

Sainthood, Patriarchy and Saguna Bhakti in the Verse of Andal and Mahadevi

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Saguna Bhakti is a path to salvation that begins with worshipful attachment to a personified, mythic God deified through a ceremonial of emotion, devotion and care rituals, the sustenance of which demands exacting codes of purity, discipline and hygiene from the initiate devotee. *Sa-guna* means that with (physical) attributes; Saguna Bhakti, therefore, means the bhakti or devotion of a god with (physical) attributes. The literal practice of Saguna Bhakti involves the chanting of scriptures, devotional singing/dancing and elaborate systems of upkeep and care of the deity and temple. Swathed in the sweet fragrance of incense, scores of lamps, drums, bells, singing and cymbals, Saguna Bhakti we can say is full of rituals that are elaborate and beautiful. It is a system that is *sringara rasa pradhan* – a system that is primarily aesthetic and embraces the delight of ceremonial worship: the beautiful ornaments and crisp silk clothes for the gods after their ritual morning baths in milk, honey, rose water and turmeric; the resplendent fragrant garlands, the brilliant tilak-marks made from guggal, vermilion, sandalwood or saffron. These (Vaishnav or Shaiva) Gods and Goddesses (manifestations of Shakti) are fashioned from rock or precious metals like gold, silver, brass or copper. They sit in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple in an atmosphere of divine euphoria - fortified with scores of ghee-fed lamps, water-honey-milk, lotus and other sacred flowers and various sweet rituals of organic upkeep. The Hindu temple gods are allocated fixed hours of waking and sleep/rest (a bit like the Greek gods and the rituals that surround them). The atmosphere during the morning and evening *arti* (prayer service) is charged, resplendent and electric – it is like the blossoming of several hearts, touched by the fervour of devotion and devotional singing, they burst into divine joy and celebration. The beautiful energies of the Saguna Bhakti ritual facilitate devotional fervour and at the same time provide hope and succour to the ordinary human who then connects instantly.

God in the Vaishnava temple was usually one of the several forms of Vishnu (Krishna, Rama, Balarama, Balaji etc.) along with his goddess consort Laxmi (or her counterparts like Radha, Rukmini). The worship rituals of a Vishnu temple were usually more elaborate and pretty compared to those of a Shiva temple. The Shiva temple, considering Shiva is regarded as the primal yogi – ascetic, primal and Spartan - bore a simpler and sublime aspect which had a magnificence of its own. More often than a full idol of Shiva, the temple

would have in its central region, the sculpture of an oblong phallus/*linga* in black stone pointing upwards; it is shown emerging from the floor from a symbolic vulva/ *yonī* – all of which is placed in a square section of framed and slightly depressed floor. Over the *linga-yoni* hangs a pot with a tiny hole, suspended from the ceiling and dripping milk-water upon the divine *linga*. Women, especially young women, ritually fasting and praying for a good husband, visit the Shiva temple on Mondays in white clothes and bathe the *linga* in a combination of milk and water. While the colour white is believed to be a favourite with Shiva (Mahadev, Mahayogi Bholenaath), the colour that is most pleasing to Lord Vishnu is magenta/deep pink or blue even. The two gods have their choice of specific flowers and fruits too, besides an elaborate matrix of myth, legendary fact, and pilgrimage sites as context.

Yet another aspect – a third aspect that completes the Saguna bhakti grid, is the worship of the goddess as the sacred Gaia principle – the primal Shakti/Devi or Prakriti in the form of Laxmi, Durga, Kali, Saraswati and scores of her counterparts; the goddess is worshipped alone or as consort to the gods, in temples across India. The Shakti/Devi theology has flourished as an autonomous tradition since ancient times and is said to have climaxed with the publication of *Devi Mahatmya* – a significant text central to the Shakti theology. This particular text, according to Prof. C. Mackenzie Brown, posits Maha-Shakti as supreme and immanent almost like a parallel counterpoint to the idea of the one male God. Later, however, worship of the goddess tends to fuse with the Vaishnav/Shaiva Bhakti Marg where Shakti/Prakriti is perceived as consort and complimentary dyadic energy to the male God.

The confluence of the Shiv-Shakti principle, at some point, led to the founding and establishment of the esoteric and highly scientific practice of Tantra. Swami Vivekanand's Guru Shri Ramkrishna Parmahansa is known for his *Devi sadhana* and rigorous two-year long practise of tantra, this however is not within the ambit of this paper. I, therefore, must acknowledge the Goddess and move on towards a reading of the poetic compositions of two 'goddess' like women bhakti saints – Andal and Mahadevi. The former belonged to the Alvar fold of Vaishnava Bhakti in ninth-century Tamilnadu and the later was a Lingayat saint – an ascetic variant of ViraShaiva bhakti that flourished in twelfth-century Karnataka.

Before I move on to perform a reading of Andal and Mahadeviakka, it is essential to note yet one more aspect of Saguna Bhakti. Bhakti was a phenomenon that emerged in the religious and cultural margins of medieval Indian society; it used the Apabhramsa dialect which was the common man's language, and from the casteless cultural margins it gradually marched to take

its place besides mainstream Hinduism and Vedic scriptures in Sanskrit. The Bhakti narrative was reformist in zeal, modernist in its ethos and as we are often led to presume, it existed in a realm that was gender-free. It was regarded as a path suitable for the spiritually inclined householder and also considered as the ordinary materialistic human's divine panacea. A majority of the male poets-saints who led the bhakti movement and composed scores of holy songs were people who either never married or if they did marry, they continued to lead parallel lives as saints and part time householders. This, however, was rarely true of women bhakti poets who were mostly pushed into marriage and underwent intense abuse and hostility in their marital homes, which they were then compelled to abandon and take to the streets. Even Bahinabai who stayed married all her life to a husband twenty-seven years older to her, is no exception. Her life was filled with physical and mental abuse at the hands of her husband who according to Hindu dharma was her lord, owner and god.

Bhakti as Resistance to Patriarchal Norm

An intrinsic feature of Saguna bhakti was that, it adopted a dyadic approach (dvaitavaad) to the idea of the divine godhead, where *God/Paramatma* was the supreme and singular male while all his devotees/*jivatmas* were his female beloveds/*gopis*. This surrender of the *jivatma* to the *paramatma* comes through as the sublime romance of the lover-beloved, who are perceived (and worshipped) as Radha-Krishna, Shiva-Parvati, Heer-Ranjha etc. through the entire bhakti (and Sufi) semiotic, where the path of emotional attachment and surrender takes the mystic to an ultimate merger with the supreme divine, which unfolds a portal to *mukti/liberation* from the birth-death cycle of life.

As far as the woman bhakti poet is concerned, the semiotic of conventional romance in bhakti is a subversive trap. The space of the devotional feminine where the male mystic/disciple identifies himself with the symbolic feminine is also a space where the female mystic/disciple is doubly marginalised. Lal Ded, Mahadeviakka, Mirabai, Bahinabai are examples of women-saint-poets whose bhakti for Krishna/Shiva was challenged and compromised by patriarchal social bias, as well as, by the fact of their location in the female body, in a space where their sainthood was perceived as immoral, sacrilegious and unacceptable in a woman. In the marital dynamic, a woman's ultimate god was supposed to be her husband, none other; not even God was allowed to replace him. Thus, unlike the married male sant/mystic, the married woman saint/mystic was fettered to patriarchal laws and tethered to her husband, who according to dharma was her sole master and lord.

Conceptually speaking, the woman bhakti saint of the medieval era, comes across as a resisting figure who challenged and pushed the norms of patriarchy

and social propriety. She was a wife who was also a saint-poet; she was one that was empowered with wisdom, compassion and detachment—such qualities in a woman (woman's body) were resented, feared and resisted. This is the premise of my paper which attempts to examine the gender dynamics that festered beneath the bubble of romance in which we tend to cast the struggles of our women bhakti saints. It is an objective of my paper to explore the radiant semiotics of Vaishnav and Shaiva Saguna Bhakti in the verse of Andal and Mahadevi. At the same time, the paper also examines the lives of these two women located as they were in the patriarchal matrix of social control, denial and abuse. When her parents began to look for a suitable husband for her, Andal insisted she would marry only Krishna. Mahadevi, on the other hand, was compelled to marry a local chieftain. Her husband who was entitled to full authority over the wife's body, soul and mind, resented the prospect of sharing her loyalties even with an absent God, whom he ritually worshipped. Mahadevi's divine journey is grim and strewn with the turbulence of harsh reality, comparatively Andal's is a narrative that is sensuous and dreamlike. To appreciate the esoteric-ceremonial of the Saguna, to acknowledge the rivalry and infighting between the Vishnu and Shiva cults of bhakti, and to interrogate simultaneously the nexus of bhakti-gender-patriarchy amounts to an attempt to de-construct bhakti construct. This essay performs a reading that resists, and therefore, is in some measure—a reading that is postmodernist and feminist.

Women Bhakti Poets

Women mystics of the bhakti sampradaya in medieval India, between the ninth and seventeenth centuries (including a few in the nineteenth century), provide an interesting scope for research in the interface between—women's quest for enlightenment and their encountering of patriarchal subordination, gender stereotyping and sexual abuse—which they must confront both at home and in the world outside, despite the fact that they are located within the broad normative of spiritual convention. Women Bhakti saints that are popularly known to us, translated and researched in our times, include the following: Andal (Tamilnadu, 9th c), Akka Mahadevi (Karnataka, 12th c), Janabai (Maharashtra, 13th c), Gangasati (Gujarat, 12-14th c), Lal Ded (Kashmir, 14th c), Mirabai (Rajasthan, 15th c), Bahinabai (Maharashtra, 17th c). A late entrant into the women's Bhakti matrix is Peero, a courtesan saint-poet from 19th century Punjab. M. S. Subhalakshmi, the ethereal classical singer from the south (who began life as a Devadasi), is another claimant to the fold of modern bhakti, besides the voices of scores of women-poets who have lived on the other side of memory, unknown to us. Here, I shall examine in brief the life and work of Andal and Mahadevi akka – two women poets from south India, and within their respective

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contexts, I shall do a reading of gender-specific issues that surface in their writings as women in bhakti.

In medieval India, we find at the centre of Hindu religion the trinity gods – Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh (Shiva) – upholders of three cardinal life principles of creation, maintenance and dissolution. Each God of the trinity was framed within a matrix of layered narratives and sported a myriad nomenclature. Lord Vishnu, the God of restoration and preservation was the locus of the Alvar Vaishnav tradition to which Andal belonged. From a very early age, Andal began writing passionate love songs addressed to Krishna – eighth avatar of Lord Vishnu, he is regarded as supreme God Himself. Recurrent references to Krishna and several Vaishnav myths find their way into her passionate love poems in the form of dyadic references, jealous digs at Krishna’s consort Radha and wife Rukmini or to Vishnu’s wife Laxmi. Myth in Andal’s verse is also accessed through the use of metaphor, anecdote, personification and other forms of tropes.

To make better sense of the Vaishnava Saguna Bhakti poetics, we need to keep in mind certain basics: two of Vishnu’s incarnations – Rama and Krishna, that are central to the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, often find their way into Vaishnav semiotic. Vishnu/Krishna is usually represented as blue complexioned, handsome and taut, with four arms holding the following esoteric symbols – a conchshell, a discus, a lotus flower and a mace. The layered semiotics of Vaishnav poetics also derives from indigenous subaltern myths that have been co-opted from agrarian contexts. The Vaishnav Bhakti semiotic exults in the aesthetics of feeling romance there is to it– a sense of abundance and the approach to god is that, of a love that is passionate and dyadic. Here is a quote from Chabria and Shankar’s translation of Andal:

Your great black body is cleaved
By springing lightning. Know
I, cracked gem, wish to be entwined with
The glorious Lord of Vengadam this way. He holds
Auspicious Sri Devi to his resplendent
Chest. Go tell him to know such love
With me, to crush my savaged heaving
Breasts to him every single day. (Andal, lines 101)

To use a technical expression from Bharatmuni’s aesthetics of the rasa theory, Vaishnav Bhakti is essentially *shringara-rasa pradhan*. Deeply imbricated in mythology, it is temple-centric and a chosen path of the well-to-do householder, who seeks to balance spiritual and material dualities. Some popularly known

names of Vishnu are – Krishna, Parashurama, Raghurai, Rama, Giridhara Gopal, Ranchod, Jagannatha and many more, with Mohini being his one and only female *swaroopa* (aspect).

Andal who wrote from within the Alvar school of Vaishnav Bhakti tradition in ninth century Tamil Nadu, graduated to the status of Goddess/special soul, early in her childhood. She was an abandoned infant who was found and adopted instantly into the family of a senior Alvar. Andal, who grew up on a diet of Krishna, perceived herself as Krishna's bride and unabashedly wrote passionate erotic verse until the moment of her disappearance at age sixteen into Krishna's idol. This unabashed tenor of Andal's stands out in her Vaishnav Bhakti poetics; it lends her voice an urgent dramatic timber, which resonates well with contemporary poetic tastes and sensibilities.

For my study of Andal's biography and her vacana writings, I have used as my primary text– Priya Chabria and Ravi Shankar's translations and notes from *Andal, The Autobiography of a Goddess* (2015). I have also referenced Devdutt Pattanaik's *7 Secrets of Vishnu* (2011) and *7 Secrets of the Goddess* (2014), besides an online essay by Padma Raghavan & Savita Narayan, titled: "Andal: The Poet and her incomparable garland of verses" from a Heritage India website. According to Chabria and Shankar, south India in the medieval ages was mired with religious conflicts. The Nayanars (Shaivites) who had secured royal patronage were busy waging battles against the dominant Buddhist and Jain religions. Also, there was infighting among the Shaiva Nayanars and the Vaishnav Alvars:

The Nayanars and the Alvars also bitterly warred with each other, a fact not often acknowledged. During our research we came across this quixotic maxim, "The Nayanars walk and sing, the Alvars stand and sing". Tellingly the maxim means that the Nayanars, having secured royal patronage under recently re-converted Shaiva Chola Kings, were free to wander and proselytize about the Shaivite god's miracles. The Alvars were restricted to singing their lauds in their local shrines or at principal temples like Srirangam... They therefore "stood and sang." (li/lii)

Of Andal, who belonged to the frontline order of the Alvars, it is said that she was found beneath a tulsi plant by Periyalvar, who was an ardent devotee and head priest of a Vishnu temple of Vatapatrasayi at Srivilliputtur. Periyalvar was a learned man, extremely spiritual and much respected. He was fond of gardening and fondly made garlands for daily worship at the temple. On discovering the tiny infant beneath the tulsi shrub in his garden, the delighted Periyalvar (also known as Vishnuchitta) and his wife Vrajai adopted the baby

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and raised her as their own; educating her and grooming her in the spiritual discipline, arts and literature of the Alvars. Periyalvar's words give us a window into how he saw this child that he had received into his life. She was for him a very *baal* (baby) Krishna, and he to her was the very mother that Yashoda had been to Krishna (symbolically, emotionally). I quote:

I saw Him both Mighty and as The Child I play with at home, loving Him as only a mother can. I think of myself as Yashoda, God's mother – as my wife Viraja knows.

.... did people begin to call me Periyalvar? After this? Or when my daughter married the Lord, and I became His father-in-law?

The love of God does strange things to us. My body remains a man's but my touch becomes that of a proud mother as each day I plait flower garlands for Him. (171)

Kodai (or Godha) as the girl was named, was happy to be her father's companion and accompanied him on many a pilgrimage. She benefitted much from the spiritual fervour, the bhakti discourse and the singing. From an early age she had begun to compose poetry seeped in ardent devotion for Krishna. A verse by Andal:

As dwarf, You strode the worlds with two steps – Glory to Your feet.

As Rama, You slew the demon of arrogance – Glory to Your valour.

As Krishna in a cradle, You shattered the cart of evil – Glory to Your fame.

As Giri Gowardhan, You lifted a mountain for our protection – Glory to Your goodness.

Glory to you eternally – Grace us we implore. (15)

Things changed however when her father, Vishnuchitta/Periyalvar, found one day a strand of hair in a garland meant for Vishnu's idol. Further inquiry divulged the fact that Kodai was in the habit of wearing the garlands made for Krishna, that she did it righteously as she considered herself Krishna's bride. Periyalvar was shocked to know his daughter had been adorning her hair with the garlands he used to make daily for Krishna's temple service. For a while he stopped making the garlands until one night when Lord Ranganatha himself appeared in his dream, and assured him no harm was done, that it pleased him, in fact, to wear garlands that had first been worn by Kodai his sweet devotee. This momentous event assured Periyalvar of the piety of his daughter's actions. Hereafter, Kodai (Andal) was addressed as Sudikuduttha Nachchiyar, meaning the girl who offered God garlands first worn by her.

Andal by then had reached the marriageable age of fifteen. She was extremely beautiful, learned and well versed in the arts of devotion. Periyalvar and Viraja were keen to get her suitably married but Kodai refused to marry a mortal, she insisted she was surrendered to Krishna and would become his bride alone. Several verses composed by Andal around this time are seared with the agony of separation and an urgent desire to be possessed body and spirit by the One Krishna. In the new bloom of youth, she writes, “Drenched in love I drench/Your feet with flowers. In return/You torture/me with half-fulfilled desires that inflame me/further,” (37) and more from the Andal translations by Chabria & Shankar:

...auspicious, incandescent, virginal
am I
accept this
fire me
into the dark one who
will rend
my body's
secret gullet
as he enters me. (36)

A marriage ceremony with the Lord was then arranged. The wedding procession was grand and abundantly arranged, even the reigning Pandya king was there with his queen and entourage. It is said that on entering the temple, Kodai in her bridal finery ran towards the idol of Krishna in the sanctum sanctorum, and instantly vanished—merged with His idol. She was aged 16; ever since her merger with Andavan (Vishnu) she is known as Andal. Andal means she that reigns. Once again, I quote Periyalvar:

Kodai never looked more luminous than on her poochudal ceremony, adorned with garlands of buds, full-blown flowers and the rarest blooms I could gather. Butterflies fluttered around her, bees hummed around her... as our girl swooned. Kodai looked like a curved petal aflame. In a flash, like a wound half-remembered I understood where my daughter was heading: it was to be a solitary, painful and effulgent path. Kodai was becoming Andal. (174)

Andal is known to be the youngest woman saint-poet of the Alvar Vaishnav tradition of Tamil Nadu. The Alvars along with the Nayanmars— their Siva-worshipping counterparts, were the earliest and the initial most proponents of the Bhakti movement, which emerged as an antidote to the exclusive systems

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of Brahmin ritual and as a Hindu strategy to stall the exodus of lower caste Hindus into Jain/Buddhist orders. From a distance of ten centuries when we look back today, the twin aspect of the Bhakti project, with Vaishnav Alvars on one hand and Shaiva Nayanmars on the other, seems like a macro sized, consolidated attempt of foresighted Hindu (Brahmin and Shudra) saints, to stem the exodus of lower caste Hindus into other religions; that the Alvars and Nayanmars were partners in the attempt is however incidental. The reality according to Padma Raghavan and Savita Narayan, is much different and rarely been acknowledged. Fact is that, there was much infighting and rivalry among the Alvars and the Nayanmars who competed against each other in the fray, along with other Jain and Buddhist rivals. Fortunately, for posterity, they both ended up expanding the limits of Hinduism by taking the Hindu icons to the margins of society, spearheading the construction of indigenous schools of parallel spirituality and alternate canons of sacred prose/poetry, which later merged with temple scriptures that were mainstream.

Thus, the Alvars and the Nayanars ushered mass movements of people from the margins to the centre – they were instrumental in birthing the Hindu alternative to temple worship, which eventually led to the opening up of temple doors to the masses, who until then had been kept outside the temple's precincts. As a result, they forged an alternate/parallel line of worship as Bhakti. In a bid to bring God to the poor man's hut they composed devotional songs in the local language, which over a period of time grew into a significant corpus and took their place in temples alongside the Vedic scriptures in Sanskrit.

As rain sews earth and sky in jewel chains
my need for him strings upwards from my wet
body. Am I to be an aromatic desert leaf
that dies in the fertile season? Ask him this, go. (109)

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potent and frail
killer and victim
this is us
I bleed
staunch
my wound
hear my prayer

fill my being
with your being. (147)

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Andal's Krishna bhakti—the metaphor of pining, passion and demanding fierceness, is reminiscent of the legendary love play of Radha-Krishna, so erotically described by Jayadev in his *Gita Govinda*. According to Patnaik, “The idea of Radha flourished primarily in the Gangetic plains. But it arose in the eastern areas of Odisha, Bengal and Assam, which were prominent centres of Tantra and Kali worship.... Radha's fierce love for Krishna would feature prominently in the devotional movement of Chaitanya to the extent that even men started identifying themselves with Radha, considering Krishna to be the only true, complete and perfect man” (70-71).

From Andal the Alvar saint of the ninth-century Tamil Nadu, we move forward in time to the Kali-like aspect of Mahadevi akka, a Lingayat saint poet located in twelfth-century Karnataka. A glaring commonality between the two lies in the fact that, they were both surrendered from an early age to the divine Lord; both were mystics, poets and beautiful women. Mahadevi was often referred to as Akka – elder sister; she was initiated to Shiva bhakti by a passing ascetic at the age of ten, and eventually by twenty-six, she had enrolled into the ascetic order of the Lingayats, who worshipped Lord Shiva and lived on the outskirts of human society. The Lingayats (ascetics who wore the *linga* as a threaded pendant) were a variant of the ViraShaiva path that surfaced in Karnataka in the tenth-century. The Lingayat saints, in their approach to Shiva bhakti seem to locate themselves closer to the nirguna/meditative aspect of Shaivism. In Mahadevi akka we have the narrative of not the householder-saint, but the aspect of one who has given up the world, family, household and marriage to live the life of a celibate, in single-minded pursuit of enlightenment and *mukti*. In Mahadevi, we have the rare woman yogi who chose eventually to withdraw to the forests near Srisailam, Telangana, and live an ascetic life of severe trials and penance, in a cave in the mountains located on the banks of river Krishna. From what we know today of the Akka Mahadevi caves, the tiger reserve and the forests that surround it, also considering the fact that she wore no clothes, her life choices and circumstances were harsh to the extreme.

Shiva himself was a great wandering yogi—a Mahayogi, Adi Yogi, or often known as, Mahadev – the greatest of all Gods. Mythical lore connects Shiva—the primal Yogi, with severe penance and ascetic practise, classical music and dance and with the subversive esoteric of tantra and dark cosmology – profound, scientific metaphysics of honing and accessing latent potential of the human body. The science of Tantra regards the human body as a powerful microcosmic

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unit, which can be brought to a state of alignment with the macrocosmic realms and their frequencies, in such a way as to awaken the body microcosm to its highest potential (which occasions the rising of the kundalini), and thereby, orchestrate its opening like a chalice that begins to receive the divine elixir and resonates to the hum of celestial harmonies, striking with the hemisphere—a sublime eternal song. Christ, who is said to have walked on water, was obviously an evolved yogi—attuned to the finest of celestial laws and harmonies.

Mahadevi's quest and life-path, even the manner of its unfolding, resonates intensely with the energies and quintessential persona of Lord Shiva, whom she addresses in her vacanas as Cenna Mallikarjua – sweet Lord white as Jasmine. The whiteness of the Lord, however, does not fit in with our general perception of Shiva – Mahadev, Bholenath, Kaal Bhairav. Although mythology presents Shiva as blue throated/*Neelkanth* with fair skin, his entire body is generally painted in shades of blue (not white). Mostly, the images show him sitting cross legged with a crescent moon adorning his lustrous hair, and sometimes in his tresses flow waters of the falling Ganges; a cobra snake garlands his neck, he wears a garment fashioned from tiger skin, and has besides him a *trishul* (a staff with a three-pronged blade attached to it), a *dumroo* (small percussion instrument), a conchshell and an earthen vessel. These symbols however find scarce mention in her later work, as her spiritual quest takes her beyond the Saguna semiotic and into the forest-realms of the formless Nirguna.

Mahadeviakka is a voice that has baked in the ordinary family grill and churned in the mill of societal pressure. The pains and rigours of life are rarely mentioned in her poems. Her general disillusionment with the world can perhaps be traced in the tone of fatigue and dejection, that we sometimes find in her poems which express her deep desire for a total merger with the divine. As a poet, she comes across as a brilliant mystic who wrote poetry of the spiritual quest and was brilliantly imagistic. Mahadevi's poems are like brief conversations with Shiva as *Mallikarjuna*; she weaves into her poetic inscapes striking images from nature, from the landscapes and natural phenomenon, that she sees around her. I quote from A. K. Ramanujan's translations of her vacanas in *Speaking of Shiva*:

You are like milk
In water: I cannot tell
What comes before,
What after;
Which is the master,
Which the slave;

What's big,
What's small. (115)

It is said that at age ten, an unknown travelling Sadhu initiated Mahadeviakka to Shiva bhakti. That moment of initiation, she grew up to consider as the real moment of her birth and soon after she betrothed herself to lord Shiva, who sat in the Udatadi temple in the form of *Mallikarjuna*. According to Ramanujan, the name *Mallikarjuna* translates as 'the Lord (Arjuna) white as 'Jasmine' or as 'Arjuna, Lord of goddess Mallika'; and '*Cenna*' means dear, lovely and beautiful. So Mahadevi fell in love with *Cennamallikarjuna*; she composed vacanas addressed to Him, and took his name for a signature in all the songs that she she wrote. The God-path, which took Andal to marriage and a merger with Krishna's (Kannan's) idol in the Thiruvarangam Ranganathswamy temple, that same path drove Mahadeviakka to abandon home and marriage and travel to the Lingayat academy in Kalyan; and from there later, to the Srisailam forests, mountain and there a deep cave, where she is said to have meditated and finally disappeared from. Here are a few vacanas, Ramanujan's translations, which reflect the harsh struggle and sublime tenor of Mahadevi's inscaple.

If sparks fly
I shall think my thirst and hunger quelled.
If the skies tear down
I shall think them pouring for my bath.
If a hillside slide on me
I shall think it flower for my hair.
O lord white as jasmine, if my head falls from my shoulders
I shall think it your offering. (120)

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In her growing up years, she appears to have had no special claims to social privilege or protection, except that she had lustrous tresses and was exceptionally beautiful; so much so that Kaushika, who was the king or chieftain of the land, fell madly in love with her. He wooed her and chased her, and harassed her parents with profuse declarations of love and subtle intimidation. Scared for her parent's wellbeing, the young Mahadevi at last relented and they were married. The lusty king was a non-believer, which made the odds even steeper. Finally, when conjugal life became unbearable, Mahadevi abandoned home, family and city, and walked all the way to the Lingayat headquarters in Kalyana, where, after much discourse with Allama Prabhu and Basavanna, she was accepted into the Lingayat fold as an ascetic initiate. Around this time, she

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came to be addressed as akka– elder sister, which henceforth was used with her name as an appendage. Mahadeviakka flourished in the stress-free environs and plunged herself in devotion. The following vacana of hers is replete with joy and has all the features of Saguna Bhakti. It also reveals the degree of the poet’s surrender and detachment from the world, as she moves in it internally awakened and lit.

Locks of shining hair
A crown of diamonds
Small beautiful teeth
And eyes in a laughing face
that light up fourteen worlds –
I saw His glory,
and seeing, I quell today
the famine in my eyes.
I saw the haughty Master
for whom men, all men,
are but women, wives.
I saw the Great One
who plays at love
with Sakti,
original to the world,
I saw His stance
and began to live. (120)

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Concluding his introduction to Mahadeviakka, Ramanujan says, “Like other bhaktas, her struggle was with her condition, as body, as woman, as social being tyrannized by social roles, as a human confined to a place and time. Through these shackles she bursts, defiant in her quest for ecstasy” (113-114). And one wonders, if Mahadeviakka’s struggle to unshackle herself from societal pulls and norms can be equated with the struggle of her male saint-colleagues. Was it not more difficult for women bhaktas to hold on their own path of God? Mahadevi who had given up her clothes and used only her long tresses was also harassed at times by unwanted male attention and abuse; note the vacana where she refers to the body as ‘dirt’. “My body is dirt, / my spirit is space:/ which shall I grab, O Lord? How/and what/shall I think of you?” (116). In

Mahadevi's context gender sexuality seems to become a liability, causing her distress and some confusion. How then must she think of Mallikarjuna, who in spiritual parlance is, the only "Master for whom men, all men are but women, wives"; he that is "the Great One/ who plays at love/ with Shakti, original to the world."

How is it, one wonders, that among male saints from Saguna and Nirguna Bhakti, none (almost none other than Jnaneshvar) were inspired to leave their marital home, while a lot of women bhaktas— such as Mahadevi, Lal Ded, Mirabai— were harassed into crossing the threshold of their marriage and home, in order to pursue their spiritual calling. Research into women ascetics in India indicates that theoretically women (like Shudras) in Vedic culture, and later in the Bhakti tradition, were allowed to take to asceticism, but the ascetic's life was regarded as unnatural and unsuitable for the female gender. Even socially, the scene was quite complex: widows or women who wished to remain unmarried were often suspected of using asceticism as a ploy to escape the normative life. Another aspect was the concept of *stridharma*, which perceived marriage, wifehood and motherhood as a woman's prime and ultimate goal, and was prescribed by authoritative texts like *Manusmriti* and the *Dharmashastra*. The concept of *stri-dharma*, in turn, was attached to the idea of woman as container and upholder of family and clan honour. Layered in metaphoric meanings, the woman subject and by extension the woman-saint, inhabited a space that symbolised dehumanization, which continuously challenged her human needs and aspect.

Conclusion

The ascetic life for women was also a ticket to freedom from the trappings of gender roles and emotional stereotypes; especially for women like Andal and Mahadevi, who were inclined to a life that was outside the socio-cultural trappings of mortal convention. For instance, in the Alvar Bhakti tradition, Andal was the first woman bhakta who wrote so unselfconsciously love poems addressed to Lord Krishna— her spiritual master and betrothed. Andal's is a poetics of erotic, irreverence and virile passion, and longing for union with Krishna, where her own female body becomes a site for yoga with the *param-atma* on levels that are carnal, subtle and divine. What saves her, a woman, from social derision is the fact that she is located in the bhakti convention of dyadic love, which symbolises the Divine-devotee connection as Shiva-Shakti, Purush-Prakriti, Radha-Krishna, man-woman, lover-beloved, husband-wife.

On the other hand, Mahadeviakka's efforts are even more stunning and man-like. In an effort to draw closer to the experience of God, she chose to drop her clothes along with feelings of shame, vanity and pride and stayed in

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the nude, in a cave till the end of her life. The ascetic's life, can we say, that although it hugely challenged the concerned women, it also brought them freedom and an independence of will? That from being dehumanised as symbols of family shame and family honour, they were able to posit resistance and recover their lost identities and selfhood, which itself was commendable and courageous to say the least.

Mahadevi, the Lingayat, who was surrendered to her Lord Mallika-Arjuna as beloved and master seems to write from a state of anxiety, sometimes even with ambiguity towards her own body. Her body in one vacana is likened to an abandoned carcass— as a thing that has been used and discarded by the Lord, and therefore, now it is of little consequence if someone else invades it. The ordeals of Mahadevi's vagrant life, her conscious choice to walk a path of severe austerities seem to take her beyond the limits of detachment and body consciousness.

Andal, on the other hand, locates her bhakti in the sacred body space that is virgin and a gift for Krishna her betrothed. Andal longs for a divine union, both physical and spiritual; for her the body with all its passion and sweat is fit sacred site for lovemaking with only her Lord, with whom she unabashedly craves for a union that is sexual and yet, sacred and divine at the same time. In contrast to Andal's firm stance—as bride to lord Krishna, which is backed by repeated entreaties to Krishna to take her “flower body”, mind and soul in complete carnal abandon, the tenor of Mahadevi-akka's vacana compositions oscillates between her *Cenna* lord, sometimes as legitimate husband and sometimes illicit lover. Also, the turn of her phrase is more ascetic and celibate. It must also be considered here that, Andal in a meteoric lifespan of sixteen years had lived a life of privilege and intense Krishna bhakti from early infancy. Her foster parents were sensitive and nurturing people, who provided her with stable education and a climate of spiritual abundance. Of particular significance was the shaping presence of her father Periyalvar, who himself was a senior Alvar, and had introduced Andal to the depths of Krishna leela and bhakti; so, when Andal rebelled against the very idea of a mortal husband her wishes were honoured. Whereas, Mahadevi, who came from an ordinary background, buckled under the chieftain Kaushaki's pressure and in a bid to save her parents from further threats and harassment, agreed to a marriage. Later, when marriage to the lusty Kaushaki became insufferable, she had only one option and that was to take to the roads and live on her feet.

Considering the Hindu normative for women as a class was that, they were incapable of independent thinking and therefore, in need of male protection, guidance and domination. I would like to recall Ramanujan's thoughtful but passing comment, where he likens Mahadeviakka's struggles to those of “other

bhaktas,” and yet at the same time mentions the specifics of her struggle “as body, as woman, [and] as social being tyrannized by social roles, as a human confined to a place and time” (113-114). One is grateful to Ramanujan for acknowledging (even in passing) the uniqueness of the bhakti context for the women bhakta. It needs to be reiterated here (with emphasis however) that, Bhakti for women who were perceived more as symbols of dharma and honour, was a path ridden with severe social stigma, issues of marital and familial rejection, and psychological and emotional abuse, which amounted to severe physical, mental and existential stress. With reference to women poets who were saintly beings, these are daunting contexts that deserve due acknowledgement and evaluation in bhakti scholarship.

As women saint-poets, who were intensely honest, pure and sublime of spirit—Andal and Mahadeviakka have earned a place among the frontrunners of the bhakti matrix. Embedded in the convention of the sacred, from beyond the gender normative, they unwittingly speak to us as spirited torch-bearers of the resisting feminist.

Note: As I understand from my readings of the philosophical writings and devotional songs of Abhinavagupta (980-1020 AD) the great poet and expert on tantric practise and theory, Tantra is an esoteric system—a scientific method and approach to the realisation of enlightenment; it coordinates and accesses elements of the human microcosm (mind, body and spirit) in all their entirety, to systematically orchestrate the attainment of liberation from dyadic dualities through union/yoga of the body/ Shakti with the spiritual element that is essentially defined as male Shiva/ Bhairav – and thereby, through sexual-spiritual union to touch the eternal, macrocosmic Divine that exists in an ever sustained state of dissolution and bliss.

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