THE problem of the relationship of woman to god is an important aspect of understanding gender relations in any society. There is much cultural variation even within India. The need for historical investigation into its past is thus that much greater. The rich tradition of bhakti is particularly significant for women both for variations and commonalities in its social and religious implications. Here the dominant Brahmanical ritual world is attempted to be turned upside down, boundaries operating in the social world collapse, and the shackles imposed by a rigidly hierarchical social order are stretched to provide breathing space for some men and women.¹

The dissent movements of the sixth century BC had virtually accompanied the construction of a caste, class, and gender stratified social order. The question of women’s place in the search for salvation had surfaced among all religious currents but especially in the dissent movements, and attempts to resolve it had led to a plurality of situations. Buddhism, for example, was forced to concede, somewhat grudgingly, space to women and provide an institutional means for them to pursue their religious goals.² However, this accommodation had been made within the social (i.e. non-grahastha) world of the Buddhist sangha. In one sense bhakti was a continuation of this tradition but it also represented a significant departure because it collapsed the distinction between the world of the grahastha and the world of the bhikshu/sanyasi. This was another reason why the experience of bhakti was vastly different from that of Buddhism.

Our focus here will be on the experience of the bhaktins (in the widest sense) in south India. We will draw in particular on the accounts of Andal, Avvaiyar, Karaikalammaiyar and Akka Mahadevi to consider the nature of the bhakti experience and the space it provided to women to expand both their own selfhood and conventional gender and social relations; finally, we will consider the manner in which the female body shaped and impinged upon the identity of the bhaktins. Our text here will be the

The World of the Bhaktin in South Indian Traditions —The Body and Beyond

by Uma Chakravarty

Karaikalammaiyar (twelfth century bronze)
hagiographies of the women and the songs they created and passed on to us.

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 south Indian history as the Sangam period, during which time a number of major poets flourished. In the closing years of the Sangam age seven warrior chiefs are reputed to have provided sustained patronage to the povertystricken Tamil poets and earned their gratitude, as expressed in many of the compositions of the poets. The political hierarchy in the Tamil region indicates two levels, the hill chieftains and the three great Tamil kings. The Tamil poets of the Sangam age are linked to the second tier, the hill chieftains, who were hostile to the three great Tamil kings. Some of the poets, including Avvaiyar, seem to have thrown in their lot with the smaller chieftains against the mightier kings.

There is a fairly well established tradition of many Avvaiyars associated with Tamil literature and it appears that the name may be a generic term used for any elderly wise woman. The earliest of Avvais lived in the Sangam age and the legend associated with her birth is important so it is worth recounting in some detail. Avvai was the daughter of an outcaste woman called Athy and a Brahman named Pagavau. According to a popular legend, when Pagavan was still a baby his father discovered, through the child’s horoscope, that he would some day marry a low caste girl. Horrified at such a prospect, the father left home on a pilgrimage. The mother then tended carefully to the child’s education and the boy grew up to be a fine specimen of a learned Brahman. At this stage Pagavan discovered why his father had left his mother and, equally horrified 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 Brahman, who lived in the adjoining village, and Pagavan proceeded on his pilgrimage. By the time he returned the low caste girl had grown into a beautiful and unrecognisable woman. Pagavan was quite willing to accept the Brahman father’s proposal but as the marriage ritual was being completed Pagavan realised that the girl he was tying himself to was the low caste girl he had encountered earlier. He then tried to escape from the marriage but was persuaded to accept the woman which he did on the condition that she abandon each child born to them wherever they might be in their travels. The woman reluctantly consented and the first of seven such abandoned children was Avvaiyar. Three boys and three other girls were similarly abandoned. As each one was abandoned the mother wailed: “Oh, who will take care of my babe” and in each case she received a wise and encouraging answer from the infant concerned. These sayings are supposed to have survived as the “Songs of the Seven.”

Each of the seven abandoned children was adopted by a different family. Avvai was adopted by a family of Panars, whose traditional vocation was to sing, especially in praise of the king. The next child, a girl, was brought up by a washerman’s family and she too, like Avvai, distinguished herself through her poetry on ethics and was deified on her death under the title of Marriamman. Next to be abandoned was Athiyaman, the eldest of the boys. He is associated with Avvai’s life. Athiyaman was known for his patronage of the Tamil poets. The fourth child, a girl named Uruvay, was brought up by a family of toddy dealers and distinguished herself as a dancer and poetess. The fifth child was Capilar, who was brought up in a Brahman family. When he was seven, he had to be invested with the sacred thread but the assembled Brahmins refused to do so on the ground that Capilar was not born a Brahman. The boy then recited a verse in which he defined superiority in caste as being determined by good deeds. The shamed Brahmins then proceeded with the investiture. The sixth child, a girl, was named Vally and was brought up by a family of basketmakers. The last child was a boy who also came to be the most reputed of the seven children. He was brought up in a Vellala household but as the relatives objected to his presence, he was actually reared by a low caste family. This child named Tiruvalluvar composed the famous Tirukural.

When Avvaiyar was still a small child she startled her parents by completing half finished compositions, thus exhibiting a wisdom far beyond her years. When Avvai grew up to womanhood a marriage was proposed. Avvai was dismayed and her girlhood friends expressed the inevitable dilemma of a woman who was immersed in her devotion to her god: how could one serve the lord and a husband at the same time? Avvaiyar resolved the dilemma of young womanhood by seeking a drastic solution in order to avoid marriage: she sought an end to her youth and beauty. In her own words she stated the problem to Ganesh thus:

Should I marry and experience family life?
Why did you give me this charm and beauty?
Only good things should emanate from my lips
Grant me the boon of birthlessness...

Immediately, Avvai was transformed into an old woman and was thus released from the requirement of marriage. As she adopted the life of a wandering teacher she told the assembled people that she
was not meant for family life; just as her adopted mother had looked after her in her orphaned state, she too must do the same for her people.

Avvai now began to wend her way up and down the land, travelling all alone even at night, going far beyond the limitations of a minstrel expected to sing praises of the king, scattering the gems of her aged wisdom as she went about. One of her special titles was curlyuccapadi or “she who sang for a meal.” Her forte was education, particularly of the young.

In the course of her career as a woman of wisdom, Avvai is said to have composed 13 books, including one on materia medica, one a panegyric on a wealthy merchant, and one on metaphysics. The remaining 10 works are collections of ethical sayings. One of them, the Atti-Choodi, contains 108 maxims which at the same time teach 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 her mixed background, Avvai, along with other poets, was critical of rigid social divisions. Accordingly, she wrote: “There are on earth only two castes, those who give (alms) are noble, 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 response was to ask in which direction god was not meant for family life; just as her adopted mother had looked after her in her orphaned state, she too must do the same for her people.

Avvai’s own life, however, was her association with kings, chieftains and secular power, generally. 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 good. The good protective heroic king was a very important theme in her poetry as is evident in one of her poems on Athiyaman (Anci):

...And, man of many spears, is at battle...  
He has the strength to protect and care though the times are troubled  
Bless him, his works.

Similarly, Avvai says:

My king, when rich, freely gives food away  
When poor, he messes with his men  
He is the head of the family of the poor  
Yet great is he with his sharp pointed spear

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 had procured it for her from an inaccessible place. The chieftains vied with each other to hold her down to their kingdoms but she refused to be bound thus, saying: “I hated youth and accepted old age. Is it right to bind me in one place?”

In the course of her travels, she met her brother Tiruvalluvar and helped him gain access to the prestigious Sangam 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 much yet to learn. She then made her mahaprasthanagamana and ascended to heaven.

Tradition associated with the life of Avvai’s brother Tiruvalluvar is significant as a counterpoint to Avvai’s life. While the two shared a common parentage and expressed themselves essentially as poets of an ethical code, their careers were vastly different. Reared by a low caste family, Tiruvalluvar took to weaving when he grew up and was a firm advocate of the virtues of a domestic life, especially if one could find a virtuous wife. Luckily for him, he found an ideal wife in Vasuki who was the embodiment of all that was required to help a man in the householder’s life. To ensure a perfect arrangement Tiruvalluvar put Vasuki through a test which, in legend, is a common test for brides: he promised to marry her if she could take sand and make it into rice for him. Vasuki took the sand, feeling sure that what Valluvar ordained must be possible, and having power with the gods, succeeded in bringing him the rice he wanted. Having passed the test she became his faithful and obedient spouse.

To those who were confused about the relative merits of the domestic life vis-à-vis the life of an ascetic, Tiruvalluvar provided a demonstration of which was
superior. One such enquirer watched a display of a series of instances in which Vasuki provided evidence of unflinching devotion and unquestioning obedience. The enquirer then understood that “where such a wife is found domestic life is the best. Where such a wife is not, the life of an ascetic is to be preferred.”

In such an idealised domestic setting, Tiruvalluvar composed an ethical treatise for the good of the world, focusing on virtue, wealth and pleasure. Persuaded by his friends to present the treatise at the Sangam of learned poets, he left Vasuki at home and wended his way to Madurai. On the way, he met Avvai who accompanied him. Together, he, Avvai and another young poet humbled the conceit of established poets. It was here that Tiruvalluvar presented the Tirukural, a work considered the perfect code of morals for the universal man as well as for the State. It propounds an ideal monarchy, with ideal householders and true ascetics. The householder leads a virtuous life doing his duty to every living being and to his ancestors. His wife, the glory of his home, is modest, frugal, adores her husband, and is the guardian of his house’s fame.

Having established his work, he returned to the adulation of his townsmen and resumed his homely life of “exemplary virtue” with Vasuki. The virtuous Vasuki had, however, silently carried within her, from the day of her marriage, a question which revealed itself in her eyes as she lay on her deathbed. Tiruvalluvar noticed her expression, sought the unspoken question and then gave her the explanation for an action she had performed for her husband every day in her life without knowing why it was to be done. He had asked her, on their wedding day, always to give him a needle and a glass of water with each meal. This was so that he could use the needle to pick up a grain of rice if it fell, and drink the water before the meal so as to eat in moderation. Satisfied, with the answer, she confidently went to heaven. That night Valluvar recorded his recognition of Vasuki:

*Sweet as my daily food! O full of love! O wife*

Obedient even to my word! Chafing
my feet,
The last to sleep, the first to rise, O
gentle one!
By night henceforth, what slumbers to
mine eyes?

He then buried her “sacred” body in the sitting posture, a practice normally associated with ascetics. Tiruvalluvar survived his wife for many years and continued to perform many glorious deeds before he too passed away.

The biographies of Avvai and Tiruvalluvar provide an interesting contrast, in that Avvai cannot reconcile a wifely role with that of a wandering teacher, cannot reconcile devotion to a cause with service to the husband. In Tiruvalluvar’s case, there is no need to reconcile anything; indeed, his stable sagely existence is predicated upon the unqualified devotion he is given by his wife. There is also a contrast between Avvai and Vasuki, between the woman who has moral authority outside the home and the woman whose moral virtue within the home releases the creative potential of the greatest sage of his time.

In the second phase of Tamil literature (c. 600 AD) an important contribution was made by Karaikalammayi, a devotee of Shiva. Karaikalammayi is not known outside the Tamil area, but within it she has left an enduring imprint, some of which is visible even today in the many images of Shiva. She composed a long poem of 100 verses titled *Arputha Thiru Anthathi* expressing her devotion to Shiva, a work which is considered capable of moving people to tears.

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 he named Punitavati, meaning the immaculate one. From her earliest days, she was deeply devoted to Shiva, the study of religious literature and the service of bhaktas. When Punitavati 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 in Karaikal.

Early in the marriage, Punitavati’s absolute devotion to her god was tested when she gave away one of the two choice mangoes sent home by her husband, for his own consumption, to an aged bhakta, since she had not yet cooked the midday meal. At lunch time, the husband, having eaten the tasty mango served to him, asked for the second one also. Punitavati 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 Shiva, who came to her rescue, and Punitavati found a ripe mango in her hand. She served this for her husband but he noted at once its unique sweetness and sought an explanation from Punitavati, who revealed the truth to him. Unconvinced by her explanation the husband mockingly proceeded to test her powers. As Punitavati provided him with a demonstration by producing yet another
mango, he became terrified of her awesome display; obviously a mere housewife could not possess such powers, in his view.

Overawed and deeply perturbed by his wife’s supernatural powers and convinced that she was no “ordinary” woman, he left home without informing anyone, at the earliest opportunity, to seek an ordinary existence elsewhere. He remarried and named his daughter after his former wife. Punitavati’s family at last discovered his whereabouts and took her to him, but the husband fell at her feet and proclaimed that she was no ordinary woman. Immediately, Punitavati prayed to Shiva, telling him that her husband needed nothing more from her, and since his words had released her, she now no longer needed her beauty of form. She besought the lord to transform her into a demoness who could thenceforth “stand by God in prayer” like the ghouls who worship at Shiva’s dancing feet in the burning grounds. Shiva fulfilled her wish and the beautiful Punitavati was metamorphosed into the emaciated 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 immediately made a trip to mount Kailash, the abode of Shiva and Uma. Hesitating to defile 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 been through great austerities to gain Shiva as a husband, marveled at Karaikalammaiyar’s devotion. Shiva welcomed her with love and understanding and she responded delightedly, addressing him as Appa (father). She then begged Shiva 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 to 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 Anthati, composed at Alavankadu, provides an insight into the essence of her devotion and the range of her emotions:

Ever since I learnt to lisp after my birth
My love to thee has increased, I reached thy feet,
Of God of Gods, with throat of shining blue,
When wilt thou rid me of my pain?
Even to seven births am I his slave
Ever my love is fixed on him, naught else,
To Him whose coral braids are covered with buds,
And to none else shall my service be due.
My father own so sweet to me, my lord,
Him I treasured in my heart always.
Him as my lord I owned and owning him
My heart rejoiced.

Visualising the beautiful dancing of Shiva at Alavankadu Karaika-lammayar sang:

The ground is damp with liquid marrow
Skeletal ghouls with sunken eyes jostle and elbow looking furtively around them
Identifying herself with the ghouls who inhabit the cremation ground she signs herself Karaikal pey (ghoul):

Sagging breasts and swollen veins protruding eyes, bare white teeth.
Skeletal legs and knobbly knees has this female pey
She lingers, weeps and wails
and wanders aimless in the forest—
There, holding fire but cool of limbs
with matted hair in all directions
Shiva dances his cosmic dance —
this forest
this sacred Alankadu
is the home of our supreme lord?

Karaikalammaiyār’s Alankadu poems are not set to music nor are they chanted in temples;38 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 feeling the presence of the lord.

The stories of Akka Mahadevi and Andal are being carried else-where in this issue. We shall only highlight aspects which are relevant to this article.

Andal’s origins were mysterious as she appeared in the tulsi bushes and was brought up by a bachelor saint named Periyalvar who was a priest in a temple. When she grew up she refused to be married to anyone but Vishnu for whom she was already expressing her love in an unorthodox manner which was perfectly acceptable to the lord (see page 34-38). When she was 16, her father escorted her to the Srirangam temple, where Andal was married to Vishnu, and then immediately mysteriously absorbed into a stone replica of her beloved.

Andal composed two poetic works, one the famous Tiruppavai representing her girlhood sentiments for Krishna. This work has been incorporated into Vaišnav temple rituals. The Nachiyar Tirumozhi, on the other hand, is a less known work, where Andal expresses her feelings for the lord in more explicitly erotic terms.39 This work has now been marginalised, except for a section that describes Andal’s dream of her marriage with the lord, which has been incorporated in the marriage rituals of the Sri Vaishnavites. Andal has come to be regarded as Bhudevi, consort of Vishnu.40

Akka Mahadevi was a great devotee of Shiva and was initiated into worship at a very early age by an unknown guru. This, for Akka Mahadevi, was the real moment of her birth. When she grew up into a beautiful young woman, the chieftain of the land, named Kaushika, saw her and fell in love with her. He was an unbeliever but he managed to become her husband, partly through a show of force. The use of coercion and the attempt to subjugate her will appears to have been a continuing feature of this unsatisfactory marriage, since Akka Mahadevi set conditions on Kaushika’s relations with her. Kaushika comes through in the narrative as the archetype of a sensual man. Matters came to a head when Akka Mahadevi threatened to leave him if he forced himself on her, and actually walked out on him when he persisted in violating her.41

Akka Mahadevi’s future life was consistent with her spirited rejection of existing marital relations. Throwing away her clothing, she braved unwanted male attention as she began her religious wanderings, until she finally found kindred spirits amongst a company of saints. It was these saints who ultimately helped her consummate her love for Shiva by arranging her real marriage, a marriage of her choice, to him. She died in her early twenties, becoming one with Shiva at Srisaila.42

A reading of the lives and of the poetry of the south Indian bhaktins reveals a difference between the experience of bhakti for the bhakta and the bhaktin in the arena of marriage. An important dimension of the bhakti movement, as we had stated earlier, had been the breakdown of the householder and renouncer divide that had been an inherent aspect of the earlier dissent movement against Brahmanism. In the bhakti movement, there was no contradiction in the pursuit of bhakti and the life of the grahashta. In practice, however, the collapsing of such a boundary operated only in the case of men. For women, the dichotomy persisted and the tension between marriage and devotion to a personal god was never success-fully resolved. All the bhaktins negotiated the institution of marriage in some way or the other. We have no equivalent among the bhaktins of the normal male bhakta, of someone like Tiruvalluvar, for example, who was a great devotee and a good householder at the same time.

Thus, all bhaktins protest marriage to a mortal man; some then end up marrying
the god of their choice. In an extreme situation, a bhaktin like Andal might even threaten self extinction if forced into marriage with a mortal man.

The problem posed by marriage in the case of women saints is articulated very early in the south Indian tradition by the sakhis of Avvaiyar. “Will you serve your husband or will you serve your lord?” ask the girls when there is talk of marriage for Avvai. The possibility of opting out of marriage as a conscious choice made by a young woman does not seem to be available to Avvai because she seeks a drastic solution to marriage and is turned into an old woman. Released thus, Avvai wanders up and down the land much like the bhikshus of the Buddhist sangha and proceeds to do what she really wants, which is to educate the people. This is something that the male bhaktas can do even in their grahastha situation.

Outside of marriage, and especially as an old woman, Avvai gains a moral authority which is normally the preserve of men. The place that she wields for herself is not just one where she can create beautiful songs, recording her devotion to god, but includes the right to teach, to formulate a code of ethics, to assume a position of authority over men.

A crucial aspect of the transform-ed role Avvai gains outside of marriage is that her world is not circumscribed by religious ends: Avvai retains a hold on the lay world, on the very world of house-holders from which she has opted out. Her attention is thus focused equally on the inner world of the home, on the everyday relations between people, and finally even on political power. With the last, Avvai transcends the conventional limitation on the bhikshu of having to withdraw from the familial, social and political arena, a limitation which was central to Buddhism. That this was perceived as an unusual role, more so in the case of a woman, is evident from the Chola king’s rebuke to Avvai when she intervenes on behalf of her patron, one of the chieftains of the Tamil region. The Chola king says to her dismissively: “Stay out, this is politics.” Avvai’s response is significant. She says she acts as she does to ensure justice and righteousness in the land. 43 In this, Avvai is like the Buddha, who came to realise that the moral order could be sustained only through the trans-formation of politics. Thus, in Avvaiyar’s view, a withdrawal from the State would imply a withdrawal from righteousness. Avvai is a woman of the world while at the same time she is outside it.

Avvai’s place and concerns with the secular political world may have derived from her Panar background. The conventional role of a bard was that of singing the praises of the king. Avvai invests the conventional role with a moral authority, transforming the conventional function of a panegyrist. But clearly, what Avvai achieves, a moral space in the secular world, would have been impossible in the case of a wife, and was near impossible in the case of an unmarried, not yet aged woman. As an older woman, Avvai nevertheless succeeds in wresting that space. She then becomes a prototype and so we have the tradition of a series of Avvaiyars in the Tamil region.

Others, like Akka Mahadevi and Karaikalammal, also have to contend with marriage. They have to handle situations where there is a conflict between unqualified devotion to god and the singleminded service to the husband which is expected. Thus Karaikalammal is put into a state of conflict when she gives away the husband’s mango to a devotee of the lord. While she is rescued from the situation through unusual devotion to the lord, the fact that she is no ordinary woman in the perception of her husband puts her outside the framework of marriage as far as he is concerned. This resolves the conflict of loyalties for Karaikalammal, but it is significant that it was not she who forced the resolution; it was forced upon her by her husband. Once released, she was free to give unrestrained expression to her devotion to Shiva. It is noteworthy that for Karaikalammal Shiva is “father”; she sees herself as his slave but he is not “husband” or lover, as he is to some other bhaktins.

In Akka Mahadevi’s case too, there were acute problems which led her to leave her husband and proceed to devote herself to Shiva. She articulates the basic tension between being a wife and a devotee: 45

Husband inside, love outside.
I can’t manage them both.
This world and that other, cannot manage them both.

Before the conflict gets resolved the love Akka Mahadevi feels for god is “adulterous.” The husband and in-laws function as impediments but Mahadevi gives them all the slip and then speaks of “cuckolding” the husband with Hara. Immediately afterwards, she speaks of making the lord himself her husband.46

The relationship with the mortal husband is utterly unsatisfactory; Akka cannot go near other men “because they are thorn under smooth leaf”; one cannot go near them or trust them or “speak confidences” to them.46 Only the lord who has no death, decay nor form can be her true husband; the mortal husbands she dismisses.

Take these husbands who die decay, and feed them to your kitchen fires’ she says with stunning contempt.

Once she has dispensed with the earthly husband, Akka Mahadevi is free — free to roam and seek the real husband. In the meanwhile, hunger and thirst make no impact because the lord is with her:

For hunger there is the towns rice in the begging bowl
For thirst, there are tanks, streams, wells.
For sleep there are the ruins of temples.
For soul’s company I have you, O lord white as jasmine. 48

Andal resolves the problem of marriage by refusing marriage to a mortal and insisting on marrying the lord himself. There is thus no conflict in this aspect of her life. She renounces nothing — neither beauty nor wifehood. Everything in her
life leads her inexorably to the grand finale - marriage to her chosen lord. Her father, himself a bhakta, forces no earthly husband upon her; instead, he travels with her to Srirangam where she is married to Ranganath. Unlike the other three women, Andal does not negotiate marriage; she chooses it in a direct resolution of the issue.

The manner in which the question of marriage is handled by each woman saint is linked to the deeper question of the sexuality of these women and their explicit attitude to the female body. Avvaiyar, Karaikalammaiyar, Andal and Akka Mahadevi confront their sexuality in different ways. Avvaiyar, for example, denies her sexuality, by going past the sexually active years into an ascetic kind of situation. With the energy thus released, she wanders about and is accepted by the social order within which she can remain and which she can work with, posing no danger to others and protected from them by her old woman’s form.

Karaikalammaiyar also transforms her sexuality into an awesome power; her husband and other men are terrified of her. In her new form, which denies her sexuality, she is inviolate — no man will come anywhere near her — she is now the feminine ascetic par excellence.

The whole symbolism in Karaikalammaivar’s case suggests the release of creative energy; Karaikalammaiyar is cast in a Kali like mould. She inhabits the world of the pretas in the cremation ground. Ultimately, her salvation lies at the feet of Shiva. But while her form is awesome like Kali, her bhakti makes her different; it contains her female energies. Thus, while in one version of the Kali legend, Kali dances with Shiva under her feet, here, in a reversal of the situation, Shiva dances the tandava with Karaikalammaiyar under his dancing feet.

For Andal and Akka Mahadevi, their bodies and their sexuality are no embarrassment or impediment to them. The body is the instrument, the site, through which their devotion is expressed. Their relationship with the lord is set within the framework of bridal mysticism. Andal’s devotion quickens her body; she awakens early to the beauty of her body, through her singleminded meditation upon the lord. She says in one poem:

My swelling breasts I dedicated to the Lord who holds the sea-fragrant conch...

Longing for the lord so that her love may be consummated, she revels in her body, seeking the pleasure of fulfilment:

Only if he will come to stay with me for one day if he will enter me so as to leave the mark of his saffron paste upon my breasts.

The lack of fulfilment itself is expressed again in bodily terms. The unsatiated body and the torment it brings leads to the threat of drastic remedies:

I pine and languish but he cares not whether I live or die---

If I see that thief of Govardhana that looting robber, that plunderer I shall pluck out by their roots these breasts that have known no gain
I shall take them
and fling them at his chest
putting out the hell-fire
which burns within me.

It is significant that, despite its uninhibited expression, Andal’s sexuality poses no threat at all at any point in the legends that have built up around her. Her unfulfilled longings are undeniably frank and expressive but they are neatly containable within the framework of an impending marriage. The sexuality of Andal is the sexuality of a young girl who will become a bride, the wife of the lord. It is thus set in the mode of legitimate love and it is this which makes it possible to incorporate Andal’s hymn in the rituals of women. Thus, in the month of Margazhi, the Tiruppavai is sung only by women. Young girls in particular sing it to get good husbands and make happy marriages. Andal’s experience of love is socially contained within the sexuality of the wife.

Akka Mahadevi’s sexuality both shares with and is in complete contrast to that of Andal. Like Andal, she does not deny the female body. She confronts it with a directness which is without parallel. But in confronting it the way she does, she forces the world around her also to do so. Her brutal frankness sees no shame in stripping off conventional notions of modesty. There is nothing to hide, says Akka:

You can confiscate
money in hand;
can you confiscate
the body’s glory?...
To the shameless girl...
there’s the need for cover and jewel?
and, again:
...0 Siva
when shall I
crush you on my pitcher breasts
O lord white as jasmine when do I join
you stripped of body’s shame and heart’s modesty?

Akka Mahadevi’s experience is, like Andal’s, informed by bridal mysticism. But in Akka Mahadevi’s case, the legitimacy of the experience is irrelevant. The lord need not be the husband, merely the

adulterous lover. Her handling of her own sexuality is much more open, like that of the devadasi, rather than of the wife:

He bartered my heart,
looted my flesh,
claimed as tribute
my pleasure,
took over
all of me.

I’m the woman of love for my lord,
white as jasmine

One may discern an interesting variation in the structure of experiences of Avvai, Karaikalammaiyar, Andal and Akka Mahadevi in terms of the manner in which the question of marriage features in the narrative, the manner in which they handle their sexuality, and in their relationship to god. Avvai jumps past the stage of marriage, becomes a mother to the people, her sexuality is transformed into a mother force and the god himself appears to her in her last moments as a child.

Karaikalammaiyar is released from marriage, transformed into a preta, subdues her sexuality and relates to god as a daughter or a slave (god is both father and master). For Andal, a beautiful woman full of the unfulfilled longings of a young girl, consummation lies in marriage and the lord is her husband. Akka Mahadevi on the other hand is a mature woman, who is unwilling to be contained in an earthly marriage. Unashamed of her body, the lord is her lover, even an adulterous lover. In our review of four women saints, we find two ways in which the female body and sexuality are treated. One way is to deny sexuality and transcend it as Avvai and Karaikalammaiyar do. This also resolves
the threat that female sexuality poses, especially for a non-grdhastha woman who may wander widely in pursuit of her goal with the same freedom that the male bhaktas have.

Another way is to accept the sexuality of woman but channelise it away from mortal men and direct it to the chosen god as lover or husband. In this situation, the female body itself is used to express the bhaktin's devotion. In such a situation, there still remains the threat represented by the body of the bhaktin in terms of her interaction with the wider world. In the story of Andal, she is taken to Srirangam by her father, married to the lord's image and disappears into it, so no one can violate her.

Only Mahadevi confronts the crucial problem directly. As someone who has not denied her sexuality but at the same time seeks the liberation that other bhaktas have, she adopts a radical measure, and wanders about naked. Mahadevi is the very opposite of Andal. In a sense, she flaunts her sexuality and defies an onslaught upon it. Her decision to strip off all clothing is a refusal to be circumscribed by the notion of the vulnerability of the female body, a refusal to make compromises because of it. In that sense she conquers the threat it poses and is the only bhaktin to do so. Only Akka Mahadevi works within the female body, not around it, as others do.

It is possible that she achieves this because she, among our four women saints, had found that in the home one could be violated: what then is unique about the violation that the outer world represents? Thus, Akka Mahadevi refuses to allow the female body to be an impediment in the search for salvation.

Explaining the experience of bhakti requires unravelling its complex strands and one must guard against homogenising it into a neat unified tradition. There is a strong possibility of simplifying bhakti, especially in terms of its social content.

Thus, its conventional association with marginalised groups, such as women and the low castes, needs to be viewed with a measure of caution, especially since there is evidence of much Brahman participation, especially in south India. And yet it would not be wrong to see in bhakti elements which move away from a highly intellectualised religion and in doing so, make religious experience more accessible and more popular.

Also, even while a noticeable degree of Brahman participation may be traced in south India, especially in Tamil Vaishnavism, this in itself was a regional resistance to a more Sanskritic penetration of religious forms. Pre-sanskritic Tamil cults were extended to create, for the first time, a devotional cult which personalised religious experience, eliminated mediators like the priest, and made for a direct relationship with god.

The space thus created provided the leverage women required to insert themselves into the cult of bhakti. Denied a voice in normal social and political relations, in bhakti poetry they left behind their only record. It is significant that religious poetry is the only place where women's speech has been permitted to survive and has gone on to become the heritage of both men and women. But in evaluating the collective heritage of bhakti, we need to ask: what kind of room did the bhakti tradition actually provide for women in the world of religion as well as in everyday social relations? To answer this, we need to focus on three aspects in particular: the relationship of the bhaktin to god, the relationship of the bhaktin to her own body, and the relationship of the bhaktin to other men and women. We have not been able to take up all these questions very explicitly or with the depth required, but this exploration may be treated as a small beginning.
The narratives of the bhaktins’ lives and their poetry indicate that all these women saw god as male but in an idealised version of the conventional relationship of woman to man. Their notion of god was not confined within a patriarchal structure; god was sometimes an equal, as in the case of Andal, and sometimes the bhaktin was subservient, as in the case of Karaikalammaiyar. In any case, the object of devotion was not a distant authoritative god but a close companion, someone you could “speak confidences” to. In bhakti, women indicated the possibility of an alternative model of gender relations.

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 Brahmanical social order, because of their circumscribed role within the household. In bhakti, they found the space to break through both these barriers; it enabled women to recite the lord’s name even during menstruation and it enabled women to deny the bonds of marriage itself. The bhaktin used her devotion as an armour and god as her supporter in her resistance against the priest and the husband.

The escape from an earthly marriage in the case of all four of our bhaktins also gave them an escape from the social relations 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 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 selfhood denied to widows. Thus the bhaktins circumvented the everyday social relations required of women and transformed the everyday gender relations with which they must otherwise live, as indicated in Akka Mahadevi’s statement that one could not “speak confidences” to men. This transformation was possible only in the religious arena. Akka Mahadevi’s experiences are inconceivable in any other context except in relation to the lord.

Here, another question that arises is how far bhakti dissolved the gender lines. It is clear that some divisions did break down. Men frequently used the feminine mode in their poetry, saw themselves as feminine in relation to god, and so gave up a part of their maleness. But in the narrative of their lives and even in the distinctive nature of their poetry the femaleness of the bhaktin remained. The explicit use of the language of the body is a feature of the bhaktins’ poetry.

Even in envisaging the union with the lord, there is a difference between the bhakta and the bhaktin. Men achieve the state at a symbolic, metaphoric level: the union is a metaphysical one. In the case of the bhaktins, it is envisaged much more explicitly. Andal and Akka Mahadevi disappear into the image of the lord at the time of marriage to him. In sum, then, while the bhaktins break the social rules obtaining for women, they do not give up the female identity which is constructed by the female body.

Of our four bhaktins, the two who transcend not only socially defined feminine roles (marriage) but also female sexuality, by becoming transformed into old women, are able to move around in society with impunity for substantial periods of time. But the two (Mahadevi and Andal) who work within the framework of physical femaleness, vividly expressed in their poetry, end their social existence soon after they opt out of the feminine role (Andal at 16, Ma-hadevi in her early twenties).

The collapse of the grahastha and sanyasi divide makes for a problem which is more acute for the bhaktins. In the earlier monastic tradition, there was an organised community of renouncers into which women could go; in the bhakti tradition there is no organised community of bhaktas since the men most often led grahastha lives. There is at best a loose network of devotees which cannot provide much more than minimal support to the bhaktins.

In attempting to recover the ethos of bhakti, we will need to go beyond what has survived of it in a purged, sanitised and routinised version of the original experience. It might then be possible to capture the totality of the experience of bhakti in the lives of the bhaktins.

Notes and References

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1. An important aspect of social

Ranganath of Srirangam temple, (to whom Andal is married) is also supposed to have married a Muslim princess from the Nizam’s family. The legend goes that the princess refused to marry a mortal since she considered herself already, married to Ranganath. Ranga-nath then came and took her away in the style of Prithviraj taking away Sanyukta. Her temple, with an image of her, is on the outside of the Srirangam temple, and she is offered a ritual offering of roti and butter. This lyengar tradition occasionally helps make it possible for lyengars to reconcile themselves to intermarriage with Muslims. Recently, a family of an 80 year old woman was hesitant to tell her about a granddaughter who had married a Muslim. But her reaction was: “After all, even the lord married a Muslim girl.”
movements in India has been seeking solutions to social problems in the religious sphere. Buddhism was the first major expression of such a venture and bhakti may be considered a continuation of such a tradition.


5. The account of Avvaiyar and Tiruvalluvar’s lives has been put together from J.M. Somasundaram’s *A History of Tamil Literature*, pp. 93-97; 64-71, and E.J. Robinson’s *Tamil Wisdom*, Madras, 1957, pp. xix-lvi; pp. 51-67; 105-107

6. References to low caste and Brahman interaction in the context of marriage and the repeated references to stories of foundlings and particularly to women whose origins are mysterious but who are adopted by Brahman fathers, seem to suggest a mythicisation of the process by which Brahman penetration into the Tamil region and its interaction with a pre-Brahmanic Tamil culture is recorded. The legends depict the process of the absorption of a Sanskritic culture.

7. S.S. Vasán’s film on Avvaiyar, 1953


9. Some of these maxims are pithy sayings such as “Do not withhold what you can afford to give”, “Scorn not numbers and letters”, “Learn while young” “Whale, tr you do, do well”, “Live for others”, “Associate with the wise”, “Live in harmony with your fellow beings”. In similar works, Avvai’s advice ranges over a code of behaviour, for example, “Talk humbly even to the lowly”, “Mother and Father are the visible Gods”, “No sacred verse is holier than one’s father’s words”, “No temple is holier than one’s mother,” “Better than wealth on hand is learning”, (J.M. Soma-sundaram Pillai, *Two Thousand Years of Tamil Literature*, Madras, 1959, pp. 260-263)

24. *Ibid*, p. 68

25. *Ibid*


27. *Two Thousand Years of Tamil Literature*, p. 244

28. *A History of Tamil Literature*, p. 69

29. *Two Thousand Years of Tamil Literature*, p. 288

30. *Ibid*, p. 287


32. *Ibid*

33. Vidya Dehejia, *Slaves of the Lord* Delhi, 1988, p. 130

34. *Two Thousand Years of Tamil Literature*, p. 290


38. *Slaves of the Lord*, p. 132


40. *Slaves of the Lord*, p. 128


42. *Speaking of Siva* p. 114

43. “Should innocent girls suffer under ihcr msfenations of emperors? There must be justice and righteousness in the land “ (Avvai in S.S. Vasán’s film, 1953)

44. *Speaking of Siva*, p. 127

45. *Ibid*, p. 141

46. *Ibid*, p. 125

47. *Ibid*, p. 134

48. *Ibid*, p. 132

49. The discussion in this section owes much to Vidya Rao, without whom it would not be the same.

50. *Slaves of the Lord*, p. 121

51. *Ibid*, p. 124

52. *Ibid*, p. 126. The metaphor of tearing off the breast is resonant of Kannagi’s action when she is denied justice. There, it is linked with the awesome power of the chaste wife; here, it is the awesome pas-sion of a woman denied consummation.

53. *Speaking of Siva*, p. 129

54. *Ibid*, p. 136

55. *Ibid*, p. 125