THERE are many kinds of bhakti, though we speak of it in the singular. The variety is immense and we ought to attend to it. Bhakti focused on Shiva, Vishnu, or the Devi, bhakti by men and by women, bhakti in Bengal and bhakti in Karnataka, early bhakti and late — they are all different from each other. We need new studies of these differences. I know something about one or two of these traditions and my remarks will be limited to them and biased by them. For reasons of space, I’ll cite examples only from the Kannada Virashaivas. I also happen to know a little more about the poetry than about other important aspects of these movements. Your readers might supply examples and counterexamples from their own regions and languages.

One way of looking at bhakti movements is to see them as a countersystem, opposed to classical and orthodox systems, say, in their views about caste, gender, or the idea of god. For

Talking to God in the Mother Tongue

A.K. Ramanujan

This began as a taperecorded conversation with Madhu Kishwar, and was given shape by A.K. Ramanujan
instance, the Vedic gods were not localised, but in bhakti they are worshipped in local forms in temples. The gods are given families, complexions, individual temperaments. They are as human as they are divine. To take another instance, no woman or untouchable has left a major body of literary work in the early periods. In bhakti movements, they come into their own as major saints and poets.

The first bhakti movements began in Tamil around the fifth or sixth century. Till then all religious composition is in Sanskrit (or Pali, etc.). Sanskrit is a father tongue to Hindus. It is the tongue of the father figures, the Brahmins, the patriarchs, the male elders of the community. Quite a few women must have known Sanskrit (judging from legends and the poetry) but generally they were not supposed to know it. We cannot find any religious poetry in a mother tongue like Tamil till the fifth century — only secular poetry. Some of the best love poetry and war poetry of the world, I think, was composed in Tamil in the first two or three centuries of our common era. It is only around 550 AD that the first long bhakti poem (to Murugan) was composed in Tamil.

Now the moment god begins to be addressed in the mother tongue, the language of children and the family, all sorts of human emotional experiences become relevant to religion. All the family relationships become part of the bhakti repertoire. God becomes a mother, a father, a child, a lover — not just a lord and master.

From the sixth century on, in Tamil, there was a flowering of such poetry for some three centuries, devoted to both Shiva and to Vishnu. And it continues to be a living tradition to this day — people still sing these poems, use them in temples, processions, and in concerts, and even compose new ones.

Bhakti movements started in Tamil around the sixth century, maybe because at that time Sanskrit and Tamil were the only classical literary languages. And Tamil was the only mother tongue with a long tradition of literature in it at the time. All the other languages were still dialects with oral traditions. The next great bhakti compositions were in Kannada, written around the tenth century. Bhakti is like a fuse that is lit — moving from region to region, language to language, as the dialects acquire written literary forms. It spreads from Tamil to Kannada to Marathi and Hindi, and to other northern regions. We need to know more about the details of these contacts and this pan-Indian web of connections. Our knowledge (even our dating) is still rather rough for these historic events of our social and ideological history.

Bhakti movements are also social movements. We should not forget that here all sorts of crucial human experiences are cast in a religious idiom. In bhakti, “a man is a man for all that,” and women are very much a part of the scene. Feelings are more important than learning, status, and privilege. In fact, status, panditry, even maleness and the pride that goes with such things are seen as obstacles to a true experience of god. Once such a position is taken, anyone at all is qualified to experience god. To be human is to be qualified.

The early bhaktas, however, do not necessarily come from the lowest or poorest classes, though caste and wealth come under attack. Many are Brahmins, merchants, kings. For, revolutionaries need certain preconditions — a certain leisure, a certain freedom to be concerned with more than food and shelter, and the security to throw away security. You can’t throw away privilege unless you have the privilege to begin with. And they become the voices of the lowly and the voiceless, though soon a few of the latter seem to find their own voices. Bhakti movements may not begin with the poor and the lowly but soon begin to enlist people from all castes and occupations.

Some of the most famous women saints also come from the upper classes — like Mahadevi and Mira. And they all tend to overthrow the privileges of their background.

Every regional bhakti movement, particularly in the south, has at least one outstanding woman in it. She is usually considered on par with, and often superior to the men, both in her devotion and in her poetry. In the Kannada Virashaiva movement, nearly 60 of the 300 saints (in a compendium I consulted) are women. These are not anonymous; they have legends and places associated with them, and many have left behind them bodies of poetry. The most famous of them is Mahadeviyakka. Nearly a thousand poems are attributed to her.

In such a bhakti tradition, to be male is not to be specially privileged. This may be simply a variation of the idea that in the eyes of god, the last shall be the first. Or it may spring from the idea that being male, like other kinds of privilege, is an obstacle in spiritual experience, in attaining true inwardness.

Power entails the seeking of more power; power and privilege need defences. Men have to overcome the temptation for this kind of seeking. They have to throw away their defences. One of the last things they overcome, in these traditions, is maleness itself. The male saints wish to become women; they wish to drop their very maleness, their machismo. Saints then
become a kind of third gender. The lines between male and female are crossed and recrossed in their lives.

Dasimayya says:

If they see breasts and long hair coming they call it woman,
if beard and whiskers they call it man:
but, look, the self that hovers in between
is neither man nor woman
O Ramanatha

Freud said that anatomy is destiny. Dasimayya’s poem says the opposite. Anatomy doesn’t bind the spirit of either male or female. Only culture constructs gender roles, makes male and female into masculine and feminine, restricts attainments in art, society, knowledge, or things of the spirit. In poems such as these, a woman is not thought of as psychologically or spiritually different from a man, though she may be socially different, thanks to the culture of the time and place.

In the bhakti movements, women take on qualities that men traditionally have. They break the rules of Manu that forbid them to do so. 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, give up husband, children, and family.

I love the Handsome One:
he has no death
decay nor form
no place or side
no end nor birthmarks.
I love him O mother. Listen.
I love the Beautiful One
with no bond nor fear
no clan no land
no landmarks
for his beauty.
So my lord, white as jasmine, is my husband.
Take these husbands who die, decay, and feed them to your kitchen fires!
—Mahadeviyakka
(Speaking of Siva, p. 134)

As we read the poems and the lives, however, we begin to see many differences...
Reproduced from 'The Divine Consort: Rudra and the Goddesses' of India, ed. J.S. Hawley and D.M. Wallis Berkeley

Stages of Life for Women Saints

- by becoming a courtesan and being burned in her lover's arms
- through love and sacrifice
- by a sudden death in childbirth
- by becoming a woman化 as a man (Karvalakshmi)
- by walking out on her husband (Mahidevi)
- by getting initiated by a low-caste saint (Rahulihadi)
- by marrying a lower-caste saint

Further defies social norms and taboos

- by becoming a woman (Arvati)
- by becoming a widow (Tilakavi)

- by being transformed into a nun (Karvalakshmi)
- by becoming a nun (Tilakavi)

- by being transformed into a nun (Karvalakshmi)
- by being transformed into a nun (Tilakavi)

This chart presents a composite of the lives of Indian women saints. I have amused myself by presenting it as a "flow chart" of possibilities, indicating from left to right the sequence of life stages. At each stage different paths follow different options (e.g., marrying a mortal or refusing to do so); each choice leads to further choices. These options are not the same as those for a male upper-caste saint, but are often similar to those of an unmarriageable male saint, especially when marriage is not an issue. These choices deserve further inquiry. (Names in brackets are of saints whose lives illustrate specific options.)

OR

"marries" and merges with her god in a holy place (Mahadevi in Sri Lanka)

lives a long life dies an unholy death (Rahulihadi)

and goes in search of guru or god; is initiated and
initiated by a male guru (all except Cauvari);
Husband and family symbolise the world and society with their demands, enforcing values contrary to her own.

I have Maya for mother-in law, the world for father-in-law; three brothers-in-law, like tigers; and the husband’s thoughts are full of laughing women: no god, this man.
And I cannot cross the sister-in-law.
But I will give this wench the slip and go cuckold my husband with Hara, my Lord.
My mind is my maid: by her kindness, I join my Lord, my utterly beautiful Lord from the mountain-peaks, my lord white as jasmine, and I will make Him my good husband.
—Mahadeviyakka
(Speaking of Siva, p. 141)

Here, she experiences a conflict within her, her social conditioning, her world of in-laws, the laws and legitimacies that bind male and female, which have to be shattered before she can truly reach her god, her true love. In-laws and family here symbolise the world of constructs, the made world. As you know, the root ma in maya means “to construct.” It has to be seen through and broken through.

In the course of this breakthrough, which her entire life celebrates, she even throws away her clothes and goes around with her long hair covering her body. She has some wonderful poems on nakedness and modesty:

You can confiscate money in hand;
can you confiscate the body’s glory?
Or peel away every strip you wear;
but can you peel the Nothing, the Nakedness that covers and veils?
To the shameless girl wearing the White Jasmine Lord's light of morning,
you fool,
where's the need for cover and jewel?
—Mahadeviyakka
(Speaking of Siva, p. 129)

Such a throwing away of clothes is a throwing away of concessions to social conventions, defences and investments. Nakedness signifies being open to the experience of god. In the Krishna legend, he steals the women’s clothes. In the Jain tradition, a whole community values nakedness, calls itself digamba, clad in the sky and the eight directions.

When women saints like Mahadevi and Lalla Ded of Kashmir throw away clothes, they are also throwing away the attractive parts of womanhood that are sexual come-ons — of which modesty itself is one. Women saints did have to contend with the problem of sexual advances from the males around them. Modesty, like clothes, is a way of resisting and enhancing sexual curiosity, not of curbing it. It is this paradox that is exposed when clothes are thrown away.

It is also the ultimate defiance of society, the casting away of every facade, the management of appearances, and everything that separates one from others. By exposing the difference between male and female, by becoming indifferent to that difference, she is liberated from it — and liberates anyone who will attend to it.

There are many parallels between the lives of the untouchable saints and the lives of the women saints in the bhakti movements. Neither of them usually need to go through a conversion as the upper caste male saints do. Their main quarrel is not with themselves but with others who exclude them, who prevent them access to their god. Thus, the main quarrel of the untouchable saint, in one type of legend, is that he is not permitted by the Brahmans and other castes to enter the temple. Excluded and desolate in his untouchable colony his heart is still centred on his god. The god seeks him out and comes to his hut outside town. When the Brahman priest goes to the temple, he finds that the god is absent. He has to carry the...
untouchable on his shoulders to the temple in order to get back into the good
gracies of the lord.

I began my study of women saints by looking at the life of the Kannada
Virashaiva saint, Mahadeviyakka. When I
looked at the lives of women from other
bhakti traditions in India, like Bahinabai
of Maharashtra, Lalita of Kashmir, Mira of
Rajasthan, and Andal of Tamil Nadu, I
found that these lives displayed a certain
common pattern which inverted, even
subverted, the traditional ideals of
womanhood embodied in epic figures like
Sita and Savitri.

The woman saint is not typically
bound to a man. She may escape marriage
by defying her parents or by miraculously
becoming transformed into an
unmarriageable old woman like Avvai, or
into a male like Tilakavve. Among the
hundred or so women saints’ lives that I
looked at, I hardly found two who endured
a bad marriage — Lalla and Bahina. Of
these, only one, Bahina, had a child, and
she seems to have regretted it bitterly. She
transforms him in her mind, considering
him a companion of former lives. How
different that is from the traditional
stereotype of a Hindu woman!

A married woman saint tends to get rid
of her husband — by walking out on him,
as Dalayi does even while she is making
love to him when Shiva calls her, or by
terrifying him with miracles as
Karaikalammai does. If she is widowed, she
often treats her widowed status in a way
that seems to deny the reality of having
been married at all. Mira refuses to become
a sati; Gauri and Venkamma refuse to
shave their heads. It is as if she cannot be
widowed because she is really married to
god. As Mahadevi says in the poem
quoted earlier:

So my lord, white as jasmine, is my
husband.
Take these husbands who die, decay,
and feed them
to your kitchen fires!

After escaping the bonds of marriage,
the woman saint continues to live an
unconventional life, defying social norms
and taboos. She often shows up the
shallowness of a male priest or even a saint.
Yet, we must not forget that her mentor is
usually a male, and her god is a male
figure. Several of them merge with god in a
temple as Mahadeviyakka in Srisaila or
Andal in Tirumala. Very few of them seem
to die an ordinary death as Bahina does.

In these traditions, there is often
another kind of woman saint as well. She
is the saint’s wife, who often quietly
outsides him in saintliness, not by dramatic
conversion but by a sort of spontaneous
effortless closeness to god. One example
is found in the story of Purandhara-dasa’s
conversion. Lord Vitthal, disguised as a
needy Brahman, comes to Purandhara,
who is a mean merchant, and is turned
away by him. He then goes to Purandhara’s
wife and tells her he is desperately in need
of money to get his daughter married. She
has no money but she gives him her
diamond nosering. He then disguises
himself as a diamond merchant and takes
the jewel to Purandhara to sell it.
Purandhara recognises it as his wife’s and
goes home to question her. She is
astonished to find another similar jewel in
her box when he asks her for it. She knows
then that the Brahman was god himself.
When Purandhara rushes back to look for
the Brahman, he is gone, leaving behind
only a divine fragrance.

The contrast seen in bhakti traditions
between the ordinary woman, the saint’s
wife, and the woman saint who breaks
away from domestic life, deserves
attention. The one is close to god without
doing very much about it, just by her love
and devotion in daily life. For the other,
the woman saint, life is a search, restless,
dramatic (even operatic), a search outside
the bonds of family and household. This
contrast has parallels elsewhere, especially
in the contrast between the goddesses of
the classical tradition and those of the folk
tradition.

The goddesses of the classical
tradition are consorts, the wives of the
gods. They are benign and smiling,
uspicious guardians of the life cycle of
marriage and birth. Lakshmi and Parvati
are such goddesses. In the pantheon, they
are subservient to their husband gods. In
the temples, the male gods preside at the
centre, and their consorts dwell in
adjoining minor temples. Important in many
ways as they are, deemed shaktis and so
on, the goddesses are still wifely,
dependent, though every now and then
they may show their superior powers.

But in the folk traditions in south India,
every village has a goddess of a different
kind. They are virgin goddesses who defy
their husbands, kill them, even devour
them. The male here is often a subordinate
figure. Sometimes a male has deceived or
violated the woman and in reaction she
flies into a fury which gives her powers
and makes her a goddess. Such goddesses
do not descend from heaven; they are not
incarnations, avtars or ‘descents.’ They
are human beings, not consecrated, but
desecrated, who in fury become
goddesses. Their stories are stories of the
ascent of a human being to divinity, even
a demonic divinity. Anger is a major theme
in these goddess cults.

We must hasten to add a qualification.
To the extent that, in these village
traditions and in bhakti traditions,
exceptional women and their
unconventional values and deeds are
accepted, they are also contained. If they
were not accepted, they might become real
alternatives. The acceptance, the worship,
also co-opts it, takes the sting out of it.
That’s one reason why bhakti movements,
radical in their beginnings, get routinised.
They have to be constantly renewed,
reinterpreted, and rescued from the
domestication that they suffer. But they
do offer alternatives, humane and creative
ways of being and acting, to both men and
women.

Anyone who wishes to study Indian
women, listen to their voices, and find
alternative conceptions in Indian
civilisation, often startlingly different from
what one is used to in our classics, should
turn to materials like the lives and poems of
the women saints, women’s tales, songs,
riddles, games and proverbs in oral
traditions all over the country, and the
myths and cults of goddesses.