

Rebels – Conformists?

Women Saints in Medieval South India

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Abstract. – The *bhakti* or devotional movements in medieval South India witnessed the emergence of Śūdra saints, anti-caste leaders, and women saints. Given a patriarchal social set-up which denied freedom to women, spirituality provided the only means of self-expression. Women saints ranged from the conformists who were either the wives, daughters, or sisters of male saints and the rebels who broke every social norm including the discarding of clothes. Some of the saints looked upon themselves as brides of the Lord. The compositions of rebel saints use mystic imagery and reflect their social alienation. It is interesting that not only the conformists but also the rebels have found acceptance in the modern Hindu pantheon. [*South India, women saints*]

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Spirituality provided Indian women with that freedom which orthodox Hindu society denied to them. The emergence of women saints took place in the context of the *bhakti* or devotional movements which characterized the medieval age in India.

The movement began in the sixth–seventh century in South India and gradually spread throughout the country. It lasted till the sixteenth–seventeenth century. Most of these devotional cults were heterodox and reflective of an inner social ferment. The Bhakti movement in India, by and large, was marked by the rejection of the existing ritual hierarchy and Brahmanical superiority; the use of the vernacular in preference to Sanskrit (the language of the elite); and the emergence of low-caste, non-literate persons as great spiritual leaders. There was large scale participation of peasantry, artisans, and other lower classes as well as ritually inferior but economically powerful groups such as skilled craftsmen in these devo-

tional movements. In the light of this background, the emergence of women saints during this period takes on great significance.

The morphology of feminine spirituality in India lies in the long record of male oppression and sexual exploitation which characterized the condition of women in traditional India. Indian society being essentially patriarchal, the position of women was considered markedly inferior. The birth of daughters was an occasion for mourning rather than rejoicing. Girls constituted an economic drain because, while no material returns could be hoped for from them, one also had to spend a fortune in terms of their dowry at the time of their marriage. The north Indian milieu presented a picture that was particularly grim. In fact, the Rajputs and other social groups in northern India experienced the greatest threat from the invaders. For the warring clans of Rajputana, the crying need was for soldiering sons, not daughters. It was perhaps this consideration which led the Rajputs to indulge in the horrendous practice of female infanticide, an evil that persists to this day in certain backward areas of Rajasthan and other states.

From the earliest historical times, Dharmaśāstras and the Smṛtis, especially Manusmṛti, enjoined upon women obedience, chastity, and surrender to the male, be it father, husband, or son. Women entered the homes of their husbands as child-brides, and this enabled their conditioning into a position of helplessness. The women were illiterate and knew little else besides domestic skills. Two medieval customs reinforced and strengthened the exploitation of women. One was *pardāh* or the veiling of women which was common among the upper class Hindus and Rajputs, in particular in the north, while in the south respectable women rarely stepped outside the bounds of their home. The other more heinous custom was the practice of mounting the funeral pyre of one’s husband, glorified by the name of *satī*. The term and the practice is associated with Śiva’s divine consort Pārvatī who, in her incarnation as Satī, threw herself into

the sacrificial fire built by her father Dakṣa because he had insulted her husband. This is therefore regarded as the ultimate act of devotion which a chaste wife can offer. In its practical aspect, the idea behind this barbaric custom was that the faithful wife should continue to serve her husband even in the hereafter. The lot of the women who opted to remain alive after their husband's death was miserable. They had to tonsure their hair, wear only white or saffron (the colours of renunciation), and divest themselves of all ornaments. The very sight of a widow was considered an ill-omen.

Two primary factors behind the social exploitation of women was their lack of education and economic independence. Interestingly, it was only the prostitutes who had both. Prostitution was accepted as an inevitable aspect of social life and the *dēvaraḍiyār* or *dēvadāsīs* in medieval south India (the late-Chola and Vijayanagar periods) in fact occupied an important position in society, owned property, moved about freely, and even enjoyed the privilege of direct audience with the king (*Annual Report of Epigraphy* 229.1919).

In brief, the role assigned to women in traditional Indian society consisted of these two extremes – the sacrificing mother, chaste wife, or obedient daughter or, alternately, the prostitute. Thus traditional society seemed to provide no scope for either the independence or the self-expression of women. But is a woman to be perceived only in terms of the various roles she performs vis-à-vis man as daughter, wife, and mother? Did contemporary society provide any scope for a woman to express her individuality without accepting either marriage or motherhood? The spiritual path helped women to break out of all stereotypes. As a saint, she made the unacceptable acceptable. She broke out of the chains of tradition, orthodoxy, and convention which attempted to control her sexuality, and sought God whether as a naked saint (Akka Mahādēvi) or as a skeletal being (Kāraikkāl Amṁaiyār).

1. The Women Saints

The women saints in medieval South India emerged in an atmosphere of discrimination and suppression but blossomed forth into thinkers, scholars, and realized souls. Their life and works constitute the supreme form of the self-expression of women. Consciously or unconsciously, these women saints made a departure from the norms of social behavior and spurned the limitations imposed by their family and by society. It is a moot point whether

their compositions carried the overtones of protest. Their very emergence was a social revolt in itself. One of the main thrusts of this paper is that female spiritualism, per se, indicated a break with existing social order even though there were both conformists and rebels among the women saints.

The life and works of the women saints is shrouded in mystery unlike that of the men saints. This was partly due to the fact that none of them established a *guruparamparā* or monastic tradition with disciples who might have preserved the sayings or compositions of the saints. The one exception seems to have been Venābāi, the disciple of Samartha Rāmadāsa (17th century) who became the head of the math at Miraj. Meera too had a following and the "Meera Bais" seem to have constituted a minor sect in the medieval period. But very few of the north Indian women saints really gained any recognition of their spiritual greatness during their life time. They were usually scorned by their contemporaries as "mad" and "shameless." Lalla was called "mats" or mad and Meera referred to herself as *diwāni*, one who is not in her senses. This is, however, not true of southern India where the women saints including Akka Mahādēvi or the naked saint, and Kāraikkāl Amṁaiyār, called *pēyar* or demoness, were greatly revered by their followers as well as peers. Akka Mahādēvi was in fact a leading member of the Vīraśaivite council of saints. It is possible to explain the differential impact of women saints in north and south India in terms of the perception of real or imaginary threat to the social fabric in northern India leading to greater rigidity and restrictions on women in contrast to the south. In northern India, the compositions of Meerābāi of Rajasthan and Lallēswari of Kashmir have been better preserved than others. The strong musical appeal of these compositions may also have resulted in their being passed down the generations as musical traditions.

2. The Social Background

An analysis of the social background of these saints reveals some very interesting patterns. Given the great paucity of information in this regard, an effort has been made in the following table to identify the social background of these women saints. For this purpose the area south of the Vindhyas has been divided into two broad zones – North Deccan and South Deccan. Besides tracing the social background of these saints, the effort has also been to point out their Śaivite/Vaiṣṇavite affiliations.

Name	Period (century)	Class	Artisanal and labouring group comprising Śūdras and untouchables	Remarks
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ruling
priestly
merchant

NORTH DEKKAN

Vaiṣṇavite women saints

1. Muktābāi	13th	+		
2. Janābāi	"		Śūdra (profession not specified)	
3. Kanhōpatra			Dēvadāsī (dancing girl)	
4. Rajāi	13th		Śūdra	wife and daughter of Nāma- dēv, a calico printer
5. Gonāi	"		"	
6. Mahadamba or Mahadaisa	"	+		
7. Soyrabhai	14th		Mahār (untouchables)	wife and sister of Chokka- mēḷa
8. Nirmala	"		"	
9. Bahinābhāi	17th	+		wife of Kulkarni
10. Venābāi	"	+		child widow
11. Akkābāi	"	+		child widow
12. Bayābāi	"			disciple of Rāmadāsa

Vīraśaivite (Līngāyat) women saints

13. Akka Mahādēvi	12th	+		
14. Gangāmbike	"	+		related to Basavā
15. Nīlamrīna	"	+		wife of Basavā, author of Nīlammana vachanās, Prasāda Sampadane, and Kalanjana
16. Akka Nāgamma	"	+		sister of Basavā, author of vachanās
17. Kalavve	"		Śūdra-carpenters	wife of saint Boche Kayakade
18. Lakshamma	"	+		wife of saint Kondeyya Manchanna (Chief officer of Bijjala)
19. Mahādēvi	"	+		wife of Molige Marayya, vachanā-writer
20. Lakkamma	"		agricultural landless labor	wife of saint Ayadakki Marayya
21. Kadire Kayakkala Remmave	"		spinner by profession (most probably of weaving caste)	
22. Bontaladēvi		+		wife of Siddha Buddhayya
23. Kalavve				wife of Dasarayya
24. Vīramma	"		Jēdāra – weaving caste	wife of Kata Kuttayya
25. Rechchave				wife of Kata Kuttayya
26. Guḍḍavve	15th		Chandāla	wife of Battalessvara; lame, but got back her legs by Śiva's grace

Name	Period (century)	Class	Artisanal and labouring group comprising Śūdras and untouchables	Remarks
		ruling		
		priestly		
		merchant		
27. Masanamma	16th			wife of Edemathada Nagidēva
28. Muktāyi				sister of yogi Ajaganna
29. Gōggave				
30. Lingamma		+		wife of Hadapada Appana
31. Nimmavve			water-carrier	
32. Vaijakawe				

SOUTH DEKKAN

33. Kāraikkāl Arinrhayār	6th	+		one of the Śaivite Nāyanārs
34. Maṅgaiyarkkarasiyar	7th	+		"
35. Tilakavatiyār	"		Veļļāla – agricultural landowning caste	Śaivite
36. Tadagai				Vaiṣṇavite
37. Chankrottamma	8th			"
38. Vandi	9th		roadside hawker	Śaivite saint; her story occurs in Chekkizhār's <i>Periyapurāṇam</i> as Pittukku man chumanda Perumān
39. Aḷagi	11th		low caste Śūdra (profession not specified)	Śaivite saint
40. Auvaiyār	12th–13th		low caste – Anulōma	" daughter of a <i>pulaya</i> woman, married to a Brahmin, attained old age by divine grace
41. Vāsukiār	14th		Veļļāla	wife of Tiruvalluvar
42. Uttiranallūr Naṅgai	15th		Paraiya (shepherdess)	author of the famous Paichalūr Padikam
43. Karūramma	17th	+		Vaiṣṇavite
44. Nanga Peṇṇu	"	+		"

Vaiṣṇavite saints – disciples and followers of Rāmānuja (based on Jagadeesan 1977: 335)

45. Tiruvanantu Purattu ammai	12th			
46. Tiruvattarū ammai				
47. Tiruvaparisarathu ammai	"			
48. Mannar Koyil Porreṇu ammai	"			
49. Tirukkanappurattu ammai	"			
50. Tirunaraiyūr ammai	"			
51. Tirupati srikāryam seyyum ammai	"			

Name	Period (century)	Class		Artisanal and labouring group comprising Śūdras and untouchables	Remarks
		ruling priestly	merchant		
52. Āṇḍāl ammai	"	+			wife of Kurattāzhvār
53. Nāyaka Dēviyar	"				
54. Tuyya Perundēviyar	"	+			mother of Gōvinda Embār; also called Dīptimati or Periya Pirattiyār
55. Sīriya Āṇḍāl	"	+			wife of Gōvinda Embār; in spite of her marital status she was given initiation into <i>sanyasa</i> <i>āśrama</i> by Rāmānuja
56. Kantimati or Bhumi piratti	"	+			daughter of Sri Saila Purna (mother of Rāmānuja)
57. Kongil Pirattiyār or Chelanchalamba	11th	+			
58. Bibi Lachimar	"	+			daughter of a Muslim ruling chief of Delhi, only Muslim; vaiṣṇavite saint, devotee of Lord Rāmapriya of Melkote
59. Atulai ammai	"	+			daughter of Perianambi, guru of Rāmānuja
60. Ammangi amma					
61. Kurattu Āṇḍāl					
62. Dēvaki Pirattiyār					
63. Yatiraja Valliyār					
64. Pankaja Selviyār					
65. Ponnachiyār or Hemembāl	12th			Malla (caste of professional wrestlers)	wife of Piḷḷai Uranga Dāsar
66. Innila Vanaiyār					
67. Sudikoduttāl					
68. Tiruppāvai pādināl					
69. Tripuradēvi	11th			"	wife of Akhalanga Nāṭṭalvan
70. Kumudavalli	"			Kallar	wife of Tinumangai Āzhwār (a Kallar), her father was of Vaidya caste
71. Akkāchchi	12th	+			wife of Parāsara Bhattar
72. Manni	"	+			"
73. Tirumalamma or Tikkamma	14th	+			wife of Annamāchārya; wrote Subhadra Parinayam
74. Akkakanna	"	+			wife of Annamāchārya
75. Lakshmi Dēvi or Paratikolla Nāchchiyār	12th	+			wife of Varadāchārya Kar- pasaraṇṇa; fed Rāmānuja and disciples by selling herself to a merchant but the merchant was converted by guru's grace

In the table 75 women saints have been listed out of which the social background of 50 has been identified, i.e., 66.66%. Among these, 44% belonged to the priestly class, thus constituting the dominant social group. This is closely followed by the professional or artisanal classes (this includes the Śūdras as well as the untouchables) who constitute 42%. The ruling class forming just 10% and the merchant class comprising 4% are both to be seen as peripheral groups in the whole process of the emergence and social role of women saints. The conclusion that emerges is that women saints came predominantly from the priestly (the highest social group) class or from the Śūdra (the lowest social group) professional groups. One plausible explanation for this is the higher awareness levels of both these groups. While the Brahmin women had some access to education, both sacred and secular, the awareness of the Śūdra women arose from the fact that economically they were almost coequal with men.

It is further interesting to note that of these women saints, 57% were Vaiṣṇavites and 43% Śaivites. It would also appear that the majority of the lower caste saints were to be associated with the heterodox, sometimes anti-Brahmanical cults of the bhakti movements like Vīraśaivism. Although lower caste women saints do occasionally figure in Rāmānuja's Śrīvaiṣṇavism, this was still essentially orthodox in its essence. In spite of some departures in practice, the theoretical norms were still rigid. Excessive liberalization was rejected by Rāmānuja in his *Śrībhāṣya Śubhasūtrādhikaraṇa* and in the *Śrutaparakāśikā*. This view was endorsed by Vedānta Deśīkar in his *Nyāyapariśuddhi* (Jagadeesan 1977: 195). It is, however, interesting that the only instance of initiation into *sanyāsa āśrama* and that, too, of a married woman (done by Rāmānuja himself) occurs in this movement (see no. 55). Otherwise, by and large, lower class representation in Śrīvaiṣṇavism occurs in the North Deccan in the Maharashtra region.

Although no similar analysis has been attempted for northern India, a preliminary survey of the north Indian women saints suggests that here, too, the same trends may be perceived.

An analysis of the social background of these saints indicated that since quite a few of them came from the priestly class they seem to have had access to religious or spiritual knowledge. This is true of Lallēśwari or Lalla and Rūpa Bhavāni of Kashmir; Muktabāi, Bahinābāi, and Mahadamba (the earliest poetess in Marathi literature who lived in the 13th century) of Maharashtra; and among the South Indian saints Āṇḍāl, the only woman Āḷwār

saint, Athulōi, the daughter of Periyānambi (Rāmānuja's guru), and the saint from Kerala, Karūramma. Even though these women were excluded from the *gurukula* system, their family background enabled them to gain access to a certain amount of śāstraic or scriptural knowledge. At the other end were the low caste women saints. These women, though excluded from scriptural knowledge, could and did have access to knowledge which was based on folk traditions. Their language was not Sanskrit but the local languages. In fact, with the exception of Tamil which goes back to antiquity, the other Dravidian languages took birth during this period – Malayalam in the tenth century, followed by Kannada and Telugu in the twelfth–thirteenth centuries. This made possible the tremendous contribution of women to vernacular literature. Akka Mahādēvi's contributions to Kannada literature is paralleled by similar achievements by north Indian saints – Lalla to Kashmiri, Meera to Hindi, etc.

Quite often the family had already had examples of renunciation as in the case of Vishnuchittar, Āṇḍāl's father who became celebrated as Periyāḷwār, and Jñāneśwar, the brother of Muktabāi. In the case of the Śaivite Nayanar saint Tilakavatiyār, she in fact is said to have inspired the spiritual transformation of her brother Maruṇneekki, who later became known as Appar or Tirunāvukkarasar. In the context of the role played by women saints it is important to note Chēkkizhār's comment on the birth of a girl. He says that the wife of Saint Mānikkavāchagar gave birth to a daughter who would help him to free himself from the cycle of birth and death (Saraswati 1975: 212). There are other favourable references to the birth of daughters in the *Periyapurāṇam*.

Although both brother and sister of a family may have taken to spirituality, there is a distinct difference in the paths taken by men and women. This is because Hindu scriptures themselves provide the path of renunciation for men in the final *āśrama* or stage prescribed – *sanyāsa*. It was, however, only the upper castes who were qualified to adopt this course. This spiritual path was closed to men of lower castes as well as women. Therefore, while Jñāneśwar or Appar would have social sanction for their renunciation, female asceticism was, prima facie, a flouting of existing social conventions.

However, the scope for changing the existing order of things was provided by the medieval bhakti movement. The Brahmin Periyā Nāmbi performing the funeral rites of Māranār Nāmbi, an untouchable, and Sīriyā Āṇḍāl, the wife of Gōvinḍa Embār, being given *sanyāsa* by Rāmānuja, are

two striking instances. Thus, in an overturning of social conventions, both the woman saint and the low caste male saint find a certain degree of acceptability.

3. Rebels, Conformists, and Others

These women saints can be classified into a few broad categories on the basis of their choice of spiritual path and their particular interaction with traditional society. If at one end of the spectrum one has the rebel – Akka Mahādēvi, one can locate the pious and chaste housewives, the ideal stereotype of womanhood like Vāsukiyār, the wife of Tiruvaḷḷuvar; the wives of the Vīraśaivite saints like Basavā's wives – Nīlāṁma and Nāgalōchane; Bahinābhāi at the other end. Another example is that of Tilakavatiyār who elevated *karpu* or chastity to such a height that she began to live as a widow when her betrothed Kalaippāgaiyār died in battle. In between these two ends of the spectrum are located those women saints who gave up their home and a conventional style of life only when they were driven to it and left with no other option. Kāraikkāl Āṁmaiyaṛ would be the best example of this category.

A. K. Ramanujam (1988: 315) has attempted a "flow chart of possibilities" of the stages of life for women saints. But while his chart categorizes variations in the behavior patterns of the unconventional saints, it leaves out the conformists like Vāsukiyār and other saintly wives who form a fairly important category. The majority of these women saints were not social rebels in the conventional sense of the term. Quite a few of them seem to have accepted the yoke of marriage as inevitable. In fact, Vāsuki subscribed entirely to the traditional role model of women. It is said that Vaḷḷuvar wished to test Vāsuki before he married her. She had to turn the sand he gave her into cooked rice. This she accomplished by the power of her chastity and Vaḷḷuvar married her. At another time, spiritual aspirants came to Vaḷḷuvar to ask him whether the path of the householder or the ascetic was superior. Just then Vaḷḷuvar was having a meal of cold rice and he told Vāsuki to fan his food which he claimed was piping hot. Vāsuki's *karpu* made steam arise out of cold rice! Thus Vāsuki demonstrated that marriage to a chaste woman who looked upon her husband as God and obeyed his every command, was superior to leading the life of an ascetic.

This obedience even meant the surrender of one's chastity as with the Nāyanār saint Iyarppā-

gaiyār who offered his wife to his guest (Saraswati 1975: 216) without encountering any opposition from his spouse. Nāgalōchane, the wife of Basavā, is also classified among the saintly women of South India. She was, however, plunged into a life of austerity and renunciation because even when he married her as a second wife, Basavā's domestic life was already over. It is believed that her *vachanās* (spiritual sayings) were in fact the sublimated outpourings of her insatiate desires.¹

4. Marital Discord and Renunciation

The question of Akka Mahādēvi's marriage is shrouded in a lot of mystery and controversy resulting from the ambiguity in the medieval sources themselves. While *Prabhulingaleele* of Chāmarāsa says that Mahādēvi went to king Kauśika's place but never married him because he refused to give up Jainism. Harihara, another writer, refers to her marriage with king Kauśika and her ultimate renunciation (Sreekantaiah 1979: 35). However, in the case of Akka Mahādēvi it is a moot point whether she got married or not. She obviously never led a married life. All sources, however, agree that her renunciation came when she walked out naked from Kauśika's palace with her long hair as her only covering.

The North Indian saints Lalla, Meera, and Rūpa Bhavāni are also saints who walked out of their homes and, in their case, their main cause was ill-treatment. Rūpa Bhavāni who lived in the 17th century was the daughter of a Śaivite Brahmin, Madhao Dhar. She was married before she was ten and was ill-treated and tortured for dowry. Finally she walked out of her married home and learnt spiritual discipline under a Sufi – Shah Sadiq Qalandar. Many of Meera's verses abound with references to ill-treatment by the Rana of Mewar, her mother-in-law, and her sister-in-law, Udhābāi; Akka Mahādēvi also refers to ill-treatment in her *vachanās* although this is more allegorical than real:

¹ An amazing controversy has developed in recent years regarding the two marriages of the Lingāyat saint Basavā. A Kannada historian, M. M. Kulburgi in his book *Marga Ondu*, wrote that Basavā's second wife's (Nāgalōchane) *vachanās* expressed her insatiate desires rather than her spiritual experiences. This has stirred up a hornet's nest with death threats to Kulburgi being issued by Lingāyat fundamentalists. It is their belief that the marriage was a purely spiritual union (see "Rushdie like dispute in Karnataka," in *India Abroad* 19 [30], April 28 th. 1989; *India West*, April 21st. 1989).

I have Māyā for mother-in-law,
the world for father-in-law,
three brothers-in-law like tigers,
and the husband's thoughts
are full of laughing women
no God, this man,
and I cannot cross my sister-in-law
(Ramanujam 1973: 114).

Another classic case of marital ill-treatment is of Chakkubāi. She was treated like a chattel and locked up as being insane. She was tied to a pillar so that she would not be able to join the group of saints led by Kabīr and Nāmdev going to Paṇḍharpūr.

Ill-treatment in married life was combined with an unnatural husband and wife relationship. The incidents in the life of Punitavati (Kāraikkāl Ammaiār, one of the Nāyanārs) illustrate this point. Her husband feared her spiritual powers to such an extent that he could not longer look upon her as his wife. He disappeared from Kāraikkāl and settled down in Madurai with another wife. When their mutual well-wishers brought Punitavati to him, he fell at her feet with his new family and sought her blessings! In Hindu tradition where it is the wife who serves and worships her husband, there could be no greater reversal of roles. These women saints did not have the conventional urges of marriage and home and marriage to them implied duty fulfilment. Therefore, when her husband Paramadatta abandoned all claims upon her, Kāraikkāl Ammaiār gave up her beautiful earthly body and assumed a fearful skeletal form.

5. Brides of the Lord

The third category of women saints consist of those who never went through a worldly marriage. Many of them fall into this category like Mukṭābāi, Janābāi, (Viṣṇu devotees); Gōggave (Lingāyat); Āṇḍāl (Vaiṣṇavite Azhwār), Nanga Peṇṇu (Vaiṣṇavite from Kerala), etc. It is interesting to note that, irrespective of whether they were actually married or not, many women saints believed themselves to be brides of the Lord. Meera looked upon Lord Kṛṣṇa as her husband and put the bridal garland upon him. She sang: "Giridhar Gōpāl is my husband, I have no other." This was not a vague or metaphysical relationship but a physical surrender of oneself, body and soul, to one's divine husband. Akka Mahādēvi's verses are strikingly intense in the expression of this love. Before the Lingāyat spiritual council, the *Anubhava Mantapa*, she declared:

The preceptor became the giver;
The Lord Linga became the bridegroom;
And I became the bride.
All this the world knows
The innumerable devotees are my parents
Hence Chenna Mallikārjuna is my husband, O Prabhu,
I have nothing to do with the husbands of this world
(Tipperudrasvami 1982: 195).

Another vachanā expresses the same idea in almost violent imagery:

On a frame of water, raising a roof of fire,
Spreading the hailstones for the bridal floor-bed,
A husband without head, married a wife without legs,
My parents gave me to an inseparable life,
They married me to Lord Chenna Mallikārjuna
(Tipperudrasvami 1982: 223-3).

Āṇḍāl, the daughter of Periyāzhwār, got the name Kōḍai (garland) since she daily fashioned a garland for the Lord, put it on herself and on Him. Her marriage to Lord Śrīranganātha (Viṣṇu) is described in a series of dreams in her work *Vāraṇamāyiram*. The style is less intense than that of Akka Mahādēvi.

The marriage tent is decorated,
The podium is adorned with garlands of pearls
The golden *poornakumba* [auspicious pot] is ready.
I see Mādhavā enter like a handsome young bull
In the presence of Gods, he takes my hand,
And circumambulates the fire
This dream I saw, my friend
(*Vāraṇamāyiram* – Srivatsan 1984: 207).

It is said of Āṇḍāl that she finally merged with the Lord of Srirangam.

One of the most dramatic rejections of marriage is by a saint from Kerala called Nanga Peṇṇu (period not known but could be the 17th century). She belonged to a Brahmin family of Trippunittura, the seat of the Royal house of Cochin. On the day of her marriage while the bridegroom was being brought to her house in a grand procession, the bride fled the wedding scene and merged in the image of Lord Viṣṇu in the Trippunittura temple. Even today the memory of this event is kept alive by the annual celebration in that temple of Nanga Peṇṇu festival. One of its most important functions is the procession of the deity as the bridegroom to the paternal home of Nanga Peṇṇu.

It is interesting to note that while the "bride of the Lord concept" came naturally to women saints, it was not uncommon among the male bhakti saints to see the *jīvātman* (individual soul) and *paramātman* (supreme soul) relationship as a husband and wife relationship. Tirumaṅgai Āḷwār, a male saint, preferred to adopt femininity and looked upon Kṛṣṇa as his bridegroom. Mānikkavāchagar, in his *Tiruvāchagam*, says:

Eternal bridegroom He is
Paragon of beauty He is
He resides in me, mother
(Kamaliah 1977: 56).

The Vīraśaiva philosophy is in fact based upon the principle that the *śaraṇa* or devotee is the bride and the *linga* the bridegroom. The Śaiva Siddhānta as well as the *siddhar* saints too used the man-woman relationship to express the God-soul relationship (1977: 69). The bride of the Lord concept is also to be found in Kabīr and the Aṣṭachāp saints of northern India.

6. Sexual Transcendence and the Demoness Cult

It is only in the spiritual sphere that the commonsense view of terms like “male” and “female” get turned upside down. Many of the saints believed all creation being the product of *śakti* or the supreme creative power to be feminine. Akka Mahādēvi sang:

I saw the haughty master (Mallikārjuna)
for whom men, all men,
are but women, wives
(Ramanujam 1974: 120).

The underlying meaning is that the only Puruṣa or male is Paramātman and all creation being *māyā* or illusion is feminine. The soul itself is neither male nor female. In parallel logic the Siddha poets ask whether anyone can tell if the human breath, the essence of life, is male or female. In some of her *vachanās* when talking of her state or self-realization Akka Mahādēvi describes herself as male:

A woman though in name,
I am, if you consider well,
The male principle
(Bhoosnumath and Menzes 1970: 120).

Another striking feature of spiritualism among women is their total transcendence over what are normally regarded feminine virtues such as beauty, modesty, and gentleness. It is in this light that one should look at the form of Kālī or Durga who approximates to the deity Koṭṭavai among the Sangam Tamils. Sangam poems state that warriors propitiated the goddess by bloody sacrifices, human and animal, accompanied by a weird dance by the priestesses called *veṭṭuvavari* in the course of which they predicted what evils might befall the community and how they might be averted. The *Silappadikāram* describes Koṭṭavai as “the three eyed goddess, whose crown is adorned with the crescent moon, whose lips, red as the coral, are parted in a smile, whose waist is encircled by a

serpent, whose arm wields the trident, and whose feet, bedecked with anklets, rest upon the severed head of Mahishāsura” (Venkataraman 1936: 252).

The entire cult of the worship of *pēymagaḷir* or demonesses is to be viewed as the antithesis of the feminine image. The *pēymagaḷir* are referred to in the Sangam text *Puranānūru* as eating the flesh of the dead and dancing in the cremation ground. The *Puranānūru* essentially refers to them in the context of the battlefield as eating the flesh of the enemy. It has been argued that the origin of the custom lay in agriculture, in plucking the heads of corn and offering a sacrifice before consuming them. Therefore a close relationship exists between the mother goddess or fertility goddess and the strange manifestation of the *pēymagaḷir*. The emergence of the mother goddess must itself have been due to the fact that woman was the primary force behind the earliest agricultural practices (Kailasapathy 1966: 66–84).

It is this form of the *pēy* or demoness that is taken by Kāraikkāl Amṛmaiyaṛ. One of the leading Nāyanār saints, Sundarar, says that he is the slave of Pēyar Kāraikkāl Amṛmaiyaṛ – “Pēyārkkum aḍiyēn.” In her composition *urtvatāṇḍavam*, Kāraikkāl Amṛmaiyaṛ refers to herself as *pēyar*:

With bulging eyes and sunken pit like mouths
Two protruding front teeth and long, lean ankles
A female goblin [meaning herself] has established
itself in the cremation ground of Tiruvālangādu.
Here dances Śiva with serenity
(Kamaliah 1977: 50).

This is the sole scheme of her poems on Tiruvālangādu (*Tiruvālangādu Moota Padippakam*). The saint, transforming herself into a she-devil (*pēy*), sings in the first of these poems:

She has shriveled breasts
and bulging vein,
in place of white teeth
empty cavities gape.
with ruddy hair on her belly
a pair of fangs, knobby ankles, and long shins
the demon woman wails at the desolate creation ground.
where our Lord,
whose hanging matted hair
blows in all eight directions,
dances among the flames
and refreshes his limbs.
His home is Ālankātu
(Cutler 1987: 121).

7. The Naked Saint

Irrespective of the school of thought that she represented, the woman saint unlike her male count-

erpart was totally free from inhibitions. She recognized neither male nor female nor suffered from body consciousness. Akka Mahādēvi went naked with her body covered only by her long luxurious hair. In one of her vachanās, she says:

To the shameless girl
wearing Mallikāṛjuna's light, you fool,
where is the need for cover and jewel?
(Ramanujam 1973: 129).

An entire discussion by the male saints on the nakedness of Akka Mahādēvi took place in the "Anubhava Maṅṭapa" and is narrated in the vīraśaivite vachanās. Allamma Prabhu led the attack and asked her:

Is it true that you laid the blame
and left him [Kauśīka] by shedding your dress
and laying the body bare?
The error of your mind cannot be stilled
The garment of your hair yet screens your form.
How is it your shame is shed?
(Bhoosnurmath and Menzes 1970: 297).

There are other vachanās which go on in the same strain. Mahādēvi's reply is a telling one. She claims that she covers her body not so much for herself as to save others from temptation:

Unless the fruit is ripe within,
The outer peel will never lose
its gloss . . . I covered myself
with this intent
Lest sight of seals of love
should do you hurt
Is there any harm in this?
(Bhoosnurmath and Menzes 1970: 298).

The best defense of Akka Mahādēvi's action, however, came from her guru Basavaṅṅa:

Does the one who has loved
The one without form
Have need of body?
Does one who has loved
The one without mind
Have need of shame?
Does one who has loved
The sky-clad one
Have need of a girdle-cloth?
A devotee like Mahādēvi akka
Needs no encumbrances at all
(Bhoosnurmath and Menzes 1970: 271).

The Kashmiri saint Lalla is again said to have discarded her clothes and danced naked. This shedding of all inhibitions constituted the ultimate act of defiance by these women saints. It was their flagrant denial of woman's sexuality and their refusal to conform to sexual expectations.

8. Breaking Taboos

A third dimension to the braking of norms comes from the life of Karūraṁma, the 17th century saint from Kerala. In a startling instance of the breaking of ritual taboo on female pollution during their menstrual cycle, Karūraṁma entered the sanctum sanctorum and engaged in worship. Her action shocked her contemporary, Vilvamangala Svāmi, who rebuked her. Karūraṁma retaliated: "Can anyone guarantee that one will not die in this state of physical impurity," thus asserting that the right to salvation was more important than the preservation of ritual taboos (Seshadri 1979: 84).

These women saints also left their homes to mingle freely with male saints and scholars. Meera sings: "By keeping company with saints, I have lost the respect of society." Akka Mahādēvi asks:

Having made one's home in the market place, how
can one afford to shrink from its noise?
Having been born in this world, one should not
lose one's temper at praise or blame . . .
(Bhoosnurmath and Menzes 1970: 263).

9. Women Saints vis-à-vis the Male Sex

The lives of some women saints shows that the male, including their husband (with the exception of the guru), played but a negative role in their life. A major factor behind conjugal estrangement seems to have been the miraculous powers possessed by these women saints and manifested by them unconsciously. Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's (Punitavati) release from family life came about in a striking manner. She was married to a leading merchant from Nāgapattinam called Paramadatta who was an extremely jealous man. He had once given to her two high quality mangoes, one of which Punitavati gave away to a Śaivite mendicant. When Paramadatta came for his lunch, he ate the first mango and then asked for the second mango. Out of fear of her husband's wrath, Punitavati materialized the mango spiritually. Finding that its sweetness far exceeded that of any mango he had eaten, Paramadatta became suspicious. He commanded her to materialize one more mango but while this appeared in her hand it vanished the moment he touched it. The incident was one of terrifying realization of his wife's powers for Paramadatta who abandoned Punitavati and married again. Rid of worldly obligations, Kāraikkāl Ammaiār assumed a skeletal form and renounced home.

However, miracles were not always a manifes-

tation of conjugal estrangement but quite often of conjugal harmony resulting from the woman saint conforming to the traditional role model. Besides the incidents quoted from the life of Vāsukiyār, many of the miracles in the lives of the Vaiṣṇavite women saints bear testimony to this. There is, for instance, the story of the virtuous wife of saint Varadāchārya, Lakṣmi Dēvi, also known as Paratikolla Nāchchiyār. When Rāmānuja and his disciples were once journeying through their town, they were turned away from the doors of a rich man and so came to the humble abode of Varadāchārya seeking his hospitality. The saint was away at the time and Paratikolla Nāchchiyār found the stores at home empty. Hence she sold herself to a merchant for provisions and fed the devotees. Hearing the nature of the promise, Rāmānuja gave her holy water which converted the merchant as soon as he partook of it. There is similarly the incident in the life of Āṇḍāl, the wife of Kurattāzhwār, who happened to remark one stormy night (when her husband could not go out for alms) that the Lord was feasting sumptuously while his devotees starved, and immediately a delicious feast materialized before them.

10. Alienation and Poetic Imagination

The compositions of these women saints undoubtedly depict the mood of freedom from material things and the achievement of spiritual bliss, but they also portray their alienation from society and personal loneliness. On being asked by the Chola king (probably Kulōttunga, 13th century) as to where she came from, the Tamil saint Auvaiyār replied:

My legs are aching, paining
Fast have I walked
and a weary distance journeyed . . .
What place shall I call my own?
A wanderer like me
(Rajagopalachari 1971: 4).

This alienation of the women saints was a dual alienation: first because they were out of tune with the world and material pursuits and, second, the social alienation resulting from being a non-conforming woman. Akka Mahādēvi writes:

Like a silkworm weaving her house with love,
from her marrow, and dying in her body's threads,
winding tight, round and round, I burn
desiring what the heart desires, O, Mallikāryuna
(Ramanujam 1973: 116).

Meera similarly describes herself as a fish out of

water, a *chakravāha* bird deprived of the sight of the beloved, a lonely and lost soul.

Some of the women saints use very powerful imagery in their compositions. This is true of all the compositions of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyaṛ such as *Urthva Tāṇḍavam*, *Arpuda Tiruvantādi*, and other poems in the eleventh book of *Tirumurai*, the Śaivite canonical works. They are a brilliant portrayal of the cosmic dance of Śiva. Some unusual and mystic imageries are to be found in the poetic composition of a fifteenth century woman saint of Tamil Nadu who is not known by her proper name but as the maiden (*naṅgai*) of Uttiranallūr. In her *Paichalūr Padikam* she writes:

I have seen the tuft on cock, the tattoo on hen
So have I seen the fire on water
Citing your *satkula*, speak not to me of four Vedas
Use your discretion to see truth, ye elders of Paichalūr.
Village Brāhmins gather, build a high wall
[the sacrificial *vēdi*]
Dip in the river and pour clarified butter on fire
Like frogs in the rains, they croak the Vēdās
Have they gained salvation, ye elders of Paichalūr?
(Arunachalam 1969: 361 f.)

However, the most unusual or startling imageries are to be found in the *abhangs* (hymns) of Muk-tābāi, the sister of Jñānadev. To Chāṅgadēva, one of her principal followers, she said he should speak words of silence (*abhang* 9), sleep the sleep of ecstasy wherein the unstruck sound is heard (*abhang* 10). "In that state," says Muk-tābāi "the bridegroom will come from the womb of the bride, and as the bridegroom comes out, the bride will vanish from before him and there will be no limit to the happiness that may be enjoyed" (*abhang* 12 – Ranade 1983: 206). The only parallel with the mystic imagery of Muk-tābāi are the *ulaṭ sawayyan* or the inverted truths, found in Kabīr's poetry such as the tree with its roots outside and the branches beneath the earth, the upside down well, etc. Along with the male saints of the bhakti movement the compositions of the women saints marked a substantial contribution to the growth of vernacular literature like Lalla to Kashmiri, Akka Mahādēvi to Kannada, and Meera to Hindi.

11. Social Impact

The emergence, life, and creative works of these women saints thus had a significant impact on contemporary society. Their contribution was both direct and conscious as well as indirect and unconscious. The role played by the Nāyanār saints Maṅgaiyaṛkkarasiyār and Tilakavatiyar in the res-

toration of Śaivism in the wake of the growing challenge from Jainism was a direct and conscious one. Her husband, the Pāṇḍyan king (7th century A.D.), was a Jain, and this also appeared to be the common religion of the land. With the aid of her famous contemporary, saint Tirujnāna-sambandar, Maṅgaiyarkkarasiyār succeeded in restoring Śaivism in the land. In his *padikam* of Alway starting with the words *maṅgaiyarkkarasi*, the saint calls her "the Pāṇḍyan queen who is devoted to the cause of Śaivism." The compiler of *Periyapurāṇam*, Chēkkizhār, calls her "the divine maiden who avenged the honour of the South [Thenkulam], removed the obstacles in the path of Tamil, and spread the message of Śaivism" (Saraswati 1975: 218–220). Tilakavatiyār, who also lived in the same century, saved her brother Maru Ineekki from the clutches of Jainism. He had in fact become the head of a Jain monastery under the name Dharmasena and it was when she cured him of a deadly disease through a demonstration of her spiritual powers that he came back to the fold of Hinduism. This has been acknowledged by him in one of his *padikams* starting with the words *kuṭṭrayinavarū* (Arunāchalam 1973: 99) in which he says: "Losing the protection of her who was my guide I fell into the pit from which I had no redemption." He later became reknown as Appar or Tirunāvukkarasar.

The representation of social protest in the lives and works of these women saints is, however, much more subtle and less conscious except in the case of Auvaiyār from the South or Rūpa Bhavāni from Kashmir who functioned more like social reformers. By and large, the compositions of women saints represent the intense personal search for God in the midst of wholly uncongenial familial and social circumstances. Their comment on the overall social situation is an indirect one. As with the male saints of the bhakti movement there is usually no overt effort to critically examine or overturn the existing social order.

Some south Indian saints, however, provide more concrete examples of the rejection of the existing social structure and behavioral modes. Akka Mahādēvi says of herself:

O brothers, why do you talk to me
who has given up her caste and sex
having united with Chenna Mallikāṛjuna
(Tipperudrasvami 1982: 163).

The maiden of Uttiranallūr, although a *paraia* by caste, mastered the Vedas from a brahmin boy and married him. When the elders of the Paichalūr

village came to the Paraiya street with burning sticks she responded with her famous *Paichalūr Padikam*. Her verses deserve detailed citation because they constitute virulent anti-caste statements:

All your talk of caste and creed
Is it even as natural as the spider and its web?
The four blessed Vedas, were they created by Brahma?
Is caste and creed worthwhile, ye elders of Paichalūr?

One palm tree, from it hangs *nongu* [fruit] and toddy
For the knower of truth one no different from the other
Will one then be superior and the other inferior
Why then blame the paraya, ye elders of Paichalūr?

The smells of neem and sandalwood are distinct when they burn.
But indistinguishable is the smell of the burning Brahmin.
Does fire smell different if an unkempt Pulaya burns?
Does the burning stuff and flame differ, ye elders of Paichalūr?
(Arunachalam 1969: 361 f.).

Janābāi, herself a low caste, sings in a *abhang* that Chokkamēḷa (a famous male saint, Mahār by caste) was an outcaste but had great devotion in his heart, and so God became his servant and used to dine with him. Jāni is inclined to laugh because Chokkamēḷa made even God an outcaste like him (Kher 1979: 58). The significance of this verse lies in the fact that upper castes do not interdine with lower castes because this results in physical pollution. So in a logical turning of tables, Janābāi inverts the paradigm by making God himself subject to pollution. A significant example of the breaking of caste taboos comes from the life of Athulōi, the daughter of Periyanaṁbi, the guru of Rāmānuja (11th century). Periyanaṁbi was ostracized because he nursed and eventually performed the funeral rites of Māranār, an untouchable and his co-disciple. Athulōi stopped the chariot procession and compelled God himself to bear witness to the righteousness of his action and lift the ban on Periyanaṁbi. The most pungent commentary on the caste system comes from Auvaiyār (the one who was the contemporary of Kambar and Oṭṭakkūttar in the 12th century):

There are no castes but two if you want me to tell
The good men who help the poor in distress
The other, that will not so help
These are the low born
(Rajagopalachari 1971: 9).

The rejection of caste is of course a recurrent theme with most of the male low caste saints like Kabīr, Dādu, and Raidās and occasionally even upper caste ones like Chaitanya.

Strong condemnation of rituals, ceremonies, and idol worship come from both south and north Indian saints. Uttiranallūr Naṅgai says: "The re-

vealed Vedas are lies, body and soul are lies. Are not all castes one? Is everything variegated?" (Arunachalam 1969: 361).

Lalla of Kashmir says in her vak: "The idol is but stone, the temple is but stone" (Bazaz 1959: 132).

Auvaīyār, more than any other woman saint has made the most pithy and effective comments about many aspects of early medieval society. She condemns begging and prostitution as shameful and degrading. She warns the parasites at court that royal favour is treacherous and unpredictable while the "tiller of the soil lives the noblest life" (Rajagopalachari 1971: 12). Although Auvaīyār's genius gave her access to the Chōla court, she spent much of her time among the poor. One famous story about this saint has it that once a dancing girl called Chilambi gave five hundred gold coins to Kambar to compose a verse on her. He composed only two lines because he felt the payment to be inadequate. Auvaīyār came along and seeing Chilambi's distress, completed the stanza accepting in return only a cup of rice gruel called *koozh*. Hence she is also called Koozhukkuppāḍi or one who sang for gruel.

Where do these women saints figure in the saintly pantheon of Hinduism within the accepted religious framework? The acceptance of Āṇḍāl and Auvaīyār has been found to be easier than the acceptance of rebels like Lalla or Akka Mahādēvi. Auvaīyār got around the whole social problem of women's sexuality and moral controls by achieving instant old age through an act of miracle. The name Auvaī itself indicates a wise old woman and in this capacity she commanded great respect. Āṇḍāl was unconventional in her thought rather than in behavior and did not openly flout any social rules except for opting to remain single, and in this respect she had the support of her saintly father Periyaḷwār. It is the saints who flouted every conventional social norm like Lalla and Akka Mahādēvi who were made to stand outside the orthodox religious framework. Strangely in modern India the rebel saints are by and large worshipped with as much acceptance and reverence as the conformists. This may be the result of subtle efforts by the religious orthodoxy to institutionalize them so that their radicalism gets neutralized and does not appear as an alternative to the existing situation. But besides this, the overwhelming historical and structural changes in Indian society have also altered orthodox or conservative attitudes. The mass impact and tremendous social appeal, both among men and women, of the modern woman saint, *mātāji* or *gurumā* as they are

called, and the enormous growth in the numbers of these saints, is an indisputable proof of this.

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