



*Dining for Women*

***Making Connections  
March 2007  
Tamil Nadu, India***

***“Our challenge is to help women come together to realize their collective potential and claim their rights.”***

***Renuka Gala, CWDR***

We last visited India in September when we supported the work of Matrichaya in the central Indian state of Jharkhand. This time, we’re in southern India, in Tamil Nadu, a culturally and historically rich area that has seen more than its share of tragedy, most recently in the Tsunami that devastated its coastline. The Tamil women served by CWDR share some of the challenges faced by women in Jharkhand, yet they do so in a very different part of India. This month’s *MC* aims to introduce our members to this distinctive region and its women.

***FYI***

1. **The other India.** Tamil Nadu (TN) for centuries has been the home of people of Dravidian heritage—a racial, cultural, and language group (according to varying definitions) distinct from the Aryan-Indian peoples who primarily occupy northern India. Many believe they are the original inhabitants of India. Among the largest of the Dravidian language groups is Tamil. Tamil culture flourished for some 600 years in the early Common Era. It has had a rich tradition of learning and literature, dance and music, and spirituality that blends other Indian religious traditions (known now collectively as “Hinduism”) with particularly Tamil traditions. A Tamil renaissance took place in the late nineteenth century, in part political and a reaction to colonialism and in part cultural, with the recovery of ancient Tamil religious forms and literature. Most Tamils reside in south India, the majority in Tamil Nadu, but there has been a Tamil minority community in Sri Lanka for centuries. Since the early eighties, Tamil rebels have fought for independence from the Sri Lankan government in a sporadic civil war and carried out a number of terrorist acts. In 1991, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a Tamil woman suicide bomber. While many may be sympathetic to the plight of the minority Tamils in Sri Lanka, the vast majority of Indian Tamils are not involved in political activity, armed or otherwise. Large numbers in Tamil Nadu do what their ancestors did—try to make their living off the sea. Never easy, it became much harder because of the Tsunami.

2. **The Tsunami and Women.** As Renuka Gala’s report to us indicated (please see the Fact Sheet and her report on our website), the Tsunami hit women of the fishing villages

hard in particular ways. While the devastation can't be underestimated, there may be something of a silver lining in this tragedy. The Tsunami swept away lives and homes; but it may have also begun to sweep away social conventions and attitudes that have made women's lives in these villages perpetually difficult.

The attention that the media and relief organizations have given to these villages since the Tsunami has helped expose just how difficult women's lives were even before it. High rates of violence against women, low rates of women's education. Higher rates of malnutrition and disease for women than men. Lack of women's representation in community government and lack of attention by the State. No recognition of women's status as workers coupled with the assumption that women must take primary responsibility for the family. While men generally do the fishing, women do all the other work associated with the fishing life—cleaning, caring for fishing equipment (as well as families and homes), transporting, marketing, processing, etc. Yet they cannot join the Fishworkers Cooperative or receive government benefits that go to fishermen.

While a number of reports (among the best is a 2005 article by Asha Krishnakumar, an editor of the Indian news magazine *Frontline* that I've relied on extensively here) document women's "marginality" in the villages, they also note that it is women who hold things together—even more so after the Tsunami. Krishnakumar reports that "while most men are still fearful to return to sea, women are providing almost 100% of the household income for Chennai's 40,000 fishing families," doing whatever they can to feed and house their children. The desperation of some women is shocking. Both *The Guardian* and *The Deccan* reported just this January that at least 150 village women sold their kidneys to support their families, often returning to any manual labor they could find soon after their surgeries. But more positively, women's self help groups—often vilified by community governments in the past—have taken the lead in rebuilding. NGOs (like CWDR) recognizing the plight of women and the importance of nurturing women for the culture's survival have developed "women-centered" relief programs that are not only giving women aid but giving them acknowledgment and the training to take leadership outright and be self-sufficient.

And this is leading potentially to sweeping changes in the culture. One sixty-five year old woman told a reporter for the Ecumenical News Network that "For the first time in my life, I have been sitting with men in public meetings and even speaking out our requirements." Fishing culture may never be the same. Some women, for the first time, own their own boats thanks to the help of NGOs. In January 2007, the Women Fishworkers Federation of over 500 women convened to demand "legal status" and equitable aid and benefits, according to *The Hindu*. Government officials in February responded by outlining initial steps to aid women in fishing. But there is also recognition that fishing culture can never be as it was, not only because of the devastation of the Tsunami but also because of vast economic changes in India and around the world that are affecting these small villages. *The Hindu* reports that the same government minister who announced the government's intent to give attention to women fishers also underlined the need for "women's education and economic independence." The assumption of fishing communities has been that girls don't need education because they will follow their mothers into the fish-related work women have always done. And if that assumption is swept away, there may be a silver lining indeed.

***Cultural Focus: Shakti***

In Hindu teaching, women are powerful. Particularly vivid representations of female power or *shakti* are found in the many goddesses of its ancient Sanskrit texts—Durga, Kali, Parvati, Laksmi, etc. Tamil culture not only reveres these pan-Indian figures but also a number of local goddesses; almost every village has its own special protectress. Even some Christian Tamils have adapted devotion to Mary into forms that parallel Hindu goddess worship. While the stories and characteristics of each goddess vary, they all represent *shakti*. All this worship of female power may initially seem at odds with the lives of mortal women as I described them above. But *shakti* is a complex concept and manifests itself both in goddess myths and in the lives of women in very complex ways, according to the growing number of scholars who study it.

In Hinduism, *shakti*, as Dr. Susan Wadley explains it, is the “power or energy of the universe... fundamental to all action, to all being.” In Hindu sacred stories, “the goddess provides a motivating force for the passive inactive male.” While the positive and benevolent aspect of *shakti* is often emphasized, it also has a destructive component. For example, the goddess Kali is a fierce warrior who wears the skulls of her male victims as jewelry as well as the mother of creation. A Tamil proverb puts the idea clearly: “Through woman is being and through woman is downfall.” Tamil goddesses particularly embody this paradox of *shakti*. The goddess Mariyamman, for example, prevents or ends smallpox epidemics; however, she also scourges her children with them when she is displeased.

Because female power can be overpowering to the point of destruction, Dr. Wadley explains, it must be controlled, according to Hindu teaching. Among the most important Tamil goddesses is Alli, an Amazon-like warrior figure who after conquering numerous men is “tamed” and turned into a devoted wife by the hero Arjuna. Hindu mythology even extends this “binding” of female power to the unbinding of female clothing. A pan-Indian goddess closely related to Alli is Draupadi. Central to her story is a public “undraping” of her sari. On more mundane levels, explains Dr. Wadley, the Tamil ritual traditions that highlight girls’ coming of age (not found elsewhere in India) are direct attempts to both celebrate and begin to bring under control girls’ reproductive power—which can be creative or destructive for the Tamil family. This is particularly crucial for Tamils because there is a long history of matrilineal intermarriage (again, not found in northern Indian traditions) that keeps the family “pure” so long as women’s reproductive activity is bound within it. Married women are considered much more auspicious than girls, widows, or unmarried women who lack the restraint of a husband, symbolized by the *tali*, the cord that married women wear. The groom places around the neck of the bride in the marriage ceremony.

It is the fear-fraught understanding of *shakti*’s use and control that explains why such potentially high-powered women can live such low-status lives. Scholar Margaret Egnor explains that central to the idea of *shakti* are suffering and servitude. Sacred stories repeatedly honor goddesses and heroic women who endure enormous suffering on account of the men they are trying to help or are bound to love. Kannagi, perhaps the most important heroine of Tamil literature, endures enormous suffering and injustice, including betrayal by her husband. She is known as the champion of injustice because she pursues and eventually achieves justice—not for herself, but on behalf of the husband who mistreated her. In listening to Tamil women talk about their own lives, Dr. Egnor discovered the power of these ideas. Women from many walks of life—from physicians to “untouchables” claimed enormous power over others—even over disease and the future—through their suffering and mistreatment. They claim to be able to manipulate

family members and events through the guise of servitude far better than by claiming their authority outright. Further, patience and devotion in the face of suffering and mistreatment are considered aspects of women's "nobility"—women in control of their *shakti* exhibit these characteristics, Dr. James Lincoln noted, not only in mythology but in popular novels about women. Complainers or women who claim their own self-interest are, well, less than female and lacking *shakti*. These ideas are furthered strengthened, Dr. Egnor discovered, through the bonds that the shared pain and understanding of their experience created among women. So not only male control, but also women's own self-control and the reinforcement of female solidarity serve to underline the meaningfulness of suffering for women. Women, as these scholars observe, can be the most ardent enforcers of these ideas and least sympathetic to women who do not conform to the norms.

And thus, the sacred myths of Hindu and more specifically Tamil culture can go far to explain why women work so hard and suffer so much in Tamil Nadu. Historical, political, and economic reasons abound, but gender ideology is a powerful part of the mix. Suffering is considered their virtue, their power and glory, *what is natural and real* on some very deep level. In *Voices*, you'll encounter woman who reject or reassess these ideas. While acknowledging the reality of women's suffering and their remarkable endurance, these women writers do not glorify suffering but rather, renounce the injustice of it. They also acknowledge that giving up these notions means, in some sense, giving of long-held sacred notions of female power. Might there be a way in which women and men might share power openly and equitably? These poets and writers seem to indicate that this begins with women refusing to submit to male power or to the power game of manipulation through suffering. It begins with seeing injustice and suffering for what they are and with reclaiming women's lives and bodies from the "bind" of established controls. Of course, Tamil culture is not the only one that deals with such complex gender mythologies. (Personal aside: the more I read about southern India, the more it sounds like another southern culture with which I'm quite familiar.)

### ***Recommended Book***

Although the caste system has been illegal in India for decades, it still exists. Those from the lowest caste, the Dalits, still find it very difficult to rise from the poverty that has characterized—indeed been considered a natural part of—their existence for centuries. Even those who do manage to get an education and move into professional work often suffer from the social stigma of being "impure." And things could be getting worse for Dalits. The traditional agricultural labor that Dalit women have performed is disappearing with globalization and mechanized farming and now the ecological disaster of salinization of farmland from the Tsunami. In some fishing villages in Kancheepuram (a district near Chennai in which CWDR works), even prior to the Tsunami there was tension between fishing folk and Dalits over water and fishing rights that resulted in attacks on Dalits by angry mobs. After the Tsunami, Dalits were the first sent to do the dirty and dangerous work of clean-up, but often the last to receive any aid. And the scramble for aid has pitted fishing folk against the Dalits once again.

Being a Dalit woman has meant being the lowest of the low, unheard as well as "untouchable." Until recently. "Bama Faustina" (pen-name) was born into a Dalit tribe in southern Tamil Nadu – you'll recognize the name: *paraiya*. Educated in a Catholic convent (some Dalit groups converted to Christianity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>

centuries, thinking their lives would improve), she now gives voice to Dalit women through her well-received autobiography (*Karukku*) and fiction. The recommended book this month is her novel, *Sangata* (“Events”). Nothing really happens in *Sangata* – except daily village life as experienced by Dalit women. Narrated by a precocious young girl, *Sangata* unfolds the perspectives, stories, and strategies for survival of women the world ignores. It’s straightforward language, details of village life and customs, and surprising perspectives on women’s place in Tamil society (Who is “free”—a Dalit woman who can/must walk in the street or a Brahmin woman who can’t?) make for a fascinating and enlightening introduction to Tamil women’s lives. 76% of Dalit women are illiterate. One can only wonder about the life stories that go unwritten—and how they might change if they could be.

*Voices* will include some excerpts of the narrator’s words from the novel but I encourage you to seek it out to read the stories and conversations of the other women—it’s a short book and the chapters easily stand on their own. **Bama Faustina, *Sangati (Events)*, translated by Lakshmi Holmström (Oxford University Press, 2005).** Available from amazon and other sources (please order through the DFW website). Note: Some library catalogs and booksellers erroneously list the translator as author—note the translator as well as author if you request it through interlibrary loan. And for further confusion, the author is often listed only as “Bama.” Best to include the ISBN number: 0195670884.

If you are captured by *Sangati*, you might want to move on to another extraordinary work, *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable*. This book, written in 1997, is the result of ten years of conversations between a Dalit woman and ethnologists Josiane and Jean Luc Racine. And if you are interested in more Tamil fiction about women from many walks of life, the short story collection edited by Dilip Kumar, *A Place to Live: Contemporary Tamil Short Fiction* (Penguin Books, 2004), is a good source.

### ***Dining with Women***

See the **September 06 MC** for an overview of Indian food. South Indian food is not the food you’ve encountered in most Indian restaurants in the U.S.; you won’t find the meat and dairy based curries, for example. Most Tamils are vegetarian by cultural tradition or necessity. The food tends to be fiery (recipes below have been adjusted). Tamil cooking almost always involves a process called “tempering”—quickly frying a few whole spices that become the base of (or are added to) most dishes.

Tamils (and most other south Indians) follow an eating pattern that is a different from that of northern India. Rice, as in most of north India, is the basis of the meal. It is served, however, with three basic types of accompaniments. In this order, a Tamil meal would include rice served with a *sambar* (a rather thin curry, often made with tamarind—see below); *rasam* (a tart and spicy soup—really, almost a drink); and finally “curd” or yogurt (plain or mixed with vegetables or fruits). Other drier types of curries, chutneys and pickles, and flatbreads might round out a meal. Tamils love milk-based desserts such as *payasam* (soup-like puddings often based on rice or thin noodles). This despite the fact that most south Indians of Dravidian descent are lactose-intolerant! Some nutritionists speculate that since meals almost always include yogurt, the lactose in the desserts is offset by the good enzymes and bacteria in the yogurt.

India is a land of amazing contrasts, increasingly so in the economic boom of recent years. Prosperity has brought fast food and problems such as an increase childhood obesity and diabetes; but at the same time many Indian children are malnourished—the economic boom having done little to improve nutrition for children born to poor, malnourished mothers. According to a report cited by the *New York Times* in December, 33% of the children in Tamil Nadu are malnourished (numbers are shockingly even higher in other areas). Most poor Tamils sustain themselves with a little rice or *ragi* gruel and maybe a rasam and some yogurt. *Ragi* is a red grain grown in south India. When I asked an anthropologist friend of mine who lived in South India about it, he did not recommend that we try to cook it. Having eaten it a lot of *ragi* gruel himself, he warned that it can cause severe digestive problems, especially for those unaccustomed to it. You can find finely-ground *ragi* flour (commonly used in India roti breads) in Indian stores. The *ragi* consumed by poor Indians is generally much coarser.

Our format centers on “saving” our dining out dollars to “dine-in” for women. Once again, I’ll recommend a menu of typical (but modified!) dishes. However, this time, I’m going to suggest something of a DFW heresy. If there are south Indian restaurants in your area, you might consider purchasing some typical dishes to bring to the meeting. I’m making this suggestion for two reasons: 1) unless you cook a lot and use an abundance of spices and Indian foods, you’ll save money that you can contribute to DFW because purchasing dishes from Indian restaurants will most likely be cheaper and less wasteful 2) some of the most typical dishes of Tamil Nadu are just a bit difficult to make – especially if you’ve never tried them and don’t have any idea what they should be like. I’m thinking particularly of the “pancake” dishes idli (delicate small rice flour cakes) and dosa (very thin “crepes” with a variety of fillings). An expert dosa or idli maker in action is a wondrous thing to see (and her results to taste). Nevertheless, a great way to learn about Indian culture to visit an Indian food store, buy ingredients, and give it a try. As for those large bags of dal and spices, perhaps the cooks in your group could share ingredients—many are repeated in the recipes I’ve supplied. A word of warning: South Indian food is generally quite hot, but most restaurants are willing to tone down the heat if your group doesn’t consist of chili-heads. Same warning applies to recipes you might find in books or on the internet.

#### **A note on South Indian ingredients:**

Tamarind is the date-like fruit of a large Indian tree. Indian groceries will usually carry tamarind pulp, which contains seeds. Tamarind pulp must be soaked in hot water, which is then strain to remove the seeds, before use. You can also buy tamarind concentrated, seedless tamarind paste. You add it to hot water and stir to dissolve before using in recipes. Neera’s is good brand that is widely available in gourmet and health food as well as ethnic stores. I use 2-3t of tamarind paste per 1c of soaking water called for in recipes. Tamarind is quite sour; lemon juice can be substituted when called for in tiny amounts. Asofoetida (“heeng”) usually comes in powder form and is made from a dried resin. It is very, very pungent and on its own not very desirable. It’s one of those things like anchovy (think Worcestershire Sauce) that rounds out dishes and is indistinguishable in judicious amounts. You would only use a pinch in most dishes and you can omit it. Some cooks use a little garlic as a substitute.

Toor Dal are split and skinned pigeon peas, sometimes confusingly called “red gram dal.” They are yellow. Toor Dal is a central ingredient (adding body) in sambars and rasams. Cooking it in water is the first step in making either. I find that toor dal takes about 30-40

minutes to cook to a very soft state necessary for these dishes, although time may vary. You should be able to mash it easily with a fork. In Tamil recipes, you do not drain the dal before adding it to sambars and rasams.

Whole Spices and Dried Coconut and Legumes are often ground to make pastes that season and thicken south Indian dishes. If you use a recipe that calls for a paste containing these ingredients, be sure to grind them very, very finely—otherwise the texture won't be very pleasant. I've adapted the recipes here so that you don't need to worry about this.

Ghee is clarified butter from which the milk solids have been removed so that it can be used for frying. (Milk solids in butter burn at a relatively low temperature—think about how fast butter browns—thus making whole butter a poor frying medium.) Ghee is sold in Indian stores and many others, but process is easy to do and you'll find directions easily on the internet. For the recipes I've included, whole butter will work fine as long as you are careful with your cooking temperature and watch it carefully.

Curry Leaves are small and flavorful but have nothing to do with curry powder (a spice blend). They are used in tempering. Fresh are best and many Indian stores will carry them. If you can't find them, however, don't worry.

Sambar and Rasam Powders are spice mixes, just like curry powder. You can make your own or purchase the mixes in Indian stores. They vary by brand and by cook, but generally contain the same basic ingredients. Below is a sambar powder I concocted for the sambar recipe given here:

1 T coriander seed

1 t each peppercorns, cumin

1/2 t red chili flake

1/4 t each fenugreek seed, brown/black mustard seed, ground turmeric and ground cinnamon.

Heat all but the turmeric and cinnamon in small skillet until the mustard seed and cumin begin to pop. Add all the ingredients to a spice grinder and grind finely (but not necessarily to a powder). Use 1T for the sambar recipe.

### ***Tamil Menu***

Appetizers: Vengaya (Onion) Bhaji—see weblink below  
Pappadam and Chutneys (see MC Sept. 06)

Main Course: Lots of cooked long-grain Rice  
Kuzhambu (Mixed Vegetable) Sambar  
Elumichampazha (Lemon) Rasam

Salad/Relish: Pachadi (Cucumber-Herb Yoghurt)

Dessert: Semiya (Vermicelli) Payasam

South Indians would eat everything (except perhaps the rasam and payasam) on huge banana leaves, with their fingers. The main dishes are on the spicy-sour-thin side to balance the rice and served hot. The pachadi (which would be eaten along with the mains and rice) and dessert round out the meal with cooler, richer, sweeter, and “calmer” flavors. South Indians not only like this meal pattern but also believe it to be healthy and make for sound digestion.

All the recipes here have been adapted from *Dakshin: Vegetarian Cuisine from South India* (HarperCollins, 1994) by Chandra Padmanabhan, who is a food writer and publisher in Chennai (formerly Madras, home of CDWR). I highly recommend it for its authentic recipes, beautiful photographs of the dishes, and information about south Indian cuisine and ingredients. The recipes are a bit complex for the average cook and involve a lot of ingredients. If you enjoy cooking and especially learning ethnic cuisines, you'll enjoy using the book, but anyone might enjoy looking at it. I've adapted the recipes here to make them more user-friendly. You'll find links to others below as well.

### ***Kuzhambu (Mixed Vegetable) Sambar***

This makes at least six servings—think of it as more of a gravy for rice than the main dish itself. It can be made ahead and reheated before serving—don't add the cilantro until you are ready to serve.

1/2 c toor dal, picked over and rinsed

2 c water

2-3 t tamarind paste dissolved in 1c hot water

2 c. mixed vegetables (potatoes or eggplant in small cubes, green beans chopped in small pieces, and frozen green peas are good options)

1/2-1t jalapeno, minced, or to taste

1/2 c water

salt to taste

1/2 t ground turmeric

1T sambar powder (see note above)

2 T chopped fresh cilantro

For tempering:

1 1/2 T vegetable oil

1 t brown/black mustard seeds

pinch asofoetida powder (opt)

1/2 t each: fenugreek seeds, cumin seeds

five or six fresh curry leaves (opt)

--Bring the dal and 2 c. water to a boil. Turn down to a simmer, cover partially and cook until done (see note above), 30-40 minutes. Add more water if it dries out before it's done.

--Tempering: Heat the oil in a large saucepan (that has a lid—foil will do). Add the tempering ingredients and cook a minute (until seeds sputter).

--Add the tamarind water plus the other 1/2c water, the vegetables, turmeric, salt, and sambar powder. Mix well and bring to a simmer. Cover and simmer on low heat until vegetables are tender. Remove cover, add the dal and cook five minutes or so. This makes a thin curry, but if it seems too thin you can continue cooking to reduce it or add a slurry of 2t cornstarch mixed in 1T cold water and boil a couple of minutes to thicken. Garnish with cilantro and serve over rice.

### ***Elumichampazha (Lemon) Rasam***

Good stuff for a cold and considered a general cure-all in south India. If you chop the tomatoes very finely you can serve this in small cups as a drink or add a little cooked rice and serve as a soup. Servings should be very small—a couple of oz. This should serve at



least 8. It can be made ahead but should be served hot with the cilantro and garnishes added just before serving.

1/4 c toor dal, picked over and rinsed

1 c water

1" piece of fresh ginger, chopped finely or grated

1 t minced jalapeno

1/2 t cumin seeds—or equivalent amount of powder

3/4 t black peppercorns, crushed, or equal amount ground pepper

1 1/2 c water

3 plum tomatoes, finely chopped

1/2 t turmeric

salt to taste

juice of 1 large lemon

1-2 T chopped cilantro

julienned strips of lemon rind to garnish (opt)

For tempering:

2t butter or ghee

1 t brown mustard seeds

1/2 t asofoetida powder (opt)

a pinch red chili flakes

five or six fresh curry leaves (opt)

--Bring the cup of water and dal to a boil, partially cover and simmer until done—about 30 minutes. Don't allow to dry out.

--In a food processor, make a paste with the ginger and jalapeno—use a little water if necessary. Grind the peppercorns and cumin seed (or use equivalent amount already ground).

--Put the undrained cooked dal in pot (at least 1 1/2 quart-size). Add the 1 1/2c water, tomatoes, turmeric, salt, and the ginger paste. Slowly bring to a boil.

--In the meantime, heat the butter in a small skillet. Add the rest of the tempering ingredients and heat until the seeds sputter. This shouldn't take more than a minute, but watch that the butter doesn't burn. Add to the rasam and mix well.

-- Turn off the heat. Add the lemon juice, cilantro and garnishes if using.

### ***Pachadi***

This is more of an ingredient list than a recipe. Feel free to adjust amounts and to leave out one or more of the vegetables or jalapeno. What is crucial is the quality of the yogurt. It should be full-fat (whole milk, 4%), thick, and stirred very well. I highly recommend the Greek yogurt sold in many stores called FAGE (sometimes PHAGE). If all you can find are the typical commercial brands, drain the yogurt for several hours. If you make this ahead, drain off any liquid that collects and stir well before serving. It can be served cold or at cool room temperature.

2 c yogurt, well-stirred

1 small cucumber, peeled and seeded, chopped finely

1-2 plum tomatoes, seeded, chopped finely

1T minced onion or green onion (If your onion seems "hot," soak it in cold water for half an hour, drain, and dry well before using)

a pinch of minced jalapeno (opt)

1-2T finely chopped cilantro or mint

Mix all the ingredients together. Encourage diners to use a tablespoon or so of this “on the side.” South Indians might mix it into their rice at the end of the meal.

### ***Semiya (Vermicelli) Payasam***

Payasam is considered food of the gods in south India. If you made the soup in the Iraqi menu in December and have vermicelli left over, here’s a good way to use it. If not, you can sometimes find vermicelli that is already cut into small pieces in the Hispanic section of grocery stores. Cappellini or very thin spaghetti work too. This requires a little patience, but can (should!) be made ahead and if you like rice pudding-type desserts, you may agree about the divine origins of this simple but good dish.

8 c whole milk

1/4 c butter or ghee

2-3 T raw cashews, in pieces (found at health food and Indian stores)

1-2 T golden raisins

1 c (6oz) vermicelli, broken in small pieces (1 1/2”)

1/2 c sugar

4 whole green cardamom pods, crushed lightly (try to avoid the seeds escaping—if they do, remove them before serving)

a pinch of saffron threads (scant 1/2t)

--In a small (preferably nonstick) skillet, carefully heat half the butter and saute the nuts and raisins for a minute. Don’t allow the butter to brown. Remove and set aside. Wipe out the skillet. Add rest of the butter and the vermicelli and sauté until it begins to turn reddish-brownish, watching that the butter doesn’t brown. This takes just a few minutes. Set aside.

--In a heavy large saucepan, stir the milk constantly while bringing it to a boil. Turn it down slightly to a fast simmer and continue to stir until it’s reduced to about 6 cups.

--Add the contents of the skillet to the milk, which should still be energetically simmering. Continue to cook, stirring, until the vermicelli is completely done. Add the sugar, cardamom, and saffron. Stir well. Add the raisins and cashews at the end. Place in a serving bowl or plastic container. Place plastic wrap on the surface of the payasam to prevent a skin from forming on top. Refrigerate several hours or overnight. Again, this is a soup-like dessert, not as thick as rice pudding. It should serve 6-8.

Here are some links to reliable sources that include south Indian recipes (I haven’t tested most of these):

--Another adapted rasam recipe can be found at <http://www.soupsong.com/rasam.html>. (Note: the author calls for “orange lentils”—I believe she means *toor dal* although our common split red/orange lentils would probably work in this recipe.)

--Several recipes from U.S.-based Indian food authority Madhur Jaffrey are included in an article on Madras (now Chennai—where CDWR is based) cuisine at <http://www.saveur.com/saveur-travels/asia-and-pacific/the-spice-and-color-of-madras-49153.html>.

--One of my favorite Indian food blogs is “One Hot Stove,” produced by a newly-minted St. Louis-based Ph.D. named Napur. You might check her index for other south Indian fare, but here are links to two recipes. Another dessert payasam is at <http://onehotstove.blogspot.com/2007/02/c-is-for-carrot-cashew-payasam.html>. And I highly recommend Napur’s Bhaji recipe at <http://onehotstove.blogspot.com/2005/12/o-is->

[for-onion-bhajji.html](#) (you might want to reduce the quantity of chile she calls for, however—I use one). It’s a good example of the snack foods (or appetizers) that Indians across the continent enjoy. It’s a staple party food at my house and always a hit. I serve it with Cilantro Chutney and Mountain Jam (recipes in the **September 06 MC**). You might also serve them with a purchased tamarind chutney (that’s the sweet-tart brown sauce you often get in Indian restaurants). Bhaji can be reheated in a warm oven, but are best soon after they are made, even at warm room temperature.

### *Voices (and Images)*

India is such an extraordinarily vivid place. Cultural anthropologist Chantal Boulanger has given us a great resource for seeing it and especially its women. On her extensive website, you’ll find images of the goddesses and photos of real women, their villages, and daily activities. Be sure to look for photos marked “Tamil Nadu” or “Tamil,” “TN,” or related to the districts of Kanchi(ee)puram (one of the areas where CWDR works), Kalavai, and Chettinar (all in TN). Here are some specific links:

General gateway to categories of photos (you can also click on “index”):

<http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/India/villagelife.html>

Women: <http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/India/women.html>

Village life in Tamil Nadu: <http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/India/villageTN.html>

Fishing (mostly from Karnakata but some TN):

<http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/India/fish.html>

Cooking in Kanchipuram: <http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/India/cook.html>

Goddesses: <http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/TVgoddess.html>

and <http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/India/Vgoddess.html>

Saris: <http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/saris/phsariBEST.html>

Saris of TN: (Kachipuram and Chettinar):

<http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/saris/phsariTN.html>

At the beginning of our recommended book for this month, author Bama tells us why she writes about the women of her caste:

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: Stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth, and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. I was eager that through them, everyone should know about us and our lives.

Dalit women have particular hardships in Indian culture and particular strategies for coping with them. I wish I could give you more of sense of the way they use ridicule and bawdy humor, but you’ll have to read BAMA’s stories for that. Illiterate Dalit women have had a long tradition of “singing out” their experience in folksongs passed from mothers to daughters. Only recently have their oral traditions been preserved and “shouted out” to larger audiences in writing such as BAMA’s. While their lives are especially hard because of their

caste and poverty, some of the pain that Dalit women bear as women is shared by others in other circumstances. From its ancient golden period on, Tamil literary history has included venerated women writers, mostly poets who wrote—often in ambiguous terms—of longings of women’s bodies and spirits and the desolation of being unheard, unloved, and abused by those they are bound to by command, duty, or love.

Contemporary Tamil poet Kutti Revathi expresses a sentiment similar to BAMA’s about why she writes: “I write the voices of other women...(the poetry) belongs to all women who have not written.... Neither my pain nor my feelings are solely that of an individual; they belong to all such women.” She is one of four poets (two others are also represented here) who have been at the center of controversy for their frank expressions of their experiences, sorrows, and desires. Some male writers have condemned their writings as pornography and even called for them (the women themselves) to be burned. They are the subjects of a recent documentary called *SheWrites*, from which their works are quoted here. They, like the Dalit women singing and BAMA “shouting out” in her writing, expose women’s experience—the experience of struggling for autonomy, authenticity, acknowledgment in a world where women’s bodies and selves are “imaged” and imposed on. Here, we have examples from Tamil women that testify to this in many ways. Some, as the Dalit song about a wife who dares to feed her hunger before her husband’s, lay bare harsh realities as protest and as warning. Others dare to expose women’s views of their own bodies, reclaiming them from the patriarchal gaze. There is great despair and great hope here. As you “listen” attentively to these voices, you might think about how these expressions of south Indian women’s experiences speak to our experiences as well.

Crab, O crab, my pretty little crab  
Who wandered through all the fields I planted,  
I pulled off your claws and put you in the pot  
I gave the pot to boil and set it down.  
I waited and waited for him to come home  
And began to eat as he came through the door.  
He came to hit me, the hungry brute  
He pounced at me to kill me.  
He struck me, he struck my child  
He almost crushed the baby in my womb  
He beat me until my legs buckled  
He thrashed me until my bangles mashed.

Paraiyar Folksong quoted by BAMA, *Sangati*

(I)t is quite true that the women in our street led hard lives. That’s how it is from the time that they are very little. When they are infants in arms, they never let the boy babies cry. If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls. Even with the breast-feeding, it is the same story; a boy is breast-fed longer. With girls, they wean them quickly making them forget the breast... Even when we played “mothers and fathers,” we always had to serve the mud “rice” to the boys first. They used to pull us by the hair and hit us, saying, “what sort of food is this without salt or anything!” In those days, we used to accept those pretence blows, and think it was all good fun. Nowadays,

for many of the girls, those have become real blows, and their entire lives are hell. ---  
BAMA, *Sangati*

## **Breasts**

Breasts are bubbles, rising  
In wet marshlands  
I wondrously watched — and guarded —  
Their gradual swell and blooming  
At the edges of my youth's season  
Saying nothing to anyone else,  
They sing along  
With me alone, always:  
Of Love,  
Rapture,  
Heartbreak  
To the nurseries of my turning seasons,  
They never once failed or forgot  
To bring arousal  
During penance, they swell, as if straining  
To break free; and in the fierce tug of lust,  
They soar, recalling the ecstasy of music  
From the crush of embrace, they distil  
The essence of love; and in the shock  
Of childbirth, milk from coursing blood  
Like two teardrops from an unfulfilled love  
That cannot ever be wiped away,  
They well up, as if in grief, and spill over. --- Kutti Revathi

I thought about the fact that only women—and Dalit women in particular—become possessed. And when I examined the lives of our women, I understood the reason. From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children. In the fields there is back-breaking work beside the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they have collected water and firewood, cooked and fed their hungry husband and children, even then they can't go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. Night after night they must give in to their husbands' pleasure. Even if a woman's body is wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all this. The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The one who don't have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys (demons). ... I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive. ---BAMA, *Sangati*

## A DESERTED PLACE

At a time  
When I believed that I had  
Hidden this loneliness of mine  
Within myself, away from prying eyes  
You ask me  
Why I am alone, at all times

Among those who walk, unmoved,  
Past the sorrows of my loneliness,  
You alone ask me this question, waking  
A sadness that's been buried  
So long and deep in my memory

Although I don't find myself  
Unable to give you an answer —  
Especially for you, at least —  
I must tell you in my endless confusion:  
One cannot but be lonely  
In a deserted place

I cling  
To this loneliness of mine  
Like a voice left behind by a stranger  
Among the tall hills, now wandering lost  
A twig cast away  
By waves of the sea

Only when I was totally forsaken did it commence:  
This enduring bond of mine with loneliness

Someday, the language wrought  
By this loneliness of mine  
Might be shaped into verse

This loneliness of mine  
Might even meld  
Into the sky's azure,  
Acquire its own hue

My life is ebbing away  
Beyond the reach of my will  
With a loneliness that shall never end,  
I am living here still.

---- SALMA

When everything is added up and calculated, it seems to me that society is arranged as if God created women only for the convenience of men... But women have minds of their own, too. They have their own desires and wishes. Nobody seems to reflect on women's bodily hungers and needs. Women are told never to reveal these things. They have written it into our foreheads that we must repress and destroy our own needs and feelings, and run about looking after the men and the rest of the family.... Knowing all this as we do, we must not live like people who choose to be blind though they can see. ... We must give up the belief that a married life of complete service to a man is our only fate. We must change this attitude that if a married life turns out to be a perpetual hell, we must still grit our teeth and endure it for a lifetime. We must bring up our girls to think in these new ways from an early age. We should educate boys and girls alike... We should give our girls the freedom we give our boys. If we rear our children like this from the time they are babies, women will reveal their strength. Then there will come a day when men and women will live as one... Then injustices, violence, and inequalities will come to an end, and the saying will come true that "Women can make and women can break." I am hopeful that such a time will come soon. ---BAMA, *Sangati*

Filled with trees, this path has no end  
It is paved with our words  
And will continue till there is one word left  
To be spoken between you and me.  
fr. Malathi Maithree, "Different Path"

### ***Resources***

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And thanks to Dr. Lisa Knight and Ed Yazijian of Furman University and Meredith Landis of Global Giving