the research material into a biographical fictionalized narrative. Translating the text from Tamil to English gives a national and global outreach to the forgotten heroine in the history of Tamilnadu and India.

The process of translation posited many challenges that were overcome without distorting the emotional 'being' or the soul of the text. The text moves into different slangs of Tamil as Maniammal storms into the male-dominated political arena.

Upper Caste and Working-Class Language Shift (Untranslatability explained)

The author employs the Brahmin slang in normal conversations within the family which becomes literally untranslatable and hence the simple meaning is brought out by the translator. For eg.

Tamil : "அது வந்து ... அவா பாரம்பரிய சிவபூஜை பண்ணிண்டிருந்தாள்ளியோ? தோப்பனாருக்கப்பறம் பிள்ளைகள் யாரும் கவனிக்கல. ... அதை ஆத்துல அடச்சுப் போட்டுக் கதவைச் சாத்திண்டு எப்படி வர? (pg.18 original Tamil text)

English : "It is Mani's father performed their traditional Shiva worship you know after his death the sons neglected Now Mani performs pooja with dedication. She couldn't leave the images behind inside a locked house

Brahminical Tamil language and Transliteration to show the difference in sound and pronunciation	Normal/Literary Tamil Language and Transliteration to show the difference in sound and pronunciation	Translation in English (untranslatability) Neither the difference in sound nor the change in pronunciation could be brought out
--	--	--

பண்ணிண்டிருந்தாளியோ <i>pannindirunthaalyo</i>	செய்துகொண்டிருந்தார்கள் அல்லவா? <i>seithukondirunthargal allavaa?</i>	performed the traditional Shiva worship you know
தோப்பனாருக்கப்பறம் <i>Thoppanar</i>	தந்தைக்குப்பின் Thanthaikkuppin Thanthai	after his (father's) death
ஆத்துல Aathula	வீட்டில் veetil	house
அவா Avaa	அவர்கள் Avargal	their

The author shifts to the language of the working class people living in lower caste tenements. This working class slang too is untranslatable.

Tamil: “எங்கே அம்சு?”

“அது நடவுக்குப் போயிருக்கு. அவ புருசன் பொஞ்சாதிக்குள்ள தகராறு. பட்டாமணிய லூட்டு காரியகாருகிட்ட இவ பேசிட்டாளாம். (pg.42 original text in Tamil)

English: when she is questioned about her daughter-in-law Amsu who had beaten the boy black and blue. The old lady explained that there was a quarrel between the husband and wife over the latter talking with the agent of the Pattamaniam about *Karaveli* problem.

The dialogue is converted into a reported speech to arrive at the core problem of the particular situation using the liberty given to a translator.

Working class Tamil language and Transliteration to show the difference in sound and pronunciation	Normal/Literary Tamil Language and Transliteration to show the difference in sound and pronunciation	Translation in English (untranslatability) Neither the difference in sound nor the change in pronunciation could be brought out
புருசன் பொஞ்சாதி Purusan ponjaathi	கணவன் மனைவி Kanavan manaivi	Husband and wife
லூட்டு vootu	வீட்டு Veetu	House literal translation avoided so instead of the agent who belongs to pattamaniam's house it is simply agent of the Pattamaniam

Similarly, Maniammal's language in the fields encouraging her workers and giving them the inner strength to oppose the “agent” or the middleman who exploit them marks significant shift in Tamil language usage. For eg. In a heated conversation with the “agent” she questions him

Tamil : S1 அவங்க உழைப்பை நாம தின்னுறோம். S2 அந்த உணக்கை நன்னி வேண்டாமா? (Pg, 46)

English : and asked him to always be conscious that they exploited their labour and should be grateful to them.

The dialogue form is converted to reported speech to emphasize the context. S1 and S2 are interchanged

S1 அவங்க உழைப்பை நாம தின்னுறோம்

literal meaning : we eat their labour

Translation : exploited their labour

S2 அந்த உணக்கை நன்னி வேண்டாமா?

உணக்கை (unnakkai) – translated as conscious and நன்னி(nanni) normal usage is நன்றி (nanri) translated as grateful.

Political Speech and its rhetorical style:

Another Tamil which the author introduces are the political speeches of Maniammal. The text captures the ongoing political impact in pre-independent Tamilnadu where the British /Colonial influence dominates, Indian National Congress as a nationalist party is at loggerheads with the regional Dravidian party. Maniammal rejects all the three major influences and associates herself with the Communist party championing the cause of farming and factory labourers. During one of her fiery speeches against the atrocities of the feudal / zamindari class, stones are hurled at her. Let us look into certain parts of the speech where she presents an alternative political ideology to all the three major influences of that time. In this sense the author showcases the alternate history that prevailed during that period.

Tamil : ... நீங்கள் உழைக்கிறீர்கள். ஆண்டை அனுபவிக்கிறான். கீழ்சாதி என்று சொல்லி தண்ணீருக்கும் காபந்து பண்ணுகறான். ஏன் பண்ணுகிறான்? சர்க்காரே, மனிதனுக்கு மனிதன் வித்தியாசமா நடத்துறது. (pg 124 original text in tamil)

English : Despite your diligent efforts, it is your master who reaps all the benefits. They not only insult individuals belonging to lower castes but also safeguard access to drinking water. Why does he do that? Because the government discriminates against each and every individual.

நீங்கள் உழைக்கிறீர்கள். ஆண்டை அனுபவிக்கிறான்.

Despite your diligent efforts, it is your master who reaps all the benefits. (Two short sentences merged)

கீழ்சாதி என்று சொல்லி தண்ணீருக்கும் காபந்து பண்ணுகறான்.

They not only insult individuals belonging to lower castes but also discriminate restricting access to drinking water.

ஏன் பண்ணுகிறான்?

Why does he do that?

சர்க்காரே, மனிதனுக்கு மனிதன் வித்தியாசமா நடத்துறது.

Because the government discriminates against each and every individual.

The author employs very short sentences in the political speech and it is rhetoric in nature. Whereas the translation brings out the importance of the speech without distorting the meaning but the sentences are evidently longer in English.

Conflation of Authorial voice and Feminist tone:

Born into a conservative brahmin family the author gives key insights into the regressive practices that were prevalent during that period. Maniammal is introduced as a widow who is not allowed to wear chappals, clothed in a white sari covering her tonsured head typical of a brahmin widow. Rajam Krishnan explains each of these details from a feminist perspective in the following manner:

Tamil: S1 - பெண் என்பவள் ஓர் ஆணின் சொத்து சுகங்கள் பதவி போகங்கள் ஆகிய செல்வாக்குகளில் அடங்கிய அவனுடைய ‘சுக ஜீவனத்தை’ மேன்மைபடுத்தும் ஒரு சின்னம். S2 - இப்போது கல்லும் முள்ளும் குத்தும் காய்ந்த வயலில் நடக்கையில் மணி நினைத்து பார்க்கிறாள். (pg.12 original tamil text)

English: (S2) As she traverses this dry, harsh terrain scattered with thorns, she ponders the idea that (S1) a woman is a symbol who enhances the "pleasure-filled existence" of a man confined within his possessions, influence, opulence, and welfare.

Two sentences are merged into one in the target language and the sequence of source language S2 and S1 are reversed. The term ‘சுக ஜீவனத்தை’ is a specific tamil terminology coined by the author and it is translated as "pleasure-filled existence". The language which the author employs here is a literary language giving her views in a third person narrative rendering it as the voice of the protagonist.

Maniammal's transformation into male appearance is the most challenging part of the translation. It is not a mere change in the clothing style but an act of rebellion that politically and emotionally rejuvenates the lifeless ‘inner being’ of Maniammal. Rajam Krishnan's imagination gives life to the protagonist's thought process. After the Pattamaniam's agent pushes her into the slush avenging her interference into his business he uses unparliamentary language referring to her as “mottai” meaning a widowed woman with a tonsured head. Unable to bear this insult she says

Tamil : நான் மணி... மணி... நீ ... மொட்டை, பொட்டைன்னா சொன்னே! யார்னு காட்டுறேன்! உனக்காச்சு ஒருகை எனக்காச்சு ஒருகை!” (pg59)

English : “ I am Mani...Mani!....da...you called me *mottai...pottai* ? "I will show you who I am... it's either me or you!"

‘da’ is a tamil word referring to a male, uttered in a friendly manner, to fondle kids and also in a disparaging manner by both men and women to express their anger against a man. The translation of such a usage is impossible and hence a transliteration of the word is used to show Mani's anger. On returning back home she adorned a male attire wearing Khadhar dhoti, long jibba like blouse and a towel on the shoulder. I have shown a line by line translation of this major event in the protagonist's life and the process of translation.

இந்த சோதனை கோலத்தில் இவள் ஆழ்ந்திருக்கையில் அலமேலு ஆச்சி வந்துவிடுகிறாள்.

While Mani was engrossed experimenting her new appearance Alamelu Aachi came there.

“மணி ... நா...ங் கேள்விப்பட்டது ...” என்று வாயெடுப்பவள் இவள் எண்ணெய் பளபளக்கும் தலை வேட்டி துண்டு, ஜாக்கெட் கோலம் கண்டு சற்றே திகைத்தாற்போல், “இனிமேதா குளிக்கப்போறியா?” என்று முடிக்கிறாள்.

"Mani... I...I...heard..." Aachi was awestruck looking at the shiny hair, dhoti, towel and bloused incredible appearance. With a mild disbelief she asked "Are you getting ready for your bath?"

“ஆச்சி, ஒரு ஜன்மத்துக்கு தலை முழுகியாச்சு. இப்ப வேற ஜன்மம் எடுக்கப்போறேன் ... எப்படி இருக்கும்?” (Pg.61 original text in tamil)

"Aachi I have cleansed myself entirely, free from the burdens of this birth. Now, I am embarking on my new birth... How does that sound?"

This particular episode and many of Mani's rebellion transgressing the conservative social codes is reimagined by Rajam Krishnan. The authorial voice gives life to the silenced inner 'being' of Maniammal through the act of cleansing herself with water and taking a new birth. Some of the other authorial feminist voices are mentioned below (only with the English translation) When Mani's brother leaves her on the street to fend for herself as a punishment for her rebellious acts one can sense the protagonist's unflinching confidence,

"Well then, stay here. I am leasing this house, groves, farm, and everything is specified in this document. If you refuse to come with me, you will end up on the streets. Yes, as a *stree*/woman, a widow, and childless, you will have to fend for yourself on the streets. You will have to endure and submit to a life of struggle... You can never be independent..."

These harsh realities struck her core like a sudden thunderbolt.

"Why should I be left on the streets? My brave, courageous, righteous, and truthful nature will never allow me to bow down to injustice!" (pg.77 original Tamil text)

In yet another episode in the prison towards the end of the text, Shajaathi a prison in-mate and friend of Maniammal in Vellore prison is also acclaimed and commended by the author. This young labour union girl went on indefinite hunger pressuring the Indian Railways and then she was arrested. When both Mani and the girl meet in the prison,

Mani stood in awe of this slender figure, where even her weary eyes emanated ashining light.

From what background did this girl gain such strength of character? She came from a religious background that kept women hidden behind heavy curtains, considering it sinful to reveal their faces. Was it nationalism that gleamed in her eyes? No, it was internationalism that surpassed mere nationalism. It went even further – a capacity bestowed upon her by an organization that aligned itself with humanitarian ideals. (pg.247 original Tamil text)

These instances give us an inner view of the women's indomitable will in the political arena.

Tamil Cultural Practices through the text:

This section will deal with the English Translation of the text.

The martial art *Silambam*

These were the days when the celebrations of the folk deities commenced with the raising of the temple flag. (pg.67 original Tamil text)

...she spotted two men engaged in a game of *Silambam*, a traditional Tamil heroic defence game using sturdy long sticks. The onlookers had divided into two groups, cheering and applauding. (pg.67 original Tamil text)

"They want me to play before Goddess Kaliamma's palanquin during this festival. The famed Raasu Vaathiyar (master) in those days used to play with such vigor even the young ones couldn't match him." (pg.67 original Tamil text)

Mani accepts the old master as her Guru and learns *Silambam* from him.

Harvest and Pongal festivities

The people from the *Cheri* who were associated with her had put in great effort towards her land. Soman, the farmhand who previously tended to her farm, brought the new paddy sheaves during Shivarathri in the Tamil month of Maasi (mid-February). In return, she gifted him a new khaddar dhoti and towel and prepared Pongal with milk. Everyone participated in this celebration. (pg83 original Tamil text)

Wedding of the farmhands solemnized by Mani in her own individual style under the auspices of the Red Flag Union:

The marriage stage was not elaborately decorated; it consisted of four poles adorned with red papers. They placed a wooden plank, washed the floor with cow dung solution, and drew a Kolam (traditional pattern). The wedding couple came and received Ammal's blessings.

For this occasion, Mani had bought two badges engraved with the symbol of a paddy and sickle. She pinned them on the couple's clothes. A *Kuthuvilakku* lamp was lit. Ammal took two garlands and gave one to the bride, asking her to put it around the groom's neck. Then she gave the other garland to the groom, instructing him to place it on the bride. Finally, both of them sat on a wooden plank at the centre of the house.

"Amma is the purohit (priest); Amma is our leader; Amma... Amma is everything," the crowd expressed.

A piece of turmeric root was strung on the yellow 'thaali' thread. Mani took it and handed it to the groom, who tied it around the bride's neck. (198 & 199 original Tamil text)

Indigenous Medical knowledge

Mani's friend Kunjammal, a fearless widow who lives the life of a woman mendicant treats a boy bitten by snake with herbs and brings him back to life.

Kunjammal, wearing an ochre robe, had matted hair hanging down as she sat with closed eyes.

...Mani said, "Kunjamma, there is a young lad lying unconscious after being bitten by a snake. What medicine should be administered, and how should it be given?"

Kunjammal opened her bloodshot eyes. She had adorned herself in ochre robes, resembling hermits and sages, covering both her breasts. She swiftly sprang into action, pouring numerous pots of cold water over the boy. She opened his mouth and stuffed three medicine balls inside. (pg.156 original Tamil text)

The upper and lower caste food exhibits the class and cultural difference.

The preparation of dosai and coffee as explained in the second chapter shows the luxurious delicacies enjoyed in the brahmin household.

The soft hissing sound of the *dosai* batter spreading on the hot *tava* could be heard followed by the sound of clearing throats in the hall. Mani wondered whether these men will have their dinner or tiffin. She guessed that the old Brahmin who chattered about the grandeur of the house have entered the hall. *Dosai* with side dishes like chutney and idli chilli powder were served. (pg.18 original Tamil text)

"Yes, you are right... and coffee was such a rarity. My brother used to roast the coffee seeds himself with a drop of ghee for aroma. Even cooks were banned into this territory. A separate mortar stone was used to pound the seeds ... we did not have filter, instead a thick rett cloth was used to strain the decoction, fresh foaming milk is boiled and mixed with the decoction in a silver

tumbler. Then the heat is brought down by alternately pouring coffee in the tumbler and dabara (a small cup) ... frothy foam swells with a hissing sound. I would stand, gripping the wooden plank of the swing, yearning to taste even a single droplet. Will they ever give such things to a girl? After he leaves, I secretly touch the shrunken foam on the tumbler and dabara and keep it on my tongue ..." saying this Manni laughed. (pg.21 original Tamil text)

This is contrasted with the lower caste tenements and the food they eat.

Boiled gruel made of broken rice and served them with milk or buttermilk. (pg.42 original Tamil text)

As she walked past the huts, goat droppings, salted and dried meat, felt insignificant and shy at the touch of her feet. (pg.42 original Tamil text)

The luxury of coffee preparation in the upper caste household is contrasted with the lower caste tenement where Maniammal had come to help a tender girl deliver the illegitimate burden.

Devu burned tender coconut sheaves to heat milk, and then brought it to her in a tumbler. "Amma, since yesterday you turned down even a drop of water atleast drink this milk."

"Keep this milk aside, boil coffee powder in water and bring some coffee let me pour something into her mouth"

The worst food described by the author is the prison food. Janaki one of the convict inmate tells,

"They only served me two and a half ounces of gruel and a curry with wriggling worms. It was terribly unpalatable ..."(pg.232 & 233 original Tamil text)

There used to be a cell for infants. If the incarcerated girls arrived with children under the age of three, that place was designated for the children. However, no criminal mother was ever released with her child.

Why? Because they fed the children coarse millet gruel, which led to dysentery. Dehydration caused the children to embark on a journey to the realm of Yama, the God of Death. ." (pg.233 original Tamil text)

The various aspects of this translation shows the importance to bring in a global outreach to the silenced history of Manalur Maniammal as it touches upon the Pre-independent socio-economic/cultural/political milieu of Tamil society which in turn is intertwined with caste and gender discrimination.

References

Krishnan, R. (1991). *Paathayil pathinda adigal*. Dhaagam Publishers.

Krishnan, R. (2024). *Footprints on the path* (S. Chitra, Trans.). Pustaka Digital Media Pvt. Ltd. (Original work published 1991)