



Talking to God in the Mother Tongue

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This began as a taperecorded conversation with Madhu Kishwar, and was given shape by A.K. Ramanujan

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

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 fathertongue 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 mothertongue 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 mothertongue, 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 mothertongue 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

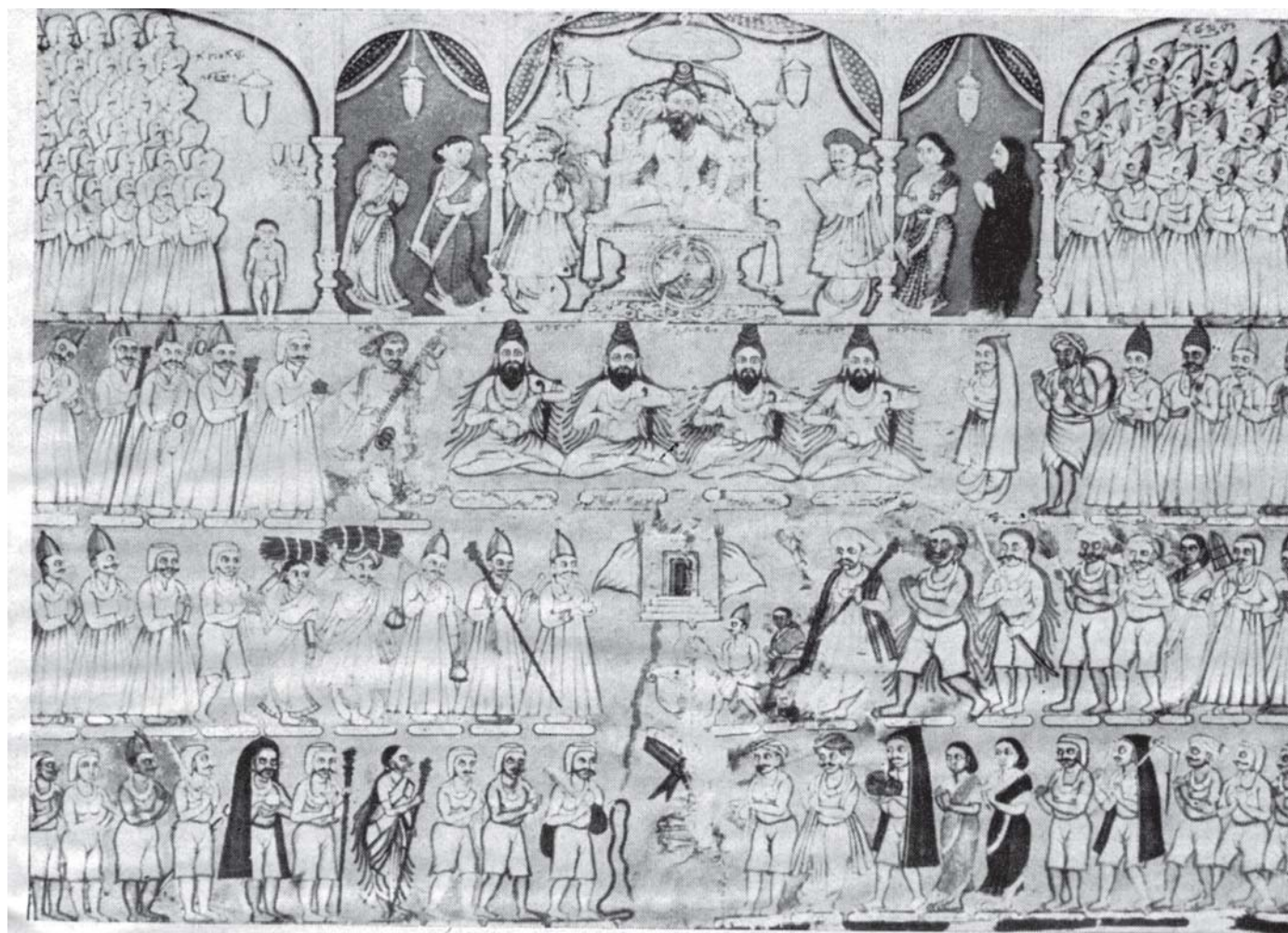
poorest classes, though caste and wealth come under attack. Many are Brahmins, merchants, kings. For, revolutionaries need certain preconditions — a certain leisure, a certain freedom to be concerned with more than food and shelter, and the security to throw away security. You can't throw away privilege 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



Painting showing devotees of the Virashaiva tradition. Mahadeviyakka is in an upper right hand alcove, dressed in the blackness of her own long hair

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

*(Speaking of Siva, translation by
A.K. Ramanujan, Penguin Books,
1973, p. 110)*

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



between male and female saints. For instance, male saints frequently go through a conversion and discover god. But the women are in love with their god from the outset. They do not have to be converted. They are already in love with god and he is the only husband they will ever recognise. They may be forced to marry a human spouse. Mahadeviyakka is forced to marry a chieftain. But she warns him not to touch her against her will. In doing this, she is going against the laws of Manu that give a husband proprietary rights. The legend goes that she told him she would leave him if he touched her three times against her will. He does so, and she leaves him.

Then she wanders, looking for kindred spirits. It is said that a poet is born twice — once into a natal family and a second time into a community of likeminded people. It is so with *bhaktas* as well — though they reject the usual rites of the twiceborn. Many of them give up a family and find a second one, rebel against an existing society to form a second one. Thus, Mahadeviyakka calls other *bhaktas* ‘father’ and ‘brothers’, and says they were the bride’s party and got her married to the lord. She herself is called *akka* or sister.

And she writes love poems to god. She says she has a lover inside and a husband outside; she cannot manage them both.

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 *digambara*, 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 Brahmins 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 graces 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 Bahinabaj of Maharashtra, Lalla 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 unmarried 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 Srirangam. 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 outdoes 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, auspicious 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, *avatars* 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. □