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Editor: Prof. Shrawan K Sharma

www.thevedicpath.in

thevedicpath@gkv.ac.in

+91-9412074666

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The Semiotics of Saguna Bhakti : Andal and Mahadevi

Neeti Singh,

Associate Professor of English,

MSUB, Vadodara, Gujrata

Email:neeti.singh-eng@msubaroda.ac.in

This paper attempts to look afresh at the semiotic of Saguna Bhakti by tracing the intricacies of Shaiva and Vaishnav Bhakti, and by examining the various threads that weave into their specific contexts through myth, history, social and religious practise and through cultural politics. I have also tried to explore the subtleties of Vaishnav and Shaiva poetics through the work and lives of its women saint-poets - Andal and Mahadevi. Andal is located in the Tamil Alvar tradition of Vishnu worship in the 9th century. Mahadevi akka is a Lingayat ViraShaiva from Karnataka in 12th century. Besides the fact that they both were great poets who led sublime lives of penance and bhakti, they both were also women. And women in the Bhakti tradition although they quite empowered, were steeply challenged narratives. Did women like Andal and Mahadeviakka have the right to be ascetic, is an issue that the paper delves into as well.

Keywords: Saguna, Bhakti, Vaishnav-Shaiva, Rasa, gender.

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. Saguna

means that with (physical) attributes; Saguna Bhakti therefore means the bhakti or devotion of a god with (physical) attributes. The literal practise 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. It 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) who are fashioned from rock or precious metals like gold, silver, brass or copper - sit in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple in an atmosphere of divine euphoria - fortified with scores of ghee-fed lamps, water-milk, lotus and other sacred flowers and various sweet rituals of organic upkeep, the saguna 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 aarti pooja is charged, utopian and resplendent – it is like the blossoming of several hearts, touched by the fervour of 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 parallels such as 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, bore a more ascetic 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 icon of a phallus/ linga in black stone, emerging from the floor from a symbolic vulva/ yoni - it is placed in a square section of framed and slightly depressed floor, over the linga-yoni hangs a pot suspended from the ceiling above 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, and an elaborate matrix of myth, fact and pilgrimage sites contextualises them.

Yet another aspect - a third aspect that completes the Saguna bhakti grid, is the worship of Shakti or Devi - the sacred goddess principle. Shakti or Devi theology flourished as an autonomous tradition in ancient India, it 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 the goddess path tends to fuse with the Vishnu/Shiva Bhakti orders where Shakti / Prakriti is perceived as consort and complimentary dyadic energy to the male God. The confluence of the Shiv-Shakti lore further contributed to the practise and esoteric 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 9th c Tamilnadu and the later was a Lingayat saint - an ascetic variant of the ViraShaiva bhakti tradition of 12th c 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 quite 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 poet-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 has rarely been the case with women bhakti poets who were mostly pushed into marriage and later faced intense abuse and hostility in their marital homes which they were then compelled to abandon and take to the streets.

WOMEN BHAKTI POETS

Women mystics of the bhakti sampradaya of medieval India between 9th to 17th centuries (including a few in the

19th 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 and translated and researched in our times, include the following: Andal (Tamilnadu 9th c), Akka Mahadevi (Karnataka 12th c), Janabai (Maharashtra 13th 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 many other poet-women who 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 contexts I shall do a reading of gender-specific issues that surface in their writings as women in bhakti.

ANDAL

In Medieval India, we find at the centre of Hindu religion the trinity gods - Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh (Shiva) – associated with 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 poetic text in the form of dyadic references, jealous references to 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 Ramayan and Mahabharata often find their way into Vaishnav semiotic. Vishnu / Krishna is usually represented as blue complexioned, handsome and taut with four arms holding in his four hands 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 passionate dyadic love. To quote from Andal as example:

Your great black body is cleaved
 By springing lightening. 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. (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 house-

holder 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 swaropa (form/aspect).

Andal who wrote from within the Alvar school of Vaishnav bhakti tradition in 9th century Tamilnadu, 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* and an online essay by Padma Raghavan & Savita Narayan, titled: 'Andal: The Poet and her incomparable garland of verses', <https://heritage-india.com/andal-poet-incomparable-garland-verses/>

According to Chabria and Shankar, South India in the 5th century 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 principle temples like Srirangam that was too / venerated to be attacked. They therefore ‘stood and sang. (li/lii)

Of Andal who belonged to the frontline order of the 9th c 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 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 Yahoda 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, Tr. Chabria & Shankar

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 Peiryalvar 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 15. 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 in 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 for, 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, Tr. Chabria & Shankar

Andal is known to be the youngest woman saint-poet of the Alvar Vaishnav tradition of Tamilnadu. 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 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 movement 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)

potent and frail
 killer and victim
 this is us

i bleed
 staunch
 my wound

 hear my prayer
 fill my being
 with your being (147)

AKKA MAHADEVI

From the Alvar Andal of 9th c Tamilnadu we move forward in time to the Lingayat saint Mahadevi of 12th century Karnataka. The 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, female poets and beautiful women. Mahadevi was often referred to as Akka – elder sister. She was initiated to Shiva bhakti at ten and eventually by age twenty six, joined the ascetic order of the Lingayats – a variant of the ViraShaiva path that surfaced in Karnataka in the 10th century. The Lingayat saints, in their approach to Siva 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 a celibate life of solitude and austerity in the single minded pursuit of enlightenment and mukti. In Mahadevi we have the rare woman yogi who chose later in life, to withdraw to the forests near Srisailam and live a life of severe penance in a cave in the mountain located on the banks of the river Krishna. From what we know today of the Akka Mahadevi cave, hers was a life that was harsh, stoic and ascetic 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 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 general persona of Lord Shiva whom she addresses in her vacanas as CennaMallikarjua – sweet Lord white as Jasmine. The whiteness of the Lord however, does not fit in with our general perception of Shiva – Mahadev, Bholenath, KaalBhairav. 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's 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 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.

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 Udutadi temple in the form of Mallikarjuna. According to A K Ramanuja, 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 Ranganath swamy 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. I quote from A K Ramanujan's translations some vacanas that reflect the harsh struggle and sublime tenor of Mahadevi's inscape.

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)

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 or 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 well being, 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 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)

Concluding his introduction to Mahadeviakka, A K 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 bhakta’s to hold their own on the 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, Mira - were harassed into crossing the thresholds of their marriages and homes 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 of life. Another aspect was the concept of ‘stridharma’ which perceived marriage, wifhood and motherhood as a woman’s prime and ultimate goal and was prescribed by authoritative texts like Manusmriti and the Dharmashastra.

COMPARISON & CONCLUSION

The ascetic's life for women was also a ticket to freedom from the trappings of gender roles and emotional stereotype. 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 the nude in a cave till the end of her life. The ascetic's life, can we say although it hugely challenged the women, but also brought them freedom and a self reliance that powered?

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 Mahadeviakka'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 A K 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." One is grateful to A K Ramanujan for acknowledging (even in passing) the uniqueness of the bhakti context for the women bhakta. It needs to be reiterated here (with more emphasis however) that Bhakti for women was a path ridden with severe social stigma, issues of marital and familial rejection, psychological and emotional abuse which translated into issues of severe physical, mental and existential stress – even with reference to saint personalities, these are daunting contexts that need due acknowledgement, and appreciation.

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