

“LEGACY OF WOMEN TO BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN TAMILNADU”

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An important aspect of social movements in India has been to seek solutions to social problems in the religious sphere Buddhism was the first major experience of such adventure and Bhakti movement may be considered a continuation of such a tradition. The Bhakti movement, which moved in continuing waves from one region to another, is known to have played a crucial role in shaping social, cultural and religious life of people of all religions of the subcontinent. It spread on an all India scale under the leadership of great religious teachers like Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka and Chaitanya and also saints like Ramanada, Kabir, Nanak, Tulsi, Janadeva, Namdeva Tukaram and Ramdas. This paper attempt to bring out a brief account of the contribution of Women to the Bhakti movement in Tamilnadu.

The Bhaktas proclaimed that God could be worshipped not only through Janana and Karma but also through Bhakti. They maintained that one who was a devotee of God could achieve salvation through worshipping God directly. Unity with God could be achieved without the help of knowledge which was the exclusive domain of the Brahmins. Bhakti implies a pure and sincere love for God and therefore, there is neither any need for ceremonies nor a priestly class for uniting mortals with God.

There are many forms of Bhakti though we speak of it in the singular. Bhakti directed towards Siva, Vishnu, or the Devi Bhakti by men and women, Bhakti in Tamilnadu and in Karnataka, early Bhakti and later Bhakti-all are different from one another.

With the method of approaching God through Bhakti women could also worship God and attain Moksha. Such a right conceded to women made it possible for them to achieve freedom from the cycle and torment of rebirth, the cardinal conception of Hindu Philosophy. It was only because of the crusade of the Bhaktas to secure this right of freedom of direct worship of God and thereby attain salvation for women, that galaxy of women

saints appeared in the Hindu social world, during the various phases of the Bhakti movement. In every province of India, women saints leading a life of deep devotion to God emerged. Incidentally, these women saints were also great poets whom India produced in her history. During this period of the dominance of the Bhakti movement women, married and unmarried, beautiful as well as homely – all women in fact, secured the opportunity to propitiate the deity, and expressed their boundless love to God in literary creation.

However, the specific social dimensions of the lives and work of women Bhaktas have by and large, been neglected by scholars. In most cultures and for most of history, women's creativity has generally been combined to contain limited spheres. Their poetic compositions have tended to be in the oral traditions, generally anonymous while in written traditions women have in most cultures been vastly outnumbered by men. However, the Bhakti traditions in many regions of the country, through an amalgam of the written and the oral preserved not only their compositions but also their names and life sketches of many women Bhaktas. While some of their poetry has been incorporated into established literary tradition much has survived on the lips of the people.

Most of the women Bhaktas are not popular in their regions. Even in their region their memories are kept alive mostly by members of certain religious sects. Very little scholarly research has been done on the lives and work of these women, even in their own language. The heritage has been kept alive more by ordinary people than by the formally educated of today.

So a study of these women and the legends surrounding each of them, testifies not only to their creativity but also their joyous exploration of their own truth, even when this involved radical departure from the life legislated for most women. The focus of attention on the paper is to understand and interpret the life and work of women saints in Tamilnadu.

Every regional Bhakti movement, particularly in Tamilnadu, has at least one outstanding woman in it. She is usually considered on par with and often superior to men, both in devotion and poetical works. We will draw in particular the accounts of Andal, Avvaiyar, Karaikalammaiyar and their Bhakti experience and the powerful social and cultural legacy they left for us.

The first wave of bhakti movement began in Tamil around the fifth or sixth century A.D till then all religious composition was in Sanskrit or Pali. Sanskrit is a father tongue to Hindus. It is the tongue of the father figures, the Brahmins, the patriarchs and the elderly men of the community. Quite a few women must have known Sanskrit but they were generally not encouraged to learn it. We cannot find any religious poetry in Tamil

till the fifth century. It was only around 550 A.D that the first lengthy Bhakti poem to Murugan was composed in Tamil.

From sixth century onwards there was a flowering of Tamil poetry for some three centuries devoted to both Siva and Vishnu. And it continues to be a living tradition to this day-people still recite these poems, sing them in temples, processions, and in concerts, and also compose new ones.

The earliest of the four women saints in South India that we will focus on is Avvaiyar. The society in which she lived is identified in Tamilnadu history of the Sangam period during which time a number of renowned poets flourished. There is a fairly well established tradition of many Avvaiyar associated with Tamil literature. Another theory is that she lived during the rule of Cheraman Perumal, the eighth century king. Yet another theory is that she was a contemporary of Kamban, the twelfth century poet who wrote the Tamil Ramayana. These conflicting theories have helped in perpetuating the legend that she lived for many centuries.

The earliest Avvai lived in the Sangam age and the legend associated with her birth is important. She was the offspring of an outcaste woman called Athi and a Brahman named Pagavan. According to a popular legend, when Pagavan was still a baby his father discovered, through the child's horoscope, that he would someday marry a low caste girl. Horrified at such a prospect, that father left home on a pilgrimage. The mother then tended carefully to the child's education and the boy grew up to be fine specimen of a learned Brahmin. At this stage Pagavan discovered why his father had left his mother and equally concerned at the prediction he too left home on a pilgrimage.

On his way he came across a low caste girl. Angry at the girl's intrusion into the place where he was cooking, he threw a stone at the girl's head. The crying girl hastily scurried off to her adopted father, a Brahmin, who lived in the neighboring village, and Pagavan proceeded on his pilgrimage. By the time he returned the low caste girl had grown into a beautiful woman. Pagavan was quite willing to accept the Brahmin father's proposal but as the marriage ritual was being completed Pagavan realized that the girl she was betrothing himself to be actually the low caste girl had encountered earlier. He then tried to run away from the scene but was persuaded to accept the woman which he did on condition that he would abandon children was Avvaiyar. Three boys and three girls were similarly abandoned. Each of the seven abandoned children was adopted by different families. Avvai was adopted by a family of Panars, whose traditional vocation was to sing, especially in praise of the king.

When Avvaiyar was still a small child she started her parents by completing half finished compositions, thus exhibiting a wisdom far beyond her age. When she grew up to womanhood marriage was proposed. Avvai was dismayed and her girlhood friends expressed. The inevitable dilemma of a woman who was immersed in her devotion to God. How could one serve the lord and a husband at the same time Realising that her beauty is an obstacle that will prevent her from fulfilling her divine desire, Avvai seeks and is granted the boon of the loss of her youthful good looks. Transformed into a middle aged, grey haired woman, she then sets out her life-long travels.

For the rest of her life her journey took her through the kingdoms of the Cholas the Pandyas and the Cheras, the three Kingdoms mentioned in the Sangam literature. One of her special compositions was *curlyaccupadi* or 'she sang for a meal'

In the course of her life as a woman of wisdom, Avvai is said to have composed thirteen books including one on Materia Medica, one a Pangyric on a wealthy merchant, and one on Metaphysics. The remaining ten works are collections of ethical sayings. One of them the Atti-Chudi, contains 108 maxims which at the same time teaches the Tamil alphabet. From her own statements it is clear that Avvai, famed for her wisdom, placed learning above everything else. Invoking Vinayaka's blessings, Avvai asked for proficiency in the threefold classical Tamil. In consonance with other poets she was critical of the rigid social divisions. Accordingly, she wrote "there are on earth only two castes, those who give (alms) are noble and those who do not give, are low" The attachment to form also received her attention. On one occasion a temple priest rebuked her for stretching her feet towards the idol. Avvai's sharp retort was to ask in which direction God was not present so that she might stretch her feet in that direction.

Her attitude to women however, was conventional as indicated in this statement, "Moderation in food is an ornament to women" or "The home is truly blessed in all, where wife obeys her duty's call" or "Womanhood by chastity becomes admirable" Good wives who are loyal to their husbands, have great powers because, they caused the reins to fall in Avvai's view. The ethics of a household is clearly based on the good wife as its focal point.

The striking feature of Avvai's own life, however, was her association generally with kings, chieftains, and secular power. Her skills in this area were considerable since she was deputed by her patron, the chieftain Athiyaman, as an emissary to the court of Tondaiman of Kanchipuram. According to tradition she once addressed the three crowned heads of the Tamil Country and advised them to do well.

After the death of her patron Athiyaman (who according to tradition, was also her brother) Avvaiyar wandered all over the Tamil region. She herself had received the Nelli fruit which gave her immortality from Athiyaman, who in turn had procured it especially for her from an in accessible place. The chieftains vied with each other to hold her down to their respective kingdoms but she refused to be bound thus, saying “I hated youth and accepted old age. Is it right find me in one place?”

In the course of her travels she met her brother Tiruvalluvar and helped him gain access to the prestigious Snagam or gathering of poets at Madurai. She lived the life of a wandering minstrel for 240 years and then voluntarily retired from the earth. On one of her last sojourns Muruga appeared to her as a young boy and made her aware that despite her deep knowledge, her learning was only a drop in the ocean and that she had yet to learn much. She then attained Mahaprasthanagamana and ascended to heaven.

Avvaiyar is the most popular of the classical Tamil poets. Her poems are read by young children- the first thing a Tamil child reads in her Aathi-Chudi or alphabet aphorisms. She is also read by scholars of classics of the highest rank. Simplicity of expression and terseness are the characteristic feature of her verse. Thus, the place that Avvaiyar wrenches for herself is not just one where she can create beautiful songs, expressing her devotion to god but also includes the right to teach, to formulate a code of ethics to assume a position of authority over men.

In second phase of Tamil literature (C.600A.D) an important contribution was made by Karaikalammaiyar a devotee of Siva. She was born, according to the Periapuranam, in the famous seaport town of Karaikal inhabited by wealthy merchants. One such merchant named Danadattan performed great austerities and was blessed with a beautiful daughter whom she named Punitavati meaning the immaculate one. From her earliest days she was deeply devoted to Siva, the study of religious literature and to the services of Bhaktas when Punitavatti reached marriageable age. She was married to a young man from Nagapattinam but since her parents were reluctant to be parted from her the husband was persuaded to reside to Karaikal.

Early in the marriage, Punitavathi’s absolute devotion to god was tested when they gave away one of the two choice of man - goes sent home by her husband, for his own consumption to an aged Bhakta since she had not yet cooked the midday meal. At lunch, the husband having eaten the tasty mango asked for the second one also. Punitavathi was unable to reveal what had become of it and went in as if to fetch it. Her distressed mind automatically sought the feet of Siva, who came to her rescue and Punitavathi found a ripe mango in her hand. She served this to her husband but he at once noted its unique sweetness and sought an explanation from Punitavathi who revealed the truth, Unconvinced by her explanation, her husband mockingly proceeded to test he

powers. As Punitavathi provided him with a demonstration by producing yet another mango, he was shocked by her awesome display obviously a mere house wife could not possess such powers.

Overawed, and deeply perturbed by his wife's supernatural powers and convinced that she was no 'ordinary' woman he left home at the earliest opportunity without informing anyone seeking an ordinary existence elsewhere. He married and named his daughter after his former wife. Punitavathi's family at last discovered his whereabouts and took her to him but her husband fell at her feet and proclaimed that she was no ordinary woman. Immediately, Punitavathi prayed to Siva, telling him that her husband needed nothing from her, and since his words had released her she now no longer needed her beauty. She besought the lord to transform her into a demon who could thenceforth "stand by god in prayer like the ghouls who worship at Siva's dancing feet in the cremation ground. "Siva fulfilled her wish and the beautiful Punitavathi was metamorphosed into the grotesque figure, thenceforth known as Karaikalammaiyar.

As she moved about in her new form, the world fled from her presence. No longer encumbered by the weight of her flesh (and beauty of form) she promptly set out to mount Kailash, the abode of Siva and Uma. Apprehensive of defiling the holy ground with her feet, she is said to have walked on her hands into the presence of the lord, a strange scene depicted on many stone reliefs. Even Uma who had undergone great austerities to gain Siva as a husband, marveled at Karaikalammaiyar's devotion. Siva welcomed her with love and understanding and she responded delightedly. Addressing him as father. She then begged Siva for an end to rebirth and also requested that, in her present birth she might sing his praises and find her sole refuge at his feet the lord directed her to go Tiruvalankadu, the sacred banyan forest, where she could see his Tandava. After many days of waiting, the lord appeared to her there and danced the Tandava with her under his feet while her songs resounded in the forest. A selection of her verses in the Arputha Thiru Anthai, composed at Alavankadu, provides an insight into the essence of her devotion and the range of her emotions.

Karaikalammaiyar's Alavankadu poems are not set to music nor are they chanted in temples: they were too strange and forbidding for inclusion in the normal world of worship. But her unique experience has left a tremendous impact upon the average devotee who could not but be fascinated by the awesomeness of a devotion that led her to reject the beauty of the female body and the external environment, both of which were unnecessary to her in experiencing the presence of the lord.

Emotional Krishna Bhakti seems to have originated with the Alvars, the Vaishnava saints of South India, and the Nayanmars, the Shaiva Bhaktas, from seventh century onwards. Andal, who probably lived in the Ninth

century A.D, is the only woman among the alvars. The word Andal (she who rules) is the feminine form of Alvar (he who rules). According to the legend Andal lived for 16 years only.

Andal's origin was mysterious as she appeared in the 'Tulsi' bushes and was brought up by a bachelor saint named Periyalvar who was priest in a temple at Srivilliputtur. She was named Kodai which means 'flower garland' As the daughter of a temple priest, she used to weave a garland every day for the image of the presiding deity, Vishnu. As a little girl, Kodai would wear the garland herself before it was offered to the deity. One day Periyalvar happened to see her wearing the garland and looking at herself in the mirror. He did not offer the garland to God that day, thinking that it would be a sacrilege to do so. It is believed that God then appeared to Periyalvar in a dream and expressed his desire to wear the garland worn by Kodai. Overwhelmed with joy, Periyalvar called Kodai Andal from that day. She is also known as *Chudikkodutha Nachiyar* or 'she who offered the garland to God after having worn it'.

In remembrance of Andal's legendary gesture, even today a garland offered to her image at the temple in her home-town Srivilliputtur is taken to the famous Triupati temple on the occasion of Venkatesa's wedding festival and to Madurai every year in the Tamil month of Chithirai (April _ May) to adorn the deity there.

The legend continues that Andal, as she grew up refused to be married to anyone but Vishnu for whom she was already expressing her love thought in an unorthodox manner was perfectly acceptable to the lord. When she was Srirangam temple where she is believed to have been absorbed into the stone image of Vishnu. Andal has come to be regarded as Bhudevi, the consort of Vishnu.

Andal composed two poetic works, one the famous 30 stanza sonnet Tiruppavai representing her girlhood sentiments for Krishna. Tiruppavai means 'the song for pavai (doll). Here it refers to a sand image of the goddess fashioned by young girls on the river bank early each morning, as part of a religious observance which probably originated in connection with fertility. The ritual performed every day in the Tamil month of Margazhi (December – January) by fasting girls, is supposed to bring abundant rains to the land and good husbands to the girls. The Nachiyar thirumozhi contain a total of 143 sentences where Andal expresses her feelings for the lord in explicitly erotic terms. It is much less known probably because of its frank use of sexual imagery. This work has now been marginalized, except for a section that describes Andal's dreams of her marriage with the lord which has been incorporated in the marriage rituals of the Srivaishnavites.

The status of Vishnu's consort Bhudevi has been conferred upon Andal in Tamil Vaishnava tradition. Paintings frequently depict her as a young and beautiful woman, holding a parrot, standing Vishnu's right hand. In many temples, her image is installed along with him. Thus, the name Andal may be said to have become appropriate in her.

These woman poets are among the moulders of modern Indian languages. Through their work. They helped make the vernaculars more flexible, suitable for expression ranging from proverbial wisdom to complex philosophical thought. Most of the regional languages. Boast of one or more eminent women bhakti poets whose work became an essential component in the growth of contemporary language.

The Bhaktas asserted equality of all souls before God, regardless of caste and status, even indicating that high status and wealth were impediments in finding oneness with God. They emphasised love as much more important than knowledge gained from books, asserting self realisation as accessible even to the lowliest, and denounced the pride and self righteousness of religious and other authority figures. Through bhakti, women also retrieved some of the ground they had lost in the Brahmanical ritual order (because of pollution, taboos, for example) and in the Brahminical social order, because of their circumscribed role within the household. In Bhakti, they found the space to break through both these barriers in enabled women to recite the lord's name even during menstruation and it enabled women to deny the bonds of marriage itself. A respectable woman is not, for instance, allowed to live by herself or outdoors or refuse sex to her husband – but women saints wander and travel alone giving up husband, children and family. The vast majority of women bhakta poets in one way or other opted out of married and domestic life and remained childless. The escape from an earthly marriage in the case of our four 'Bhaktin's also gave them an escape from the social obligation of being female. With no other ties, the Bhaktins could be completely immersed in their devotion. Further the bhaktins escaped widowhood, with its attendant misery. The desire of the Bhaktin's for a marriage with God might even be considered a search for the permanent status of a sumangali the only woman who was treated as being whole for ritual purposes. Sumangali here should not be seen merely as a married woman but as a completed self hood denied to widows. The bhaktin used her devotion as an armour and God as her supporter in her resistance against the priest and the husband.

Thus, "with god's help" by appropriation of God to herself the woman bhakta negotiates that social space for herself which is not available to another women she finds a new community and sets out on her divine quest.

Thus, these women contributed to building a culture where in women who demonstrate an ability to stand steadfast to their chosen ideals are not made objects of derision but are given special respect, even homage. This

is true even when they choose to opt out of marriage in an otherwise marriage obsessed culture. They have left a powerful legacy for us. This legacy constitutes a living tradition even today. Not only in the sense that their compositions are an integral part of popular culture in their regions but also because they are remembered and revered for having stood by their chosen ideals in defiance of prevalent social norms.

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