

**FEMALE SAINTS (700-1700 CE):  
A STUDY OF THE SACRED FEMININE PRINCIPLE  
IN HINDUISM**

By

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with a concentration in Philosophy and Religion  
and an emphasis on  
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**HINDU FEMALE SAINTS (700-1700 CE):  
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**ABSTRACT**

This study includes texts by six women: Karaikkāl Ammayar (seventh century from Tamil Nadu), Antal (eighth century; Tamil Nadu), Mahadevi Akka (twelfth century, Karnataka), Lalla Ded (fourteenth century, Kashmir), Mirabai (sixteenth century, Rajasthan), and Bahinā Bai (seventeenth century, Maharashtra). These six Hindu women saints from 700-1700 CE left behind an oral tradition and a legacy of *bhakti*, devotional poetry. These poems reflect philosophical ideations that offered philosophical truths.

This is a both a religious studies and a women's studies dissertation. I will be combining the religious studies' methodologies of exegesis of text and hermeneutics of text, with the women's studies in religion' methodology of close description of the subjective message, using empathy and close listening to the spiritual subjectivity of the women.

Philosophically, the six women offer myriad insights regarding divinity. I have focused on their attitudes towards how to live; their ideas of the self, including the use of their bodies as tools for spiritual growth; their sense of

placement within the phenomenal and metaphysical realms; and their theological ideas. It is evident that these educated women were philosophers; they took philosophical systems that had been established at the beginning of the Common Era and presented them to their devotees in an accessible manner so that their devotees could utilize them in their own religious traditions.

These six Hindu female saints were key teachers who served as religious leaders. They were important links in a conduit from other philosophers who established philosophical schools to the people who delighted in the women's exegetic processes. Oral tradition in the local languages saved their work for posterity, passing it from generation to generation.

The varieties of religious traditions depicted include Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite, as well as local manifestations of these two personal deities. Lalla Ded represents the union of the great Goddess and great God. Since these women lived in peripheral areas of India, and they lived in a wide variety of time periods, they exhibit much of the strength of the vernacular tradition for which Hinduism is well known.

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## **DEDICATION**

To my father,  
Richard Lawrence Sheehan,  
who taught me the value of relationship.



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## GUIDE TO TRANSLITERATION AND PRONUNCIATION

Sanskrit words are transliterated into the Latin alphabet through several different writing styles. I have used the most comprehensive style available, outside of the *devanagari* alphabet. All Sanskrit terms within the text will include full diacritical marks and italicization. The letter *c* is pronounced *ch*. A *s* is pronounced *s* as in *sit*. A dot under a consonant, like *ṭ ḍ ṇ ṣ* is pronounced with a palatal sound, the *ṣ* having a palatal *sh* sound. The symbol *ṛ* has an inherent *ri* sound. The letter *ś* is pronounced *sh* with a dental sound. The letter *ñ* is pronounced like the Spanish *señor*.

I realize that inconsistencies in transliteration do occur in the document. When quoting from a person who used a different transliteration system from the one I used, I left it as is in order to not change the person's work.

Note that definitions of Sanskrit words are from Monier-Williams (1976).

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the experience of six remarkable spiritual women within the classical Hindu tradition from 700-1700 CE by studying poems and songs attributed to them. I have chosen to refer to these women as Hindu saints. Since there is no canonization of saints in Hinduism, I will draw upon the definition of a saint in the West, according to the *Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, a saint is “a very virtuous person; a person of great real or affected holiness” (Pearsall and Trumble 2003). It is my contention that these women saints were philosophical leaders in their community as well as singers of songs.

I agree with University of Texas at Austin professor Robert Solomon’s view regarding world philosophy in his analysis that “Anglo-American and most European philosophers have simply ignored the rich philosophical traditions of Africa, Asia, Latin, and Native America, and the rest of the world,” which is “a subtle form of ethnic chauvinism” (Solomon 2001, 100). In order to understand philosophies from other cultures, it is necessary, according to him, to “accept metaphor, mythologizing, conscientious ambiguity, and ‘analogical thinking’ as legitimate modes of philosophizing” (103). This is the view I use when I analyze each of the six women in regard to the philosophical/theological categories of how to live, the Self, one’s place within the phenomenological and metaphysical realms, and theology. It is important to note that in Asia, theology and philosophy are not distinct and separate categories in the way they have become in the West.

The Hindu women saints studied here leave behind an oral tradition and a legacy of *bhakti*, devotional poetry, which has been studied by Western scholars

as emotional religious poetry; yet the poems reflect philosophical ideations that offered philosophical truths to the people who listened to them and who in turn sang them in their own worship activities. I see these women as key teachers who served as religious leaders and as key links in a conduit from other philosophers who established philosophical schools to the people who delighted in the women's exegetic processes and then saved their work for posterity through an oral tradition in the local languages, passed from generation to generation.

I was interested in the female divine within Hinduism, not having experienced that concept in the religious tradition with which I was raised. As a yoga practitioner, I also wanted to explore the use of the female body within the Hindu yogic tradition. I noted the diversity inherent in the Hindu tradition and wished to see if it aided women in their spiritual quest.

I found that a study of women's religious experience, as evidenced from their texts, helps to more clearly define Hindu traditions. Though divinities may be given the same name—Śiva, Viṣṇu, Devī—their conceptualization varies from place to place and time period to time period. These women, who transmitted to their followers poems on their own religious devotions, embedding into them various philosophical teachings, had varying conceptions about their own bodies as part of the material world. Some perceived their bodies as the tools with which to enter the supramundane world.

The wide variance in beliefs and rituals for the women studied led me to conclude that these regional variances should be given more proper acknowledgement when discussing the broader category of Hinduism.

This dissertation focuses on six female religious figures from Hinduism, who are considered *bhakti* saints. It addresses both historical concerns regarding women's rights and roles, and offers a study of women's religious experience. A number of these women left their homes, usually for negative domestic reasons, to live and exist as ascetics, singing of their joy in the Supreme, teaching others, and meditating to achieve the extreme experience of religious bliss through union with the divine.

I will claim that these six women saints had a good understanding of the philosophical systems of which they were a part, or to which they were ascribed by tradition. They demonstrated a good understanding and ability to teach about the Hindu philosophical traditions of Sāmkhya, Vedānta, and *kuṇḍalinī* yogic practices.

From the deep language of their poetry, their metaphors and allusions regarding women's spiritual quest and women's ultimate experience, one is able to grasp some of their womanly experience, adding to our knowledge of women's religious quest. A woman's religious experience is an awakening that leads to a new naming of the meaning of life to a woman.

The women I will be discussing extend through a long range temporally and take in a wide geographic range within medieval India as well. They include (in chronological order) Kāraikkāl Ammayār, from Tamil Nadu in southeastern India, seventh century, a devotee of Śiva; Āntāl, also from Tamil Nadu, eighth century, a devotee of Viṣṇu; Mahādevī Akka, from Karnataka in southwest India, who wrote in Kannada, twelfth century, devotee of Śiva; Lalla Ded, from the

Kashmir Valley in the Himalayas, 1334/5 to 1372, who followed the Kashmir Śaivite school of philosophy; Mirabai, from Rajasthan in north India, c. 1492, who worshipped Viṣṇu; and Bahinā Bāī, from Maharastra in north India, 1625-1700, who worshipped Viṣṇu.

### Methodology

This is a both a religious studies and a women's studies dissertation. I will be combining the religious studies methodologies of exegesis of text and hermeneutics of text, with the women's studies in religion methodology of close description of the subjective message, using empathy and close listening to the spiritual subjectivity of the women.

This is a women's studies dissertation, which attempts to redress the exclusion of women from the study of Hinduism, especially Hindu philosophy. It is woman-focused. At the same time, it considers a culture other than my own and a time period long before the conception of feminism as it is known today. I think that enough Westerners have criticized Hinduism little knowing its profound spiritual and social truths.

Comparative world religions scholar Rita Gross (2005, 152) defines a women's studies approach as beginning with a careful, empathetic description of the material. And so my approach will be in the first instance as carefully descriptive as is possible for me, a Western woman scholar. I intend to describe the religious sensibility and behavior of these six women as evidenced in their poetry, in order to illuminate their spiritual and philosophical constructions of



way of living or ethics; self and the role of the body in spiritual devotion; their views of their place within phenomenological and metaphysical realms; and theology.

Various other texts have already examined these women as writers of *bhakti*, devotional poems and songs in praise of a personal deity. That is indeed part of their importance. But also, decisive to the deepening of the religious studies field and women's spirituality, are the religious symbols inherent in their exquisite devotional poetry. Those ideas and their metaphors and allusions need to be described and discussed; they have only been examined in a cursory manner up to the present. Through what is discovered about human religious behavior through women within Hinduism, I can then expand the knowledge of Hindu women's contributions in the field of religious studies.

The study of non-Western religions is critical to an understanding of human religious experience (Gross 1998, 26). In attending meetings at the American Academy of Religion on theology, Rita Gross, as a Buddhist and a Buddhist scholar, found scholars focused on questions from the Judeo-Christian heritage and not involved in her theological questions deriving from the Hindu/Buddhist traditions.

Gross has been criticized by many scholars for her stance on women's studies from a world perspective. Katherine Young (1997) criticizes the introduction of Gross's (1998b) book *Feminism and Religion*, which speaks of the importance of women's studies. Young believes that the broader concept of gender should be the focus. I agree with Gross that women's studies is a subset of

gender studies and that it is very necessary to the recovery of lost material on or by women

Following Gross's (2005) article "Methodology: Tool or Trap? Comments from a Feminist Point of View," editor Gothoni allows Else Heinämäki, Kimmo Ketola, and Teemu Taira to respond to Gross's article with a final rejoinder by Gross. Heinämäki says in 2005 that her experience has been very different from that of Gross in the 1960s, for today women's studies curricula evidences much work to be done in religious studies in regards to women. She also points out that she considers "style" to be the defining point in discussing sexual difference, which is culturally specific.

Ketola criticizes Gross for her argumentation which she calls "ad hominem attacks on the character of the critic" (175) which I feel is a facile misrepresentation of Gross's logic. Taira's criticism is excellent. She would like to see the study of religion tied to gender studies or critical race studies which are "choosing relevant contexts contextually and trying to make sense of the organization that produces relations in religions" (181).

Gross believes that the fields of the history of religions and comparative religions have been weighted far too heavily to Western religions.<sup>1</sup> This is also what is what I discovered in my overview of Western textual feminist theology. Western theological and ritual practices are certainly important to the study of

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1. Unfortunately, neither Hinduism nor Buddhism have *one* organization that produces relations in religions, both being pluralistic religions, which Gross has already argued. However, the relation of the study of religion to gender studies and critical race studies is essential in eliminating sexist and colonial responses to the material.

human religious experience, but it is a small subset of a much larger human experience. To center one's study only on Western religious experience is to treat the religious experience of the West as though it represents the whole of human experience.

Gross writes that for Western religious scholars, the unconscious model is monotheistic (2005, 189). By this she means that all the assumptions of monotheism are assumed to apply to other traditions. In contrast, Hinduism is pluralistic; it has many authorities and many doctrines. It is of importance to Western scholars, in order to comprehend pluralism, to more fully understand humanity's enormously diverse religious forms. Hinduism has expanded the breadth of its scope, by not shutting out a variety of religious ideas, beginning from the indigenous traditions that are evidenced in the Indus Valley, through early Aryan formulations, through Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam, then finally in response to British encroachment on the land and values of the people. This study will highlight the pluralism within Hinduism through the selection of women from marginal areas of India, not from the Hindu heartland of the northern Gangetic plain.

The women to be studied represent Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Kashmir a representation of Indian cultures including the southeast, the southwest, and the northern provinces. The religious traditions depicted include both Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite, as well as local manifestations of these two personal deities. Lalla Ded represents the union of the great Goddess and great God.

Further, these women reflect a long, intense period of the evolution of Hinduism from the seventh through the seventeenth centuries, which represented the growth of both religious and philosophical traditions of Hinduism known today, inspired by older Vedic traditions.

Inasmuch as women represent a marginalized portion of society due to their inability to be fostered as priests in the Brahmanical tradition, this exploration of women through these geographical and temporal variations allows for the examination of the marginality of several women within the larger Hindu religion.

Finally, this group of six women is selected because of the historical accident that they are some of the few Hindu women whose works are available today to the speaker of English. No one typology can be constructed from an analysis of their wisdom, but rather a painting of pure colors. The fact that there seem to be so few Hindu women saints yet that are studied seriously is another sign of women's marginalization, if not always in India, then still in Western academic circles.

The history of religions can be significantly broadened through the study of women's experience; this view is central to this dissertation being a scholarly endeavor both in religious studies and women's studies. Religion generally is studied as a function of relationships, which have multiple practices and multiple effects. Patriarchal and androcentric religions are different towards men and women: "in them women and men are given different possibilities of being" (Gross 2000, 167). One of the tasks of the women's studies and the religious

studies scholar will be to recover the noetic experience of women, which is so vital to Hinduism. We might assume that this would be more readily available in Hinduism, which is centered on individual religious experience, than in Western patriarchal scholarly or religious traditions, where a hierarchy of male authority is more the norm. Even despite the intentions of Protestantism to assure individual religious experience and direct communication with God, there is to a great extent still a (usually) male religious authority that has suppressed or denied women's spiritual leadership in the West.

The exploration of these six women's poetry is of great value to a description of noetic experience, since religious poetry—for example, like the Song of Solomon in the Hebrew and Christian traditions—is often used to express the experience of indescribable religious ecstasy. In Hindu terminology, the *saguna* religious experience, which is the experience of the numinous with qualities, is not problematical for portraying philosophical ideas or even science, but poetry is better able to describe the *nirguna*, the experience of the numinous without qualities experience. No objective language exists for that which can be comprehended through meditation, yet which can be reflected and suggested through the nuances of poetry.

The study of these six women's poetry with a female-originated comprehension centers religious interpretation on women. Information about women and goddesses should not be an “add-on” to a history of religions survey of Hinduism, as they are integral to its understanding (Gross 1998a, 322).

Gross speaks as well of androcentric (male-centered) versus androgynous (male and female linked) models of humanity (1977, 18). I share Gross's view that by far the vast majority of religious studies research has been done by androcentric scholars.<sup>2</sup> Studying Hinduism from an androgynous model, as Gross proposes, would "succeed in highlighting women's lives and concerns and making women much more vividly present" (18) within the highly individualistic and pluralistic Hindu model. This study is not an androgynous study; however, it is a study particularly of women to redress the previous lack of close study of Hindu spiritual practices established by women.

Miranda Shaw (1944) outlines several important aspects of female spirituality in her text on Tantric Buddhism, which I intend to pursue as well: "women as active shapers of history and interpreters of their own experience . . . [and] the agency, creativity and self understanding of the women" (12). This study, then, will create a space for women's perspective in religion that, added to those already pursued by androcentric scholars, will widen the circle of understanding on Hinduism during the millennium between 700–1700 CE.

This study further portrays for the field of religious studies the activity of women within Hinduism during the period from 700–1700 CE in greater depth than other texts in English, and it defines their activities as marginalized human beings within and outside of the predominant religious system, in order to provide new material that eventually might be compared and contrasted with women's

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2. Gross distinguishes between androcentric—centered on men's activities—and patriarchal—centered on men's activities which are considered superior to those of women—and prefers to use the term *androcentric* where an intent to limit women is not present.

religious experience across the globe. But that world is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Goddess theologian and religious scholar, Carol P. Christ (1997), also asserts that Western religion has not traditionally addressed women's experiences. She explains that an approach that uses embodied thinking reflects women's "life experiences, histories, values, judgments, and interests" (35). Androcentric textual traditions, on the other hand, from a woman's point of view, reflect someone else's experiences and interests, male and not female experiences and interests. She adds that feminist scholars in religion will want to define "discrete moments of pure experience" and "discrete moments of interpretation" to form an "ever-shifting but seamless web" (35-36). Due to the personal creativity inherent in poetry, these "moments of pure experience" in the sayings of the six Hindu female saints of this study can be appreciated for the moments of pure experience and also interpreted for the philosophical meaning of their teachings, and for their relevance to us today.

Various problems exist in the interpretation of Indic studies by androcentric scholars, according to Miranda Shaw (1994). Texts are assumed to apply to men unless women are specifically mentioned. Can we also assume that women studied philosophical texts written by men like the great Hindu philosopher Śankara? Next, language difficulties surface with a gendered language like Sanskrit. A plural is understood to be masculine if even one man is included in the group, so one can not be sure of the percentage of representation of males and females within the text. Further, collections of historical texts by

ancient Hindu scholars are light on female representation; was this because of a lack of available texts written by women or/and because of the selection preferences of the editors? So those texts by women selected for anthologies need to be especially studied to understand their appropriation within a largely male-oriented context of publishing (75-76).

My own method of research, then, will describe the pure experience expressed in these women's poetry, and it will contemplate and interpret the philosophical meaning and significance of the beliefs either expressed or implicit within the poetry. Due to the personal creativity inherent in the poetry of these Hindu saints, these "moments of pure experience" (as Christ [1997, 35-36] names them) can be scrutinized. I will also follow Gross's recommendations to approach my subject with empathy and an understanding of my own "outsider" status.

Gross (2004) asserts that an empathetic study of a religious tradition requires that scholars observe it from within the formulation of that religion, not from a disinterested academic standpoint. She further holds that one needs to understand what doctrines and practices exist and what purpose they serve for the religious group being studied. To do this, an outsider is required to see beyond one's own culture to open oneself to the forms of another tradition. One needs an engaged thinking with that culture, a sympathetic understanding of the value of that culture's religious traditions. Gross also says that it is necessary to strive "through a descriptive study to understand a religious doctrine as insiders would understand and justify it [as a] prerequisite to making any normative comments about that doctrine in practice" (22).



Postcolonial critiques of colonial religious writing, or writings with a colonizing gaze, however well intentioned, illuminate the lack of comprehension the colonial/colonizing writers had of the cultures about which they were writing, due to their own ethnocentric attitudes and blinders. That narrow attitude pushes religions apart in one's understanding; it does not bring them together. It is not necessary to appropriate the religion to understand it as an insider does; it is necessary to recognize and eliminate (to the extent that one can) one's preconceptions in order to develop a sympathetic understanding of those spiritual practices. Kwok Pui-lan (2002), in her discussion of postcolonial critiques in scholarship, asks feminist scholars to question too their own assumptions and ask how their feminist scholarship may continue a colonialist paradigm (14-15). One needs to acquaint oneself with questions arising from women within Hinduism as well as questions derived from Western tradition.

In addition, a sympathetic understanding requires what leading French woman philosopher Luce Irigaray's (2004) theories infer as the *pregnant moment of listening and understanding*. For Irigaray, this moment is invaluable before one begins the communication process with men; but it will also be useful in approaching the religious beliefs and expressions of traditions different from one's own. She says,

What can assist the woman in becoming [a] subject is the discovery of the other, the masculine, as horizontally transcendent, and not vertically transcendent, to her. It is not the submission to the law of a Father that can permit the woman to become herself, corporeally and culturally, but the conscious and voluntary recognition, in love and in civility, of the other as other. This cultural becoming of the woman will then be able to help the man to become man. (27)

As a Western woman religious studies and women's studies scholar, I must examine my intentions to strip away as many cultural preconceptions and biases as possible, which is why description rather than critique is important in the beginning. I will also use empathy and sympathy for a culture other than my own, similar to the way Gross uses these in her methodology, along with the kind of "pregnant listening" that Irigaray recommends for the attempt to place the subjectivity of women on an equal horizontal plane with the subjectivity of men. My methodology will also include an appreciation of the "discrete moments of pure experience" as well as the "discrete moments of interpretation" recommended by Carol P. Christ (1997, 35-36), to be found in the works of the six selected Hindu women ascetic saints.

The field of religious studies will be enriched by the description of the noetic experiences of these Hindu women by providing a wider range of women's interpretations for comparison and contrast. Women's studies will be enhanced by the conclusions that will further expand the discussion of women's spiritual experiences to those found in Hinduism.

Finally, as part of my methodology I will analyze the recorded words of six Hindu women teachers from the point of view of several contemporary philosophical schools in India. Within my study, I will take the verses attributed to each of the selected women and place them within a relevant philosophical system in order to ascertain their values, narratives, and practices, how they fit (or didn't fit) within the relevant philosophical traditions, and to consider the probable purpose and the intent of each of these teachers.

As noted at the beginning of this introduction, for each of the woman saints I will address the philosophical areas of interest that include the ethical question of how to live effectively; the Self; the view of the relationship between the phenomenal world and the noumenal or metaphysical realm; and theology. These four areas will constellate the major philosophical dimensions for my study. The philosophical elements from the six women Hindu saints' poetry and the hagiographies (writing on the subjects of saints) that emerged regarding these women will be cross-examined with the philosophical systems under which these women lived.

First, regarding ethical living, my methodology will have me draw upon the field of Hindu ethics in order to ascertain what values these women held as necessary to their own religious quest and what values they taught to their followers, which may be different. My study will explore their ethical or moral relationships with other people and with their deity.

Second, regarding the Self, it is important to clarify that in the Hindu traditions, a study of the Self includes mind, body, and spirit. Mind has been focused on in the West in philosophical inquiry, but the concept of mind in Hindu philosophical tradition is broader. For example, since in Hinduism the Cartesian dualistic split between body and mind does not pertain, yogic practices and also sexual practices may utilize the body as a primary tool for spiritual realization. So, as a part of my methodology for this dissertation, it will be necessary to ascertain the use and valuation of the body to these women. To do this, I will examine both the attitude(s) of each woman to her own body and consider in what

ways this may be a result of societal constructions, and attitudes towards the body within the philosophical systems to which they are most closely related. Third, regarding these women saints' views of the phenomenal realm and noumenal realm, and the relationships of these realms, one's ontological principles are presuppositions to one's whole philosophical construct, or worldview, and, as such, need to be perused. To do this, my methodology will include examining these six women saints' metaphysical perspective toward the sense of their own position within both a phenomenal and metaphysical real, as represented in their philosophy, and I will compare each with the ontology evidenced in their supporting philosophical system. Here I am using the term *ontology* in the way generally understood in the West, but also in Hinduism, as the study of Being. Being is usually distinguished from Becoming. *Being* is the noumenal realm, beyond naming, thus without qualities. *Becoming* is the phenomenal world accessible to human senses, thus, with qualities. The relationship between these realms has been a perennial dilemma for philosophers and religious thinkers alike.

Fourth, regarding theology, for the purposes of this dissertation, I am defining *Spirit* or *Deity*, in a twofold way. It can be seen as an "Oversoul" that has its counterpart in the individual soul. This encompasses a bountiful field of exploration within Hindu philosophical thought. As part of my philosophical analysis of the six selected women's poetry, my methodology will include a study both of these women's ideas of what their soul is and the descriptions of their associated philosophies regarding the soul and its relationship to Soul (as in the relationship of *ātman* to *Brahman*). Often philosophical views, as in the

consideration of ontology, are found to parallel theological views, but not necessarily.

The study of the theology of these six women will review the concepts of spiritual “masculine” and “feminine” and will attempt to ascertain whether any of these women felt a need for a divine female to actualize herself or whether they felt they could actualize themselves in relationship to a male deity. If the deity was masculine, then what was their relationship to Him that allowed actualization? The methods I will use to address this subject will be to analyze in their writings their constructions of “masculine” and “feminine,” in order to determine the features of those constructed concepts as applied to the deities. Their ideas of an all-encompassing deity will be explored and their conceptions of hierarchical limitations of themselves and/or their deities will be examined.

This dissertation consults both primary and secondary sources. I define primary sources as those that include original texts vital to the topic of the dissertation, in their original language or in English. Secondary sources are those that discuss primary sources from varying perspectives. The poems I will be using are from long-standing accepted collections of their work, with the exception of Mirabai, for whom I will be using a collection of 101 poems by V. K. Subramanian (2005), which approximates the size of the collections of the other five women. Their veracity will be accepted, as Hindus have accepted their veracity in the compilation of the collections.

In addition to the approaches discussed above, my methodology for this dissertation will combine the following methods: (1) a historical overview of each

time period from the standpoint of their geographical traditions, (2) an analysis of the hagiography attributed to each woman, (3) a discussion of the major philosophical principles of the relevant philosophical system relevant to each woman saint, and (4) a philosophical analysis of each of their writings.

To establish a scientific method of comparison, these four aspects of my study will be analyzed under the philosophical concepts of ethics, the Self, ontology, and theology.

### Hermeneutical Context

Most scholarly works involve both description (observation and documentation) and interpretation. The scholarly work of interpretation is often called *hermeneutics* (from the Greek word, *hermeneuo*, “interpret”).

Hermeneutics proceeds, in part, by taking into account the historical context of the text(s) to be studied and explained, first in relation to its own day, then in relationship to the present day. For my dissertation work, I will be taking into account the historical context, as situated in a particular region of India, for each of the six Hindu women saints considered.

The period from the seventh through the seventeenth centuries in India was a fascinating time in the development of the Hindu religious tradition. It included the renaissance of Hinduism from the encroachments of Buddhism and Jainism; this was framed as a new form of Hinduism with new deities, new rituals, and new practices that supplanted traditional Vedic ones (though they too referenced the Vedas as their source). Hinduism became so strong that it later

withstood the Islamic incursion (1030-1772) and served as a rallying point for later Hindu leaders like Shivaji and Mohandas Gandhi.

After the centralized political control of the Mauryas (321-185 CE), and the Guptas (319-454 CE), and in accordance with the ascendancy of southern powers of the Pallavas (300-888), Cālukyas (550-757), and Colas (850-1267), divergent strands of regional history were worked into individual philosophical traditions.<sup>3</sup> Sanskrit was still the language of the elites and served as a gossamer web that came to include the major threads of Hinduism. Most of the new developments of Hinduism in this period, known to Westerners, were tied to Sanskrit.

The early Common Era writings of Bādarāyaṇa, Patañjali, Ísvarakṛṣṇa, Akṣapāda Gautama, Ulūka Kanāda, and Jaimini, which came to establish the six classic schools of Hindu philosophy, led to a proliferation of Hindu philosophical ideas that were preserved in Sanskrit that became increasingly more important than the older Vedic rituals, though they were careful to reference Vedic texts as their authority.

However, a polyvocality of voices was derived from many regional religious and literary traditions. The Tamil and Telegu regions in particular each had their own strong religious and literary traditions centered in their own languages. The vernacular tradition began in the recording of royal charters, subsequently broadened two or three centuries later to include literary writings in the vernacular tongues. These early vernacular writers were aware of “the novelty

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3. Good arguments can be made that despite the political unity of the overarching empires, regions functioned under their own norms and values.

of their enterprise, how assertive [they were] about the challenge they were mounting, and how defensive [they were] about their temerity in making the language of Place speak literarily” (Pollock 2006, 381-382).

Western religion is centered on sacred texts that are considered to be the received word of God, and ecclesiastical institutions support this view. In the scriptures and religious institutions, patriarchal religious authority is both masculine and hierarchical. Religion in the West is vested in the power of the authority of the church, which works in tandem with political power as the two most central organized institutions of the culture. The view of the Hindu religion by scholars such as William Jones (1746-1794) was to support British judicial interests. Despite his contributions to Western scholarship on India, Jones used negative language when speaking about Hindus, “... ‘priestcraft’, ‘superstitions’, ‘childish’, ‘absurd’, ‘ridiculous’, ‘fanciful’...” (Teltscher 1995, 199). He learned Sanskrit in order to break the pundits’ monopoly on the legal system<sup>4</sup> in order to assert British judicial power (197). Jones’s poem to the Goddess Gangā has an “underlying concern with legality and legitimizing of British rule” (Franklin 2002, 9):

Nor frown dread goddess on a peerless race,  
With lib’ral heart and martial grace,  
Wafted from colder isles remote,  
As they preserve our laws and bid our terror cease,  
So be their darling lays preserved in wealth, in joy in peace.  
(A Hymn to Ganga, 1.165)

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4. “I am proceeding slowly, but surely . . . in the study of Sanscrit; for I can no longer bear to be at the mercy of our pundits, who deal out Hindu law as they please” (Teltscher 1995, 196).



Scholars of history of religions in the nineteenth century first translated religious texts, like the *Sacred Books of the East* series,<sup>5</sup> whose volumes were published by Oxford University Press in 1879-1910 (Müller) because textual authority was central to their religion. In debates on religion, Hindus themselves were not heard from, and the issue was control of social custom (Stein 1998, 224). Jones did not discuss the experience of a Hindu in their religion, but appropriated it for a British social agenda. Yet that personal experience is what Hinduism is all about. It is the devout person, who goes to the temples or creates rituals within the home, who expresses Hindu ideas and provide ideals, that the individual desires.

Hinduism began during the Vedic era as political/familial authority in which men and women played distinct and necessary roles in ceremonial proceedings. Priests gained their living by officiating at ceremonies. The great revolution of the Upaniṣads was to make religion individual, which included the focus on the individual, not the political or familial structure, as evidenced here in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 14.2-4:

This self (ātman) of mine that lies deep within my heart—it is made of mind; the vital functions (prāna) are its physical form; luminous is its appearance; the real is its intention; space is its essence (ātman); it contains all actions, all desires, all smells, and all tastes; it has captured this whole world; it neither speaks nor pays any heed.”

. . . . This self (ātman) of mine that lies deep within my heart—it contains all actions, all desires, all smells, and all tastes; it has captured this whole world; it neither speaks nor pays any heed.

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5. Some of the important contributors to this series included Samuel Beal (1825-1889), Georg Bühler (1837-1898), T. W. Rhys Davids (1843-1922), James Legge (1815-1897), and Max Müller (1823-1900).

It is Brahman. On departing from here after death, I will become that. (Olivelle 2004, 123-124)

The individual soul (*ātman*) is the key to human liberation from this cycle of rebirths (*samsāra*), when one finally understands and becomes one with Brahman. Individual understanding is gained through study combined with meditation. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (3.1.8) expresses the ideal: “the partless one is seen by a man, as he meditates, when his being has become pure, through the lucidity of knowledge” (Olivelle 2004, 275).

This individualism is the foundation of the ascetic tradition in Hinduism and in its breakaway movements, Buddhism and Jainism.<sup>6</sup> Then it was continued by Patanjali in his *Yogasūtra* with its emphasis on individual meditation (III.2 in Hariharānanda 1983, 251).

*Bhakti*, a further refinement of this individualistic thinking, caused the establishment of the physical place as important. Much wealth was placed in the development of temples and images of the deities. The temples were the place for the reestablishment of the importance of the priest for *pūjā* (worship), but *bhakti* was still centered on individual development. *Bhakti* serves many purposes, it is a focus for a devotee to sing ritually with a group, it is part of individual worship in the recitation of texts or of *mantras*, and it is a comfort in times of stress and sorrow.

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6. As an example, the *Digha Nikāya* states, “[The Tathāgat] preached the Dhamma which is lovely in its beginning, lively in its middle, lovely in its ending, in the spirit and in the letter, and displays the fully-perfected and purified holy life. A disciple goes forth and practices the moralities. That for him is morality” (*Potthapāda Sutta*, 183.7 in Walshe 1995, 161).

A vignette from a stay in India illustrates its importance. I was traveling from Tirupati to Delhi in a compartment with several other people. One was a woman, dying of cancer, who was being taken by her husband to Delhi in a last-ditch attempt to save her. Her husband was garrulous, speaking Tamil and English, so we spoke in English. Another member of our compartment spoke Tamil and Telegu, so the husband would occasionally translate aside to him. The fifth member spoke Hindi and Telegu so I could speak to him in Hindi, and filled him in on the conversation in that language. After we laughed about all the languages and conversed a bit, we began singing *bhajans*, devotional songs, while the stricken woman listened, her eyes closed. The *bhajans* were easy, much repetition, and we sang them for hours until we reached Delhi. I would like to say some miracle happened to that ill woman, but she did visibly relax and perhaps that was part of the miracle. The other part was that all of us, with our different languages, sang as one. The boundaries between all of us in the carriage broke down and we were one being as we slid into the Delhi station, the sky just lightening with the colors of dawn. The experience of *bhakti* made it one of the most remarkable nights in my life.

A problem with working in this period is that indigenous languages have already become a medium for religious texts, so women, who might have had their songs, poems, or views recorded in writing, would probably have been recorded in prakrits rather than the Sanskrit texts, in which male authors like

Śankara and Rāmānuja wrote. This we know from Sanskrit plays where the women and lower classes spoke prakrits and the elites Sanskrit.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, Kāraikkāl Ammayār, Āntāl, Akka Mahādevī, Lalla Ded, Mira Bai, and Bahinā Bāi chose an ascetic life style and taught others from their personal religious experiences.

It is further problematical that these women's precise songs or poems weren't written down at the time by disciples, but collections were made of their writings anywhere from four hundred to six hundred years later. The precision (or imprecision) of words could be questioned in regard to the male saint and teacher Śankara's writings as well, but, for him, what is left are organized, edited pieces; but, in contrast, each of the women studied has a series of short sayings, completely unedited, with no narrative. Still, it is all that remains from these women whose teachings did not appear in the Sanskrit of the elite Brahmanical tradition, but who spoke in the voice of the people whom they were addressing.

The collection of one set of recorded verses, rather than others, may represent the whim of various recorders, devotees who found some more appealing than others. Still, they were retained in people's memory from one century to the next, and taught to their children. In reading these pieces of religious literature, one finds reflected within them the values of the multitudes of people who cherished them. But beyond this, we will want to ask whether

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7. Somehow they all seemed to understand each other.

these women existed and did they sing precisely these verses and no others?

That cannot be ascertained; their origin is lost in time.

Instead, it can be affirmed with gratitude that these particular, or these particular religious writings, reflecting religious and spiritual paths and goals of the people who wrote them down and probably of the women to whom the verses were ascribed, can be acknowledged and discussed by us today. They must not be ignored, if one is to study the full extent of what Hinduism was during the millennium from 700-1700 CE. These texts tell of women ascetics who serve as models for men and especially for women; they broke out of the constructions of the Brahmanical laws regarding marriage and women's role within marriage, to experiment, from their noetic experiences, with asceticism.

The questions I am posing here have not been asked of these women's writings before to any depth. Women have been assumed to advocate devotional *bhakti* experiences.<sup>8</sup> *Bhakti* has been enjoyed for its beauty and literary importance, but the theological and ontological underpinnings regarding ideas of divinity and the relation of that divinity to the world around them by pioneering intellectuals have not been explored, perhaps because *bhakti* has been considered by those who propagate Hindu philosophical texts to the West, as superstition and not worthy of philosophical consideration, and so instead its beauty has been consigned to literature and not philosophy. Yet the traditions of

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8. Gupta (1991, 208) says women are lonely lovers or bond maids yearning for their beloved; Kinsley (1980, 83) says they have an inherent urge to love the lord; Ghanananda (1995) states, "The supreme devotees of God, who are in a state of perpetual soul-communion and union with God, are patterns of divine love" (23); and Deitrich (2001) speaks of their "eroticism, sensuousness, and sexual imagery" (98).

the women saints represent the religious thoughts and feelings of a great number of Hindu adepts beyond the traditional priestly worldview, and it can be claimed that they are greater in number than those who hold the priestly overview.

Philosophical schools and their ideology have been preached by pundits at the learned enclave, the temple or *matha*: these six women adepts may have read them or heard them in an age that had no printing press to scatter them out widely. The philosophy of these Hindu texts will underscore these women's conceptualizations, just as St. Thomas Aquinas underpins Catholic opinions even though many devotees have not read him. These six women saints are midway between the philosopher and the people, and include both the intellect and exegesis that makes philosophy understandable to others within their communities.

Further, each of these six women teachers represents a different religious role that needs to be recognized as an exemplary part of women's roles within the Hindu religion. Kāraikkāl Ammayār serves as a theologian, defining Śiva to her listeners; Āntāl is most known for her desire to be the bride of Viṣṇu; Akka Mahādevī represents the quintessential teacher; Lalla Ded focuses on teaching the use of the body; Mirabai is known for her hymns to her beloved Kṛṣṇa; and Bahinā Bai chooses to be always be known as a wife. Their experience leads the way into a definition of women's roles within Hinduism and within world religions. Women's roles will vary considerably within each religious tradition, each role valued because it is based more upon women's experience and words

than upon particular religious texts and established rituals that have been promulgated for men and men's roles within the religion.

I will show that the period 700-1700 CE had some remarkable women who were educated and some who taught philosophy—not as large a number as men, but enough to know they were there. This era from 700-1700 CE, at least in certain regions, appears to have been much more focused on the sacred feminine than the Mughal period (1525-1605,<sup>9</sup> during the British Raj [1773-1947]), and through the twentieth century.

### Literature Review

This is both a religious studies and a women's studies dissertation. It provides a descriptive view of highly valued women and their history of teachings, which reflected their religious experience. This is important to the history of religion, in particular to the history of Hinduism. In the West, these studies have traditionally been dominated by Western androcentric scholars. Hinduism is recognized as a pluralistic religion but its considerations of women as saints and teachers in contrast to those of men are only beginning to be studied.

The literature review begins by discussing Western works chronologically. It then considers the Hindu texts most useful for this study.

Several texts about women and, or in, world religions, included discussions of both women and goddesses within the context of Hinduism and the

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9. A number of female Islamic saints existed, and art historical evidence in the form of miniature portraiture of women as ascetics and teachers was common in the Islamic era.

relationships between goddesses and women's ideal roles and status in society.

Three important texts of this genre that use a Western feminist approach are Denise Lardner Carmody's *Women and World Religions* (1989); Nancy A. Falk and Rita Gross's *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures* (1980); and the anthology edited by Arvind Sharma, *Women in World Religions* (1987).

In response to feminism, an early Western approach by scholars to the study of women's spirituality in Hinduism during the 1980s was to look for the Goddess, either as complement or substitute for the male monotheistic God. Second, scholars in the late 1980s and early 1990s looked at texts that examined the ideals of constructed female behavior. More contemporary anthropological approaches, from 1993 through the present, addressed what the Goddess means in contemporary Hindus' lives. Western women's studies theology will be discussed to ascertain the place for this inquiry within contemporary contexts.

The earliest feminist approach to Hinduism was studying the goddesses, largely because of the lack in of goddesses in Western religion, to discover who they were and what functions they served. Carl Olson, *The Book of the Goddess: Past and Present* (1980) was one of the first of these studies that defined goddesses from many cultures of the world. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff edited another early anthology on goddesses, *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India* (1982). David R. Kinsley's *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (1986), completes the early trio.



Next, ancient texts were translated to ascertain the rules for women's conduct. Julia Leslie made a major contribution with her text, *The Perfect Wife: The Orthodox Hindu Woman According to the Sridharmapaddhati of Tryambakarajan* (1989), in which she translated and annotated an ancient Hindu text on proper female behavior. Stephanie Jamison researched women's roles in rituals of the home in *Sacrificed Wife; Sacrificer's Wife: Women Ritual and Hospitality in Ancient India* (1996).

Most recently, anthropological scholars like Katherine Erndl, *Victory to the Mother: the Hindu Goddess in Northwest India in Myths, Ritual, and Symbol* (1993); Meena Khandawal, *Women in Ochre Robes: Gendering Hindu Renunciation* (2004), and Lynn Teskey Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism* (2004) have published on contemporary religious ascetic experience in the cities of Haridwar and Varanasi respectively, but the experience of classical Hindu women hasn't been addressed. Part of the problem for Western scholars is that Hindu women wrote mainly in the vernacular, in regional languages, which poses a problem for the non-native speaker.

Looking at Indian scholars, however, one sees a more varied picture. Beginning with the Rama Krishna Vedanta Centre's summary *Women Saints of East and West* (1955), the work of women teachers has been important to Hinduism. It was followed by Swamy Thipperuda's *The Vīrāśaiva Saints: A Study* (1968). K. C. Kamaliati's article "Women Saints of Tamil Nadu" (1977) was next. Some women's spiritual verses were translated by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita in the feminist *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present, Volume 1* (1991).

Then Vijaya Ramaswamy wrote the article “Rebels—Conformists: Women Saints in medieval South India” (1992). The saints are an inclusive aspect of Hindu religion. Works referencing these individual saints will be dealt with in each chapter, but it didn’t take feminism to draw those saints out of the dusty drawers; they were an active, intentional part of Hindu religion, recognized by females and males alike.

A text on women in Tantric Buddhism, by Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (1994), takes the reader into the female side of Tantrism, illustrating the value of the practice to women. This text turns the study of Tantrism on its side to illuminate the female.

A perusal of Western feminist theology yields little that is useful in regard to the six selected Hindu women adepts, but the texts have some valuable contributions regarding the study of religion, methodology, philosophy of religion, and philosophy. Ellen T. Armour’s *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology and the Problem of Difference* (1999) is germane to racial justice within Western culture. As it is a social critique, it is useful for methodology in looking at racism within Hinduism. Anne Clifford’s *Introducing Feminist Theology* (2001) is Christian oriented and monotheistic. Amy Hollywood’s *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference and the Demands of History* (2002) is a postmodern text based on Georges Bataille, who little recognized women’s active role in sexual or religious ecstasy. Bataille’s (1994) misogynistic view of the female body is antithetical to the reverence yoga accords it.

Postcolonial theory as defined by Kwok Pui-lan in *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse* (Donaldson and Kwok, 2002) and *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (2005), with Laura Donaldson, is founded on conflicts between Christian colonialism, East Asians and feminists, but their critique of white feminist scholars is pertinent for my study.

Rita Gross's *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (1998) is a necessary read for this project as she is asking the right questions, as is Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003), for she views scholarship from an insider's perspective. Carol P. Christ's *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (1997) is also useful as she claims Western religion, in general, doesn't look at women's experience, about which a thorough understanding is necessary for feminist theology. Christ's later text, *She Who Changes: Re-Imaging the Divine in the World* (2003) offers a philosophical exploration of the female concept of divinity.

When we turn to sources regarding the six individual Hindu women saints selected for this study we find that the texts were varied. As most of the women didn't write down narrative structures, and as their sayings are drawn from a strong oral tradition told by storytellers and grandmothers, for many of them a question must be asked as to what they actually said. An historical study of their persons and background is impossible as most of the biographies are hagiographies that date from a later period. Still what one can discover is that a tradition, a female tradition of women adepts, that came from their hearts and that

made their lives legendary and distinguished them from ordinary mortals, was so beloved that it was eventually written down and saved for posterity. So my hermeneutics must be confined to the texts and the language of the surviving texts themselves.

Kāraikkāl Ammayār was one of 63 Nāyanmārs, or Tamil Śaivite saints, and one of three women in the tradition. She wrote the “Arpuda Tiruvantādi” of one hundred and one verses, and the “Tiru Irattai Manimālai” of twenty verses. Her work is found in the *Periya Purāna* by Sēkkizhār in the twelfth century. I have been working from Kārâvêlane (1956/1982) (the 1956 title was *Kareikkalammeiyar: Ouvres Editees et traduites. Introduction par Jean Filliozat*; the reprint was entitled *Chants dévotionnels tamouls de Kāraikkālammai*). However, two more selections of her works are available in English: N. Jagadeesan, “The Life and Mission of Karaikkal Ammaiyar” in N. N. Bhattacaarya’s *Medieval Bhakti Movements in India* (1989). It is unfortunate that a complete translation of Kārakkāl Ammayār’s works is not yet available in English because of her importance to Tamil Śaivism. I will be working from the French reading that is the only complete translation of Kāraikkāl Ammayār’s verses.

Āntāl’s verses are some of the four thousand verses of the Ālvārs compiled in the *Nālāyira Tivya Pirapantam*, the hymns of the Ālvārs. English translations are found by Chenni Padmanabhan, *Concepts of Sri Andal’s Tiruppavai* (1995); Vidya Dehejia, *Āntāl and Her Path of Love: Poems of a Woman Saint from South India* (1990); Norman Cutler, *Consider Our Vow: An*

*English Translation of Tiruppālai and Tiruvempāvai* (1979); P. S. Sundaram, *The Poems of Āndāl: Tiruppavai and Nacciyaṛ Tirumozhi* (1987); Ramaswamy D. Iyengar, *Thiruppāvai (with an English rendering)* (1946); and J. S. M Hooper, *Hymns of the Ālvārs* (1929). S. M. S. Chari has written a text on *Philosophical and Theistic Mysticism of the Alvars* (1997), which I will also use for their deconstruction. We find Āntāl's biography in the *Kuruparamparāpirapāvam 6000 (6000 Verses on the Glory of the Succession of Gurus)* by Pinpalakiya Permal Jīyar in the fourteenth century, and the *Divyasūicaritam (Characters of the Sacred Ones)* by Garudavāna Pandita, fifteenth century, which is only available outside of India at the Cambridge library, U.K. I will be using the translation the multifaceted Vidya Deheja has done because of her well-known aesthetic sensibility and her comprehension of the underlying philosophical principles.

Akka Mahādevī's poems were edited by L. Basavarāju in 1966; and I have found English translations of selections of her verses by Vinaya Chaitanya, *Songs for Siva: Vacanas of Akka Mahadevi* (2005), and R. K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva* (2004). Chaitanya has the most comprehensive translation of her works; therefore Chaitanya's translation of her works will be my major focus.

The earliest mention of Lalla Ded in literature according to L. Kaul is in the *Asrār-ul-Abrār* (1654), which is hagiographic. In the eighteenth century, he says, notice was beginning to be taken of her by Khwāja Muhammad 'Azam Dedamari in his *Wāqi 'āti Kashmir* (1746). Muhammed Aslam Abu-al-Qāsim mentions her in his *Tarikhi Shāyiq* (1754-62); Burbal Kācru mentions her in his

*Gauhari Ālam* (1785-86); and Pir Gulam Hasan gives a brief mention in his *Tārīkhi-Hasan* (1835). Finally, Jaylal Kaul lists Hāji Mahī-ul-Dīn Miskīn's reference in the *Tārīkhi-Kabīr* (1909-1910) (Jaylal Kaul 1973, 2-5). Aurel Stein collected a selection of her verses in 1914 recited by Mahāmahopādhyāna Pandit Mukund Ram Shāstri who recorded the text. This is the basis of Grierson's *Lallā-vākhyān* of 1920. Grierson appended to his 109 verses another 60 verses translated into Sanskrit by Rājānaka Bhāskara. Anand Kaul (1930-1932) is said to have another 75 verses that he obtained through a search of the Kashmir Valley. Recent translations include Maina Kataka's translation to French, *Paroles de Lad Ded: Une mystique du Cachemire (XIV siècle)* in 1998, and Jaishree Kak Odin's *The Other Shore: Lalla's Life and Poetry* in 1999. I will be working primarily from Odin's translation, which has the most modern English, but she translates Lalla Ded from a literary point of view. I will refer to Grierson, whose language is now archaic, but whose greater understanding of Kashmiri Śaivism and whose valuation of her writings as philosophy is readily apparent. Most importantly, I refer to the original Kashmiri as well where questions of philosophical interpretation surface in my reading. Kashmiri is a part of the Hindi/Urdu language group that I studied while I was in India.

Over five thousand songs in Hindi, Gujarati, and Marathi are ascribed to Mirabai which, like for Lalla Ded, leads to questions of authenticity. As her songs were sung by mainly women in an oral tradition, and not sung in the male professional singer's tradition, it is a significant problem as to which she actually wrote. Callewaert (1990) gives twenty-eight manuscripts with anywhere from six

to over one thousand songs included in each. Mirabai has also been well translated. Callewaert in 1990 gives 13 English translations. As we cannot ascertain fully a few definitive manuscripts, I will use Padmāvati's Hindi edition *Mīrām: Vyaktitva aura Krtitva* (1973) and V. K. Subramanian's *Mystic Songs of Meera* (2005) in Rajasthani and English, although neither cite their sources. Between the two, a representative sampling of her verses will come forth (Padmāvati includes 601 songs and Subramanian 101 songs). I will also refer to Krishna P. Bahadur's *Mira Bai and Her Padas* (1998), A. J. Alston's *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai: Translated with Introduction and Notes* (1980), and Hermann Goetz, *Mira Bai: Her Life and Times* (1961).

Three manuscripts of Bahinā Bai's work exist, one by Dhondo V. Umarkhāne in 1914, the second by V. N. Kolhārara from 1926, and a later one by Śalinī Anamta Jāvadekara, *Samtā Bahenābāimcā Gāthā*. Two English translations exist. Justin E. Abbott translated a selection to English and includes the Marathi in *Bahinā Bāi: A Translation of Her Autobiography and Verses* (1929). Anne Feldhaus translates selections in her "Bahinā Bāi: Wife and Saint" in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (1982) from Jāvadekara.

### The Context of Sacred Female Value and Influence

Female ascetic symbolism supported female perceptions of divinity and women's spirituality from 700-1700 CE in numerous ways, from temple architecture and artwork, to oral traditions that were eventually recorded. Stone temples, statues, and friezes were built, to be used for *pūjās* and as teaching

devices for the illiterate. Many of those temples were to goddesses whose importance was just beginning to be recorded, such as Lakṣmī, Durgā, and Kālī. At this time, the Purāṇas were gradually written down, stories and myths surrounding the meta-deities of Śiva, Viṣṇu, and the Devī. The Devī was a Goddess who had every bit the power that Śiva and Viṣṇu had, as creator, preserver and destroyer, while other female deities were considered to be her manifestations, just as Viṣṇu manifested in many guises. Pilgrimage spots devoted to female power became important. The *śaktipīṭhas* were sites where parts of body of the goddess Satī fell. And the Yoginī sect built a number of temples across India worshipping the Yoginīs, possessors of occult power who could be beneficent or malevolent. Then in Kashmir, Abhinavagupta and others established the Kashmir Śaivite cult, which paradoxically worshipped a monistic goddess, Śakti, who was forever one image, one being, merged with their monistic idea of Śiva. Finally there emerged the female-inclusive religious movement of Tantra, which is a broader term that encompasses non-Brahmanical rituals and included both “right-handed” Tantra, with more mainstream rituals, and “left-handed” Tantra, considered the more heretical one which partook in sex, meat, wine, and other things abhorred by Brahmanical religion. Tantric sex valorized the female body, which was the center of the ritual practice for men. Sacred female power disclosed itself from many directions, beginning from the great Female Divine to goddesses, to the individual female body, in all their signs and expressions. The next chapters look at how some women used that female power.



I will be looking at each of the six Hindu women saints through several categories derived from a study of their poetry. First I will give the hagiography of each woman, what is known about her life, and analyze it for its meaning to her devotees. Second, I will look at what she considered to be “how to live,” the basic building blocks on which one builds one’s relationships with the world. I had assumed that they would be similar to *yamas* and *niyamas*, discussed in the *Yogasūtra*, but I found out that for many of the women, their world was their devotion to the Lord, so the ethics spoken about by them focused on proper ritual practices. Next, I will look at how each of the women looked at her self, a person in this mundane world, and her Self, her identity within the sacred cosmos. Then I will describe how each of them looked at the phenomenal world, the world of which each is a part and their sacred world, and how those two worlds unite. Finally I will contrast their ideas on divinity. For Mahādevi Akka, I had to include a further category, which was her experience of the Vīraśaiva path.

The female divine principle that manifested during this thousand-year period in these six women who sang religious songs and poems, who were portrayed in religious art, and who lived religious lives as ascetics, was a South Asian practice. This female spirit or principle as expressed in the millennia from seven hundred to seventeen hundred has not been explored by Western scholars, but it is an important part of Hinduism. One of its manifestations is through the body, discussed here as yogic techniques that Akka Mahādevī and Lalla Ded used and advocated for their disciples.

Through this study of women in diverse regions of India, one sees the wide variety of Hinduisms that function within the subcontinent. And one sees the development of regional languages through these women who wrote in the vernacular. Their work takes the reader back to the practices advocated in the Upaniṣads, which they utilized in making their individual decisions to live a religious life, religious to their own understanding. Further, traditions of the sacred female and sacred feminine/masculine aided them in their ability to reject negative situations in marriage and live their lives as ascetics, without the comforts of home and family, but with the knowledge of their powerful relationship with their deities.

## CHAPTER TWO: WOMEN AND THE DIVINE FEMININE

To ascertain the divine feminine within Hinduism from the seventh through the seventeenth centuries CE in India, one must first pull together the many aspects of the divine feminine from that period. One must ask what the environment was that these six Hindu female saints lived religiously and philosophically.

The period from the seventh to the seventeenth century was an amazing period of tremendous change in Hinduism, as the religion moved from a religion of political and domestic rituals to a more personal religion with strong ethical principles. So much that is known as Hinduism today was established after 500 CE. Between the Vedic period and this period, Buddhism and Jainism were founded as reform movements, grew in size, and Buddhism became one of the most profound philosophical systems in the world.

The *saddarśanas*, or six classical schools of Hindu philosophy, were formulated and refined in the beginning of the Common Era. Original texts like Bādarāyaṇa's *Brahma Sūtras*, Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*, Īśvarakṛṣṇa's *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*, Akṣapāda Gautama's *Nyāya Sūtra*, Kaṇāda's *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra*, and Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* were studied. These texts were precise, concise summaries of a philosophy that would be expounded upon by the student's guru.

In the coming centuries, commentators would expand upon the short verses to more fully explicate their meanings. To mention just a few of the commentators, Patanjali's *Yogasūtra* was commented on by Vyāsa (BCE century), Vācaspati Miśra (ninth century), Bhoja (tenth century) and Nageśa (seventeenth

century). Íśvarakṛṣṇa's *Sāmkhya Kārikā* was commented on by Kapila (seventh century) and Vācaspati Mísra (ninth century). The *Nyāya Sūtra* was commented on by Vātsyāyana (fourth century), and Jayanta and Vācaspati Mísra (both ninth century). The *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* was commented on by Praśastrapāda (fifth century) and Śrīdhara (tenth century).

Other writers established their own schools of these philosophies. Śankara (eighth century) established the *advaita* (non-dualism) school of Vedānta based on Bādarāyaṇa's *Brahma Sūtra*, the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Rāmānuja (eleventh century) theorized a *viśiṣṭādvaita* (qualified monistic) school of Vedānta; Nimbarka (twelfth century), established a *dvaitādvaita* (duality in unity) school of Vedānta; Śrī Vallabhācārya (fifteenth century) a Vedānta school emphasizing *puṣṭimarga* or path of grace; and Caitanya (fifteenth century) established a *bhakti* Vedānta school based on Kṛṣṇa.

For the Nyāya school of philosophy, Jayanta (ninth century) and Udayana (tenth century) wrote new theory. New Mīmāṃsā schools included those by Prabhākara (eighth century) and Kumārila (ninth century).

Developments in yoga included the *Yoga-Yājñavalkya* dated to the ninth century CE. The *Gheranda Samhita*, approximately 1685, is a *hathayoga* text listing the various *āsanas*, *mudrās*, *pratyāhāras*, *prāṇāyāmas*, *dhyānayoga*, and *samādhis*, and their health benefits.

The aforementioned are just a few of the most important commentators on these texts. The proliferation of commentators attests to the vitality of Hindu philosophy during this period. Throughout the geographical extent of India

philosophers were meeting, discussing, and deepening their understanding of ontology.

Besides the standard six philosophical schools, other religious sects emerged that focused on valuable deities, the Devī, Viṣṇu and Śiva, from indigenous traditions and growing out of Vedāntic ideas. Samuel hypothesizes that city-states were the norm before the establishment of a new urbanization in the fifth to sixth centuries that arose in the middle Gangetic plain who had local protective deities, today called *yakṣas*, and local female protective deities who protected from illness and protected children (Samuel 2008, 201-202).

The Bhagavatas, which included Kṛṣṇa began in the second century before the Common Era in west India (Bhandarkar 1965, 3), then emerged on a pan-Indian scale about the first century of the Common Era. They worshipped Vāsudeva, a form of Kṛṣṇa, who is referenced by the grammarian Pāṇini in the mid-second century BCE (Bhandarkar 1965, 3; Samuel 2008, 202), and was later considered an avatar of Viṣṇu. Among those worshippers of Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa, the Ālvārs were Tamil saints from the seventh through the tenth centuries who wrote devotional songs that were collected later. The ideas of these two religious schools influenced the philosophical ideas that philosopher Rāmānuja set forth in the eleventh century.

Śaivite religious schools begin with the Pāśupatas referenced in the *Mahābhārata* (Bhandarkar 1965, 117). The early Śaivite literature includes the Āgama texts and later literature in Tamil Nadu, composed by the Nāyanārs. These early Śaivites were dualistic, *dvaitas*. In Tamil Nadu, the Nāyanārs extolled the

personal experience of Śiva, beginning in the sixth and seventh centuries, which were later collected and written down. Kashmir Śaivism is said to have begun in the Himalayas near Mt. Kailāsa in the fourth century with Tryambakaditya. In the eighth century, his sixteenth descendent, Sangamāditya, settled in Kashmir, and this school developed several scriptures including Somānanda's *Śivadraṣṭi*, and his disciple Utpaladeva's *Īśvarapratyabhijñā* (Kaul 1999, 84-5). Vasugupta wrote his *advaitan Śiva Sūtra* in the eighth century that was expounded upon by Abhinavagupta in the tenth century (1998). Abhinavagupta's greatest contribution was the *Tantrāloka*, which was the fundamental text for Kashmir Śaivism. Later the Vīraśaiva sect developed in Karnataka under Basava (eleventh century), who taught a strong *advaita* philosophy that included reform to the social structure, in order to eliminate the discrimination of castes and also discrimination against women.

The *Devī Mahātmyā Purāṇa*, written c. 400-500 CE, the first reference to the Devī (Goddess), tells the story of Durgā as Mahādevī (Great Goddess) and is considered the earliest text to identify a female deity as Supreme. The Great Goddess is also identified at times as Mahālakṣmī or as Mahāsarasvatī. The *Devī Mahātmyā Purāṇa* was later incorporated into the *Mārkaṇdeya Purāṇa*, which was incorporated into the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, allegedly compiled about the fifteenth century of the Common Era. These two purāṇas are not considered in the list of the eighteen major purāṇas, which are inclusive of Brahmanic deities. Art historical evidence places the Devī to the beginning of stone sculpture, about the

second century BCE, with images of Lakṣmī.<sup>10</sup> The worship of Śiva/Śakti as the one conscious creative power was broadened and philosophically theorized in this period, especially by the Kashmir Śaivites.

Also non-Brahmanic, Tantric texts began circa the seventh century, but textual evidence places the beginning of Tantric philosophy and rituals earlier (Lorenzen 2002, 26).<sup>11</sup> These texts celebrate the religious power of women.<sup>12</sup> Traditional scholarly opinion holds that Tantra treats women as tools that men utilized to achieve *siddhis* (magical powers); however, traditions of women Tantric masters exist and the valuation of the female body and of the female religious sense was sometimes very positive towards women. Tantrism remained important in India until at least the thirteenth century, and it continues through the present.

How did women of this period see themselves religiously? How did they come to understand their own basic nature, *svabhava*?<sup>13</sup> How did they come to

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10. The inability to distinguish at times between Mahālakṣmī and Lakṣmī, and amongst Durgā, Mahālakṣmī and Mahāsarasvatī is a function of a particular geographical area or henotheistic donor. Research needs to be done in this field.

11. Lorenzen (2002) mentions Bānabhatta's *Kādambarī* and *Harsacarita*, Mahendravarman's *Mattavilāsa*, and Dandin's *Daśakumāracarita* as the first four Sanskrit literary texts.

12. See Georg Feuerstein, *Tantra* (1998); David R. Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine* (1997); Sanjukta Gupta, Dirk Jan Hoens, and Teun Goudriaan, *Hindu Tantrism* (1979); Katherine Anne Harper and Robert L. Brown, *The Roots of Tantra* (2002); David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body* (1996) and *Kiss of the Yogini* (2003); and Geoffrey Samuel, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra* (2008).

13. *Svabhava* comes from the Sanskrit *sva*, "own" and *bhava*, "nature" (Monier-Williams 1976).

understand their religious roles as women, their *strīsvadharmā*?<sup>14</sup> Were they literate? How educated can we expect these women of the middle ages to be? Katherine K. Young names apotheosis, henotheism, sacrifice, yoga, and emotion as religious practices that enhance women's domestic religiosity (Young 1987, 59). What were their religious practices? Did they learn their philosophy from a woman's oral tradition? Did it come fully formed from their own reasoning? These questions are difficult to answer, as women's experience and thinking was rarely documented.

To infer the status of women during different historical eras, both androcentric scholars and feminist scholars quote from important Hindu texts, for example, from the *Laws of Manu* the statements that a woman should always be subject to their father, their husband, or their son. The *Laws of Manu* state: "As a child, she must remain under her father's control; as a young woman, under her husband's; and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. She must never seek to live independently" (Manu 5.148 in Olivelle 2004, 96). They quote the laws allowing a woman to choose to go with her husband on the third stage of life, or *āśrama*, to an ashram, or to stay at home. Julia Leslie (1989) translated the *Stridharmapaddhati* of Tryambakarajan, which details women's submissive role toward men. And Hindu women today will quote from the *Rāmāyāna*, the teaching Sītā learned in her education, valorizing her denial of her own activities for those of her husband. Morny Joy criticizes the idea that there was a single vision of what womanhood should be: "In appeals to *Vedas* or *Manu*, a single,

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14. *Strīsvadharmā* comes from the Sanskrit, *strī*, "woman," *sva*, "own," and *dharma*, duty; therefore, it is a woman's own duty, versus that of a man.



idealized vision of womanhood is constructed ignoring the divergences of caste/class/regional/historical variants” (Joy 2004, 29). Nancy M. Martin (2003, 268-269) agrees with Joy, arguing that the text, *The Laws of Manu*, is not followed by all Hindus, but that British colonialist judges, like William Jones, referred to textual material, like that of *The Laws of Manu*, for their legal authority. She feels that legal leap, while well intentioned, subverted other oral means of transmission of ethical standards.

To place the Hindu women saints in their proper context, this chapter will first summarize for the reader the aspects of Hinduism that focus on women, beginning in the Indus Valley, then note religious changes regarding women through the medieval period and beyond, when the women I will be discussing lived. Like Joy, divergences of caste, class, region and historical variants will be taken into consideration.

### Indus Valley

In the Indus Valley, from approximately 3000-1800 BCE, female images were present from which we can infer a focus on cosmic female principles. As study of this major civilization has continued, variations are beginning to be ascertained between religious iconography and practices in different cities and towns. The greatest number of figurines discovered so far are those of animals; and of those, bulls hold the greatest frequency, about 75% of the seals from

Mohenjo Daro and Harappa (Fentress 1976, 210). In the study of the anthropomorphic artifacts by Possehl (2002) and Kenoyer (1998), most were female.

Terracotta figurines are the most common type of anthropomorphic artistic expression. Slender stylized female figurines,<sup>15</sup> the most often encountered, were either highly ornamented, or plain and abstract, and all are linear and static, frontally-oriented, with rough finishing on the back. They are found in Mohenjo Daro in a ratio of 10:1, women to men; they are noticeably absent in Kalibangan and Lothal (Ardeleanu-Jansen 1989, 10).

Other less refined female figures have been found in neighboring areas that show similar characteristics of large breasts, tiny waist, with elaborate hairstyles. The earliest known female figurines show up in Mehrgarh in unbaked clay (c. 3000 BCE), then later as stick figures and, in the height of the civilization, the female figures have an elaborate coiffure and rounded body. The culture of Nindowari shows a similar progression to female figures with breasts and figures of a woman suckling a child, in the mature phase of the culture (Allchin and Allchin 1982, 163). The figurines in each site are similar, yet each reflects, in details, their own traditions. Male terracotta figurines are found as well, but in very small numbers. Because of the frontal orientation and rough back of the terracotta figurines, it is likely they were displayed standing in a niche. Most were found in the residential area, not the formal citadel areas (Ardeleanu-Jansen 1989,

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15. See Kenoyer (1998), Figures 1.7, 6.6, 6.16, 7.20, 7.23 and Possehl (2002) Figure 6.9 for examples of the figurines.

6), indicating that these were found more in private homes than in public ritual sites. Whoever these women figures were, and what they stood for, has not been ascertained as yet.

Neither Kenoyer nor Possehl mention in their sections on Indus Valley religion the well-known male “priest-king” figure from Mohenjo-Daro (Possehl 2002, cover, Fig. 6.6, 6.7). Kenoyer says that this figure, and other male stone sculptures, is a representation of a ruling elite, and that the stone sculptures “may represent the rise and fall of . . . one such community of the ruling elite (Kenoyer 1998, 100). These stone sculptures were found on the surface of the site or in the topmost levels, buried under the fallen walls of the latest Indus structures” (100). The exquisite male torso of the figure called the “priest-king,” which is used frequently to represent the Indus Valley, is looked at by Kenoyer in 1998 (129) as a dancer, and Possehl dates it to the Late Period of the Indus Valley civilization, perhaps 2000 BCE, see note below (2002, 114).<sup>16</sup>

Despite the emphasis in Western texts on these few male figures from the Indus Valley, it is clear that the majority of sculptures from the Indus Valley period represented the young slender woman. Their importance to later periods is evidenced at the Museum für Indische Kunst Berlin, which has three figures in the

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16. Possehl doesn't specify the approximate date of the sculpture, terming it “Late Period.” His book (p. 29) gives a chronology for the Indus Age, but this chronology does not use the term “Late Period.” It gives the “Mature Harappan as 2500-1900 B.C. and “Posturban Harappan” as 1900-1700 BC. I would assume this sculpture to be Late Mature Harappan or early Posturban Harappan, somewhere around 2000 BCE.

Mathura style from fourth century BCE, c. 200 BCE, and 150 BCE,<sup>17</sup> that are very reminiscent of the Indus Valley figures. All three have elaborate headpieces, and number I 10 131 is sculpted in the same manner as Indus Valley figurines with clay pieces added to an original figure. All three have, like the Indus Valley figurines, large hemispherical breasts and small waist, which are the classic female iconography found in later Hindu art. This suggests either continuity of body type or of religious/artistic stylization beginning in the Indus Valley era.

A number of “traders’ seals” discovered in the Indus Valley that included a script which has not yet been deciphered but is considered to have been formulated around 2600-2500 BCE (Possehl 2002, 133).<sup>18</sup> A series of seals represents a female stick figurine in relationship to trees and to an audience.<sup>19</sup> The seals were found in the urban areas of Mohenjo Daro, Harappa, and Kalibangan. The figures on the seals are quasi-stick figures, rarely displaying sexual characteristics, either breasts or penises, due to their small size. Kenoyer alludes to two types of trees represented, the pipal with heart-shaped leaves, and the banyan with elongated leaves. One figurine, considered female, stands in the midst of a womb of pipal branches, with a ritual performer before her, and a watching audience of seven figures. A similar figure (HR 3766) is a portrait of a

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17. The museum numbers are I 10 123; I 10 131; and I 3224.

18. Scholars now say these seals “may not have been made as a part of seal-based administration known from Mesopotamia” (Possehl 2002, 130). The edges are not worn down indicating that they were not used for marking packages, but were probably used as individual markers or possibly amulets (130-131).

19. See Kenoyer (1998), Figures 6.1, 6.22, 6.24, 6.32, and Possehl (2002), Figure 6.17 for representations of these figures.

woman upside-down with a pipal tree growing out of her vagina. Kenoyer infers the pipal tree can be said to allude to vegetation and the agricultural tradition (Kenoyer 1998, 105). The unusual image of the woman with a tree growing from her vagina might symbolize either an earth mother, from which all trees and plants grow, or a fertility figure conflating the fertility of the vagina with the fertility of vegetation represented by the pipal tree.

The hunting and gathering tradition is represented by banyan leaves (Kenoyer 1998, 105). One terracotta seal portrays a woman balanced in a banyan tree with a snarling tiger below her (Fig. 6.22). A second seal has a figure identified as a woman with tigers on either side of her with which she appears to be wrestling (Fig. 6.24). The third image of a woman on a seal, in which breasts are clearly shown, has morphed shamanistically. Her hands have become claws, and her feet hooves, as she reaches for the neck of the doomed tiger, teeth bared, ears back, who has also metamorphosed, with the leaves of the banyan tree crowning his head (Possehl 2002, 6.17). In another seal, the female figure has metamorphosed into the tiger, her head and torso female, and her body that of a tiger (Kenoyer 1998, Fig. 6.32). These similar images, though from different cities, can be interpreted as representing sympathetic magic, where the hunter becomes the hunted in the ritual dance, to unite their souls and invite the hunted to submit to the hunter's needs. Shamanism came into India by way of Tibet from Central and North Asia, a tradition that can be extrapolated back to the Indus Valley (McEvelley 1981, 44-45). This series of images gives evidence for

shamanism in the Indus Valley at the time of its ancient hunting and gathering tradition.

It is proposed that yoga was known and practiced by the Indus Valley (Dhyansky 1973, 9). Several portrayals of a figure sitting in a yogic *āsana* have raised speculation amongst observers as to whether the Indus Valley people originated and practiced yogic meditation. McEvelley argues they are seated in the *mūlabhandhāsana* yogic position with feet resting on each other, toes down. By raising the buttocks, as in the Indus Valley figures, then the figures would be seated this yogic position (McEvelley 1981, 19). McEvelley goes on to argue that if this is indeed yoga, then, when later it entered the Aryan sphere it developed into two brands of yoga, Aryan and less Aryan (McEvelley 1981, 56). “Aryan” is that which Patañjali expounded upon with his focus on ethics and with *mokṣa* as the goal (McEvelley 1981, 57); and “less Aryan” leads to *siddhis*, magical powers, including those surfacing in later Tantric practices (McEvelley 2002, 277). Samuel argues that just not enough is known of those figures to verify those assertions and that reading later practices into the material is not a valid practice (Samuel 2008, 8). Edwin Bryant (2001, 160-164) lists the history for the identification of the proto-Śiva seal, stating some scholars—such as Marshall (1937), Mahādevī (Hiltebeitel 1978), and Agni (Rao 1991)—identify the seal with Śiva. He believes as Samuel does: that there is simply not enough evidence to make any of these connections. I agree with McEvelley, who postulates the arising of two traditions

from a form of yoga begun in the Indus Valley period. On the other hand, while I agree we cannot project religious values backward in any definitive way, still it is intriguing to think of the possibility of a continuous yogic tradition stretching from the Indus Valley to present day India. And it seems that the figure raises this possibility. Let us look at these figures more closely.

If these Indus Valley figures are correctly interpreted as yogic figures, they are the first representation of a figure doing yoga in India, and would indicate that yoga is probably indigenous to India, much before Patanjali. Possehl (2002, 141) accepts of one figure as a proto-Śiva in the Paśupati, Lord of the Beasts myth. Kenoyer says that these figures cannot be confirmed as a proto-Śiva (Kenoyer, 1998, 113).

I would agree that the first figure, heavily ornamented, is male, for it has a beard. One must question the sex of the other figure, however, which is assumed male. In looking closer at the naked yogic figure, Kenoyer says it has large pectoral muscles. Yes, that could be, but those could also be considered breasts. The “penis” on the figure is the oddest shaped penis with two sections. It is suggested that it represents a girdle or waist-cloth (Wheeler 1968, 105); but generally Indus Valley men have been shown naked, and certainly not wearing dhotis. The two lines that converge at the pubic area, considered the “penis,” could represent the ovaries and fallopian tubes, in which case, it could be interpreted as a female. That indicates that the first yogic figures in India were male and possibly female. Why were they doing yoga? What were they gaining by that? And were they yogic deities, not just yogic figures?

We have noted that, in the Indus Valley, the highest preponderance of anthropomorphic figures is female. The consistent usage of the male “priest-king” figure, the male torso, and the representation of the yogic figure as “proto-Śiva,” and the lack of discussion on the female figurines and seal representations, reflect the misunderstanding of the academic community of the “theologic” aspects of early civilization. (*Thealogy* refers to the identification of the divine female principle, in contrast to *theology*, which studies the divine male.) That is to say, the possibility of goddesses being imaged during this era is generally overlooked or marginalized. David Kinsley agrees and adds: “It seems logical to suppose that the emphasis on the feminine in later Hinduism is a survival or persistence of an indigenous, non-Aryan religiosity that has finally surfaced in the Hindu tradition” (Kinsley 1986, 216).

The strong presence of female figures within the Indus Valley lends credence to the probability that female figures are a part of an indigenous tradition that focused on a divine feminine. More archaeological work needs to be done on other sectors of India during this period so establish whether that was a pan-Indic tradition or only a part of the Indus Valley.

Signe Cohen has argued that the number of female figures from this period should indicate a matrilineal tradition. A burial pattern indicated that in a multiple burial women were more closely related to each other than the men buried with them; this lends credence to the idea of a matrilocal residence that is commonly associated with matrilineal descent (Cohen 2006, 190-191). Cohen continues that the lack of religious and political centers, and the use of writing on seals rather



than authoritative steles, like those found in Mesopotamia, further indicates the lack of a united authority and the relative importance of individual families or clans (194). I disagree with Cohen's opinion that there is a lack of religious and political centers, as I think that the large tank<sup>20</sup> areas were public areas for social, possibly political activities such as the storage of grain. The tanks found in those areas are similar to tanks found near Hindu temples in the present day and could be religious. The 10:1 ratio of female to male figurines has already been discussed. And I note that the large number of female statuettes found in the residential area (Ardeleanu-Jansen 1989, 10), opposed to public areas, *would* indicate the importance of a religious system for individual families or clans, within the larger political context involving the storage of grain and other administrative activities.

In the reconstruction of the female role in the Indus Valley, reference can be made to several goals laid out by Westenholz in her discussion on Mesopotamian women (Westenholz 1990): "(1) depictions of the images of women: (a) self images and (b) society-engendered images on the various levels—mythic, heroic, folk; (2) establishment of the life-cycle patterns of women within the kingship structure, including birth, marriage, childbirth, as well as inclusion or exclusion from male society; (3) delineation of roles possible to women in the political system, accessible positions within the hierarchy of the state structure; (4) definition and boundaries of women's roles and responsibilities in the socio-economic matrix; (5) function of women in the religious sphere; their relationship

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20. Tanks or ponds are found today near rural temples and are used for bathing before entering the temple.

to the sacred, piety, and pollution” (512). She further considers the factors of class distinctions, and the possibly disparity of role in public and private domains (512). None of these goals have been achieved in the Indus Valley studies, but they indicate the lack of research on women within this ancient civilization, the largest in the ancient world. Further study of these women’s roles would aid in establishing the significance of the Indus Valley female figurines and seal images.

On the east side of the subcontinent, also in the pre-Vedic period, R. N. Bhattacharya has identified, among prehistoric predominately zoomorphic figures found in Orissa and the environs from the Paleolithic period, six female figurines (two pregnant); two male representations (one a phallus), and two human faces that are not sexually identifiable, from the Paleolithic period. One female figurine consists of a torso but no extremities. In it, the vulva is a deep slit and a small hole in the back represents the anus. Bhattacharya’s article demonstrates the preponderance of female figurines compared to male replicas in Orissa, as well as in the Indus Valley (Bhattacharya 2003, 15).

### The Vedic and Upanisadic Period

In order to set the stage for discussion of the women saints of India from 700-1700 CE, I will look at the early Vedic period (1800-1000 BCE) with three topics in mind: the theology of goddesses; women who wrote Vedic hymns, or were otherwise known as scholars; and philosophical ideas on womanhood.

The hymns of the *R̥g Veda* tell us about the hopes and needs of the people who recited them. Samuel places these writers who lived in small kingdoms and

herded cattle in northwestern India, probably from Afghanistan originally, at the time some of the hymns were written (Samuel 2008, 51). The poems are pluralistic representations; ideas from similar cultures with the same underlying basic concepts. Forty goddesses are mentioned; and hymns are written to the goddesses, including Uṣas, Vāc, Pṛthivī, Āpā, and Rātrī. The hymn to the goddess Rātrī, Night (RV 10:127 in O’Flaherty 1981, 129) is a beautiful portrayal of a village settling in peacefully for the night. Uṣa, or Dawn, is a goddess of prosperity as symbolized by the value of the cows or horses she hitches to her chariot each morning (RV 1.92 in O’Flaherty 1981, 179). Evidences of women’s religious activities in the Vedic period are established by their authorship of some of the Vedic verses: “Orthodox tradition recorded in the *Sarvanukramanika* as many as twenty women among the authors of *Rg Vedic* hymns” (Altekar 1956, 10). Ellison Banks Findly lists Lopāmudrā and her husband Agastya as composers of RV 1.179 (O’Flaherty 1981, 247). Lopāmudrā was the daughter of the ṛṣi, King Kaksrit (Findly 1985,49) She also lists Apālā, as the writer of RV 8.91 (O’Flaherty 1981, 256). Ghosā, foremost of the female poets, composed both RV 10.39 and RV 10.40 (O’Flaherty 1981, 264 for RV 10.40). Pravrajika Amalprana (1984, 76) mentions several women: Romaśā, writer of RV 1.126; the Devī-sūkta by a woman named Vāc; and Śaśvatī.

Text criticism of the Vedic verses points out the religious roles women pursued in the Vedic period. Women before 600 BCE were able to undertake fasts for themselves, to hear and learn the Vedas (Wadley 1977, 126); and Wadley adds that wives of Brahmin priests often conducted the life cycle rites (126), that is to

say, wives of Brahmin priests often performed rituals, dealing with birth, marriage, and death. As partners to their husband and as the locus of hospitality, women were necessary parts of the domestic rituals. The Vedas also give evidence of women ascetics. The *Atharva Veda* refers to *brahmacarinīs* gathering wood and begging for the guru. Findly lists two classes of female students, *upādhyānīs* and *ācaryās*, both of whom learned Vedic hymns and prayers and, further, learned proper ritual techniques. Also included in the Vedas are the *sadyavadhus* who studied only until marriage, and the *brahmavādinīs*, who pursued Vedic studies and Pūrvamīmāṃsā for a lifetime (Findly 1985, 49). A *sahadarminī* was a woman who was an intellectual companion to her husband; and a *brahmacarinī* was an ascetic. The *Atharva Veda* states, “May the teacher who fastens the girdle on, free us of all impediments. Become sister of sages, desire thought and wisdom, religious zeal and mental vigor” (Atharva Veda, 83).

Cosmic female principles may be extracted from the Vedas, which speak of many creations. The world was created with the material, *Puruṣa*, and the mental and vocal constructs, *Vāc*, in an order, *ṛta*, and through the heat, or *tapas*, of sacrifice that order was maintained. *Puruṣa* and *Vāc* are seen as sacred male and female powers.

In one version of creation, the *Ṛg Veda* tells of the sacrifice of *Puruṣa*, which sets the material universe in order, including the ranking of people into castes:

When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet:

His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet, the Servants were born.

The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born. Indra and Agni came from his mouth, and from his vital breath the Wind was born.

From his navel the middle realm of space arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two feet came the earth, and the quarters of the sky from his ear. Thus they set the worlds in order. (10:90.11-14 in O'Flaherty 1981, 31)

Complementing this male, material idea of creation, the *Rg Veda* includes a female creation story of mental not material constructs under the auspices of the goddess, Vāc:

When the wise ones fashioned speech [Vāc] with their thought, sifting it as grain is sifted through a sieve, then friends recognized their friendships. A good sign was placed on their speech.

Through the sacrifice they traced the path of speech and found it inside the sages. They held it and portioned it out to man, together the seven singers praised it. (10.71.2-3 in O'Flaherty 1981, 61).

The complementary principles of material and mental, or material and spiritual, as just discussed, are a pattern that entwines within Hinduism beginning here. However elsewhere it is the male that is equated with the material and the female with the mental; but elsewhere, as in the Sāmkhya school of philosophy, the female is equated with the material aspect of creation, and the male with the metaphysical *puruṣa*.

A second hymn by Vāc continues this expansion from the physical into the mental, though she doesn't name herself. It is considered to be the nucleus of later Śaktism (Bhattacharyya 1996, 2).

I am the queen, the confluence of riches, the skillful one who is first among those worthy of sacrifice. The gods divided me up into

various parts, for I swell in many places and enter into many forms.

The one who eats food, who truly sees, who breathes, who hears what is said, does so through me. Though they do not realize it, they dwell in me. Listen, you whom they have heard: what I tell you should be heeded.

I am the one who says, by myself, what gives joy to gods and men. Whom I love I make awesome; I make him a sage, a wise man, a Brahmin.

I stretch the bow for Rudra so that his arrow will strike down the hater of prayer. I incite the contest among the people. I have pervaded sky and earth.

I gave birth to the father on the head of this world. My womb is in the waters, within the ocean. From there I spread out over all creatures and touch the very sky with the crown of my head.

I am the one who blows like the wind, embracing all creatures. Beyond the sky, beyond this earth, so much have I become in my greatness. (10:125.3-8 in O'Flaherty 1981, 63)<sup>21</sup>

In Hindu metaphysics, the idea of speech and the word is an important thread, and that word has a feminine ending (Vāc and Sarasvatī). This energy or *śakti* includes Word, *vāc*; consciousness, *cit*; breath, *samvid*, and vital or vibrative energy, *prāṇa* (Padoux 1990, xi).

From the beginning the creative forces of feminine and masculine manifested, Vāc and Puruṣa. The Word (Vāc) is that which generates the Vedas, which inspires the *ṛṣis* to hear, under the veil of soma, the great Word, or speech, that impels order in the universe. The sacrifice of Puruṣa creates materiality. Here materiality is chaos unless held in control by the Word (Vedas). The Vedas order life and also order the afterlife. Through doing sacrifices properly, with the proper words, in the proper time, one goes to the Land of the Fathers. The Word can

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21. See also André Padoux (1990) for further elucidation on the importance of Vāc in the Vedic period on through the later manifestation of Kashmir Śaivite philosophy.

exist without materiality; it is held without materiality in Brahman during the interstice between destruction and creative growth. One wants to subsume one's materiality, life, through knowledge and practice of the Word. But materiality exists purely in a chaotic manner without the Word.

A female power exists in the sacred creative imagination and its works. This interest in the creative imagination continues through Hinduism, which is interested in the creative imagination of each person as they develop their religious interests, through their rituals, pilgrimages, and meditations. The order, *ṛta*, eventually becomes an understanding of a natural moral order, *dharma*, which one should diligently work to emulate, leading eschatologically to a more desirable reincarnation. But at this time, it is more a creative aesthetic order that helps one create an understanding of the nature of life on the earth, both physical and moral.

Within both the Vedic system and the Sāṃkhya system, two of the most important demarcations are masculine and feminine. In the Sāṃkhya system, which dates back to 500 BCE, the feminine/masculine order of *Ṛg Veda* is reversed. *Puruṣa*, consciousness, is masculine, yet unable to move until moved by *prakṛti*, feminine energy, which again is a generating force, but which here is materiality. The analogy is that one cannot have consciousness without a body to hold and impel it and, in turn, be impelled by it. Both feminine and masculine are placed on par with one another.

The Upaniṣads (700-300 BCE), though also androcentric, celebrate the goddess Umā in the *Kena Upaniṣad*; she teaches Indra, Agni, and Vayu about

Brahman. They in turn admit of a tradition of women learners. In the *ṛṣitarpana*, a list of sages to whom one must daily pay respect, three women scholars from the thirteen classic Upaniṣads are named: Gārgī Vācaknavī, Vādavā Pratitheyī, and Sulabhā Maitreyī in the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, one of the earlier Upaniṣads. Gārgī Vācaknavī appears in two chapters in the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*. In the first (BU 3.6.) she seems to be trying to understand a presupposition, but she is eventually told by Yājñavalkya, “Don’t ask too many questions, Gārgī, or your head will shatter apart!! You are asking too many questions about a deity about whom one should not ask too many questions. So, Gārgī, don’t ask too many questions!!” (*Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 3.6.1: 6 in Olivelle 1986/1996, 40-41). Findly (1985) argues that Gārgī’s style of questioning and her silence prefigure Buddhist scenes. She sees her as forethinking, perhaps even too much ahead of her time, and that is why Yājñavalkya silenced her.<sup>22</sup> By the second piece, however (BU 3.8), Gārgī Vācaknavī shows herself to be a respected seeker after truth, for she has the authority to chide the others, stating that Yājñavalkya is indeed a great scholar. In both selections, Gārgī Vācaknavī is concerned with the basic elements of existence according to philosophical theory.

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22. Ibid., 51. Findly compares the Upanisadic and Buddhist references: Gargi and Yajnavalkya—On what is water strung and threaded? On wind. On what is wind strung and threaded? On ether. One what is ether strung and threaded? [and so forth] *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 3.6.1.

Sariputta and Gotama: Birth, on what is it based? Becoming. Becoming, on what is it based? Grasping. Grasping, on what is it based? Craving [and so forth].



Black (2007), in his text *The Character of the Self in Ancient India*, agrees that Gārgī represents a philosophical female. He says that, though she is defeated in argumentation by Yājñavalkya, “she is the first challenger [to Yājñavalkya] to be threatened, the only one to speak twice, the only one to address the other challengers, and the only one who gets in the last word with Yājñavalkya” (150).

Maitreyī is another astute female in the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*. She is co-wife with Kātyāyanī. Their husband, Yājñavalkya, praised Maitreyī, who took part in theological discussions, and he opined that Kātyāyanī’s understanding was “limited to womanly matters.” As Yājñavalkya was about to leave (wander? die?), he wanted to make a settlement between Maitreyī and Kātyāyanī. Maitreyī informed him that she didn’t need worldly goods, but understanding of that which he knows (BU 2.4.1-6).

Black argues that when Maitreyī questions Yājñavalkya (2007) her confusion is brought about by “Yājñavalkya’s muddled explanation” (165). He further argues that Kātyāyanī doesn’t represent a reticent wife but that her “knowledge of womanly matters,” *śtrīprajñā*, could have been quite extensive and could refer to the knowledge of the wife of the priest who “manages the household and fill[s] in for the priestly duties of her husband in his absence” (165).

Black (2007) further argues that the incidents surrounding the male student and later priest, Satyakāma, in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 4:4-17 (Olivelle 1986/1996, 130-137), give further information of women and learning. First

Satyakāma was praised when he truthfully used his mother's name rather than his father's, thus indicating that he was born without knowledge of his father. This reliance on his matrilineal line presupposes the women in the *Mahābhārata* who also have children out of wedlock. Black theorizes that when Satyakāma's disciple was taught by the fires, while Satyakāma was gone elsewhere, he was really taught by Satyakāma's wife, linking her words with the fires (Black 2007, 161).

In the times of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, it was desired both to have a learned daughter and a learned son. A verse is given for such a daughter: "I want a learned daughter who will live out her full life span" (BU 6.4.17). So Gārgī was not necessarily unusual. McGee (2002) concludes in her article on *adhikara* and Mīmāṃsā that women jointly with their husbands, according to Pūrvamīmāṃsā, have the right to perform sacrifices, which means they must have been taught the Sanskrit hymns (44). The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* gives a celebration of woman as sacrifice to match the sacrifice of Prajāpati:

Her vulva is the sacrificial ground; her pubic hair is the sacred grass; her labia majora are the Soma-press; and her labia minora are the fire blazing at the centre. A man who engages in sexual intercourse with this knowledge obtains as great a world as a man who performs a Soma sacrifice, and he appropriates to himself the merits of the women with whom he has sex. The women, on the other hand, appropriate to themselves the merits of a man who engages in sexual intercourse with them without this knowledge. (BU 6.4.3 in Olivelle 1986/1996, 88)

Black (2007, 138) couches his reference to these women within a larger framework that the text of the Upaniṣads is written for a male, priestly audience, therefore the female body is reduced to a sexual and procreative body. He

continues in a manner that foreshadows the alleged Tantric use of the female body: “The Brahmin man is characterized as a sexual subject and the male body is never reduced to the sexual organs. Rather, men are encouraged to have sex for the sake of actualizing their pursuits of knowledge, and intercourse is portrayed as an activity that is part of the quest for immortality” (138-139). His reference is to BU 1.4.3-6 where Prajāpati splits to form man and woman and “produced fire from his mouth as from a vagina. As a result the inner sides of both of these—the hands and the mouth—are without hair, for the inside of the vagina is without hair” (BU 1.4.6 in Olivelle 1986/1996, 14).

I disagree with Black’s theory of the larger context of the Upaniṣads in regards to the female regarding the two statements he quoted from the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* above. This reference to female sexual organs and the sacredness of the female organs being a part of the sacrifice are references not just to clinical descriptions of sexual organs, but instead, I feel reference a primal sacred female. Recall that the reference to the sacrifice of Prajāpati earlier is not symbolic of Prajāpati’s limbs, it is symbolic of the ordering of the social structure; in the same manner, the sacrifice of the woman above is symbolic of the sacredness of the female. The vagina has already been established as sacred because it blasts forth fire, which Prajāpati seeks to imitate. He is pleased with his hairless result because it resembles the vagina in its hairlessness. Male has imitated female here who is greater than he is, and is sacred to him.

In the first Western accounts of India, women take an important role in philosophical matters. The Greek Nearchos (360-300 BCE) relates when speaking

of the Hindu men: “that their wives join them in the study of philosophy” (Strabo, *Geography*, XV 1.66 in Vofchuk 1988, 149). Strabo (63 BCE–c. 23 BCE) reports that “women, as well as men, study philosophy, with some of them, and that the women likewise abstain from the delights of love” (Vofchuk 1988, 150). These outside observations indicate that women like Gārgī and Maitreyī were not unique, women were observed studying philosophy in the first century BCE and were ascetics as well.

Though the Vedic period was portrayed in the Vedas as overwhelmingly patriarchal, with its male sky gods, male priests who must conduct the rituals, its concern for the establishment and perpetuation of the crown, and its concern for male children to do proper rites for an elder after death, still by reading closely one finds a place for women within this. First some of the most important deities and their mythology are female. As well, some of the Vedic hymns were written by women. Secondly, the rites within the home were dual rites to be done by both the wife and the husband and some of the political rites, like the horse sacrifice, required both the man and the woman. Hindu rites, though established for the male side of the family who worked within the political structure of the community, did not prevent women taking on the roles as well as, or instead of her husband. Finally the concern for male children did not deny the desire for female children as well and for intelligent, well-educated women.

## Epics

Within the epics, women hold a strong role within the extended family and act independently. Their strong role was slipping though, and by the completion of the epic period, the dharmaśāstras were requiring women to stay at home more.

Hinduism has two well-loved epics. The *Rāmāyāna*, the earlier of the two, is probably from 500-300 BCE and tells the story of the epic battle between Rāma and the demon Rāvana. The *Mahābhārata* probably received its present form between 200 BCE and 200 CE and is told and retold through television, theatre, and dance. Many of the well-loved heroines of the epics spent time as ascetics. Sītā, Damayantī, and Savitrī from the *Rāmāyāna* each spent time as ascetics. Śramanī was a featured female ascetic, as was Śabanī, a disciple of Mātanga, who through her sincerity and *guru bhakti* was revered. Ātreyī studied at Valmiki's hermitage, learning philosophy from the sage Āgastya. In the *Mahābhārata*, Draupadī and Kuntī spent long periods of their lives as ascetics. The *Mahābhārata* also mentions Sulabhā, a nun who bested the philosophical king Janaka in philosophical discourse (Fitzgerald 2002, 641-677).<sup>23</sup> Śivā was mentioned as a female Vedic scholar and Vidulā in the Śāntiparvan discoursed on yoga and

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23. The Sāmkhya nun Sulabhā heard that King Janaka had boasted about reaching *kaivalya* already. She made herself beautiful and went to see him at his court, sitting across from him. Suddenly she entered his body, at which, he became very angry, telling her that she was not a *ksatriya* like him, so could not invade his body; she was a woman not a man and how could she invade his body. Then he realized; if he had reached *kaivalya* he wouldn't care about the objections he had criticized her with and realized that he needed to learn from her, rather than the other way around (Fitzgerald 2002, 641-671). The author probably chose a woman to make the story more damning of King Janaka, to be bested by a woman, but the pretense that a woman was a Sāmkhyan nun was accepted by others would demonstrate that some Sāmkhyan nuns lived at the time of the *Mahābhārata*.

samādhi. Kuntī, Draupadī, Damayantī, and Sāvitrī remained as ascetics for years. Thus, these epics name these major and minor characters who were exemplary women, who lived as ascetics for portions of their lives or for their entire life and who engaged in philosophical discourse.

The *Mahābhārata* also demonstrates that Draupadī, the wife of the five Pāndava brothers, stood on the fulcrum between respect and disrespect for women. The women before her, Satyavatī, Kuntī and others, had the freedom to choose their own lives, even to bear children as single mothers. It is said that Draupadī learned kingship as a child sitting at her father’s feet (MBh III.33.58). She was admired by all as Panditā, learned and wise; and she advised people on women’s role within the system. Her knowledge of law was extensive and she was well able to speak to legal matters in a public setting. After the celebrated dice match, the essential question Draupadī asked at the court is not “Who did Yudhiṣṭhira lose first, himself or me?” (MBh II.60.5), as is asserted by other commentators, but rather, “What prince, or *raja Putra*, would wager his wife?” (MBh II.60.7). This question attacks legally the “ownership” of her and other *kṣatriya* (warrior caste) women. The summation of a legal argument emerges from behind that. In Draupadī’s world, the environment in which she was taught and accepted a marriage, where women chose their economic supports, and where women had children out of wedlock, the concept of ownership by men was not possible. No *raja Putra* would wager his wife. His wife is the other half of him.

It is said the Kali Yuga, the fourth epoch of time, which we live in currently, began after the end of the Mahābhārata war, when wise kings, like

Yudhiṣṭhira, no longer existed. It is conjectured that legal texts like the *Laws of Manu* were composed because the king could no longer know everyone in his kingdom; and it also marks the point where women's role became situated more inside of the house rather than in the political and philosophical arena. We can see from the *Laws of Manu* a sharp decline in the status of women in Hinduism.

Early Buddhism and Jainism (shortly after the life of their founders) gave a reluctant place to women within their religious hierarchy. The philosophy of the early Buddhist nuns has been saved in the *Therīgāthā*, a collection of hymns by early nuns. Important Buddhist women include Gopā, the wife of Siddhartha (who became the Buddha); Mahāprajāpati, who began the order of nuns; Kisā Gautamī, Supriyā, Vajirā, Sukkā, Patācāra, and Sanghamitrā (Amalprana 1984, 114).

Mahāyāna Buddhism began, with its more personal emphasis, and the great Buddhist philosophy also began. What did this do for Hinduism? Did the impetus towards a more personal religion begin in Buddhism or had it begun long ago in Hinduism? These are questions that need to be explored. Jains had a very strong female monastic tradition, in fact it is said that at the time of Mahāvīra there were thirty-six thousand nuns to fourteen thousand monks (128). The female Jain leader Candanā was the head of a great nunnery. The mothers of the Tīrthankaras were worshiped along with their sons, and one of the Tīrthankaras, Mallinātha, was a woman.

It is evident that women held religious roles and that female deities were worshipped in early Hinduism, that many women wrote philosophical and poetic texts, and that a cosmic female principle was present as well. It can be said that a

positive place for women as religious members of society, and a positive place for a cosmic female principle within religious ideals, had likely been included in Hinduism from the pre-Vedic period forwards and that a positive place for them continues through post-Vedic and Epic periods. This inference has been based on mostly textual and art historical evidence. It does not say what religious practices were fostered in individual villages, both before and during the Brahmanical sovereignty, because that evidence is not available.

#### Divine Feminine Archetypes from 700-1700 CE

Now let's turn to the period from 700-1700 CE, when the women saints of this study worked and taught, to look at their environment. A number of traditions where women have central roles blend and separate and blend together again during the millennium under consideration, like the delta of a vast river.

Brahmanical marriage represents a balance of masculine and feminine qualities. Hinduism developed from the beginning of the Common Era a divine prototype of a numinous couple be they Śiva and Pārvatī or Radha and Kṛṣṇa. In Hindu religious art the yoni and lingam represent the “life forces on which creation depended” (Carmody 1989, 49). Human beings are inexorably attached to “cosmic patterns of fertility and regeneration” (50). In the archetypal sense, goddesses developed in the Common Era could be either malevolent or benign. In the same manner, women were perceived as malevolent or benign. Positively a woman is the creator of the next generation in the family, and possesses beauty, power, and wealth. Negatively she represents arrogance, suspicion, decay and,



death (45). An unmarried woman of marriageable age, whether she was a widow or an ascetic, faced insinuations of malevolence, especially sexually as they did not fit into that complementary female/male ideal. Women who were ascetics were suspiciously viewed as temptresses. Women who were widows were marginal figures who could ruin a family's reputation.

Just as marriage had its divine prototype, so too did the independent woman in the new traditions of goddesses and especially the Mahādevī. Though it is known that the presence of goddess figures does not necessarily aid women in their spirituality and in their daily life, still I will argue that when a woman desires to use that archetype, it will aid her.

Female iconography during the timeframe from 700-1700 CE was both benign and malevolent. The Saptamātrkāś were early female figures found across India on temple friezes, but, later, in the text *Devī Mahatmyā*, they became secondary figures, drinking the blood of the fallen, like vultures in Durgā's great battlefield. Sātī could be a powerful and beneficent archetype, depending at which *tīrtha* one worshipped her. The Devī, a monotheistic/monistic goddess became an important figure, along with polytheistic goddesses, such as Lakṣmī, Parvātī, and Sarasvatī. This period is marked by the establishment of goddess temples and the proliferation of goddess stories carved into friezes on all temples. Tantric rituals idealized the individual woman.

Across India there were smaller traditions that served as transitional in time and transitional between the Devī and the people. The Yoginīs were very strong female figures, independent, vicious yet also sometimes gentle. The

*kuṇḍalinī*, an internal female snake that one must awaken for enlightenment, which was mapped out through yogic practices, created the cosmic female principle within their own body for adherents of this discipline. A plethora of female symbolism was available to women and men who were interested in it. The religious world of this period included interaction of the male and the female. As will be shown in my discussions of the six women saints, social mores, rather than any lack of a sacred female, contributed more to the dearth of women remembered for their philosophical activity.

A small number of paintings of female saints further illustrates women saints from the eye of the painter. Vidya Dehejia, the art historian, found a number of images of female *yoginīs*<sup>24</sup> done in the Mughal style. One from Rajasthan in 1687 wears a blanket shawl, a deer-horn whistle, carries a whisk of peacock feathers and has her dreadlocks pulled back in a bun. One from West Bengal in the eighteenth century shows two *yoginīs* together dressed in *gheru*, the earthen-colored clothing worn by ascetics, with a band around one's knees that aids in sitting, a fly-whisk, *rudraksha* beads, and large earrings that were characteristic of the Nathas. She adds that eighteenth century *rāgamāla* paintings of the Kedar ragini portrayed a single female ascetic. A seventeenth century painting of several female *yoginis* shows women at a pilgrimage site or isolated retreat (Dehejia 1990, 387-389).

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24. Yogini is here (uncapitalized) defined as a woman who practices yoga. The Yoginis (capitalized) mentioned in Chapter One were separate, cosmic beings who could be malevolent or beneficial.

Other images of *yoginīs* come from the Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad. One from the seventeenth century shows a *yoginī* in her *gheru* dress playing a *vina* and probably singing for two royal visitors dressed in silks and jewels. Another from the same period shows a *yoginī* dressed in *gheru* clothing holding a peacock feather fan and a trident, identifying her as Śaivite. From the same century again comes an image of a *yoginī* being greeted by a lion that she bends over to pet. She wears *rudraksha* beads, but her *churidars* (long pants) are patterned, which is unusual for an ascetic *yoginī*. A further one, not dated, shows a *yoginī* sitting on her mat under a tree in the forest with a lion lying down contentedly before her.

Other paintings reference Sītā at Valmiki's hermitage being given ascetics' clothing by other female ascetics. Further, one represents the goddess Umā meditating by herself to achieve marriage with Śiva as her husband, next to her hut built by branches and leaves. She wears bark and leaves as ascetics are said to have worn long ago.

These paintings provide evidence for assuming that, during the Mughal period, female ascetics wandered around by themselves, dancing together in a remote area, and teaching disciples. As the subject of portraiture was generally royalty or religious icons, such as the images portrayed in the *rāgamāla* paintings and the *Kṛṣṇa-līla* paintings of Kṛṣṇa at play with the milkmaids, these paintings project a value held by society for women who became ascetics. Many of them hold Śaivite iconography and some stand before a Śaivite shrine, so they appear to be Śaivites, but little is known of them (Mittal 2004, 173-174). The subject of

women in asceticism has been recorded much more vividly by artists much more than in known religious texts. Further study in Urdu or Persian of the commentaries on the artists would prove fruitful in regards to the view of the *yoginī* during the Islamic era.

### Śakta

What is the cause of Brahman? Why were we born? By what do we live? On what are we established? Governed by whom, O you who know Brahman, do we live in pleasure and in pain, each in our respective situation? (Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 1:1)

Questions central to a personalized idea of divinity burst from the Upaniṣads. The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (quoted above), considered prior to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, summarizes these questions, which had been at the heart of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads*, and provides a theistic answer to them (Gonda 1970, 18), leading the way for Kṛṣṇa's theistic treatment in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. But much of that period from 500-300 BCE is lost in the mists of time and what is known is derived from Buddhist texts. The beginning of the Common Era is the inception of artistic representations in stone of new deities, who are more personal in nature. Evidences of personal religion began, including textual evidence of how an individual person can eliminate *karma* in order to achieve *mokṣa*. A careful review of the fuller panoply of art and texts indicates this experience included female deities in the same power and number as male deities.

*Devī/devī*

Somewhere between 300 and 500 CE, the *Devī Māhātmya*, a part of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, was written, the first articulation of the Ultimate as Female in Sanskrit. The invocation praises her thus:

Whatever and wherever anything exists, whether it be real  
or Unreal, (you) who have everything as your very soul,  
Of all that, you are the power [śakti]; how then can you be  
(adequately) praised? By you the creator of the world, the protector  
of the world, Who (also) consumes the world. (*Devī Māhātmya*  
1.63-65)

Here the Devī is invoked as the creator, preserver and destroyer. The invocation later asserts that she has caused Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva to assume bodily form.

The first item to note in this invocation is the trinity of the three male deities, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, is presumed by the writer, not the Vedic pantheon. Second, the Devī has at her fingertips, shall we say, more power than the whole trinity taken as one group. N. N. Bhattacharyya (1996) states: “in the Śakta cosmological process, *prakṛti* alone existed before creation. She wished to create and having assumed the form of the Great Mother, created Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva out of her own body” (5). The Devī in this text is Durgā, and, at other places, can be named Mahālakṣmī, Mahāsarasvatī or Mahākālī. Contradictorily the text later describes her as having been formed of all of the gods and thus greater than them.<sup>25</sup>

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25. From Śiva her face, from Yama her hair, from Visnu her arms, from Candra her breasts, from Indra her waist, from Varuna her shanks and thighs, from Earth her hips, from Brahmā her feet, from Sūrya her toes, from Vasus her fingers, from Kubera her nose, from Prajāpati her teeth, from Agni her three eyes, from the light of the two Sandhyās her eyebrows and from Vāyu her ears (*Devī-Māhātmya*, 214-218).

Later the text adds evidence to Pannikar's supposition that the Saptamātrkās also represent the sacred female inherent within the sacred male. "Śaktis, having sprung forth from the bodies of Brahmā, Śiva, Skanda, Viṣṇu and Indra . . . approached Devī" (8.11-13). As Devī and the Saptamātrkās were made from the total of the male gods, they are obviously greater than male gods.

The Devī, like Śiva, had both benign and malevolent aspects, the benign being Durgā and the malevolent being Cāmundā. The female is considered to be *prakṛti*, mother or source of all; *śakti*, indomitable potency and fecundity and *māyā*, the seductress. She is power, potency, and potentiality and divine consciousness and wisdom. As Godhead she blesses goddesses with her secondary powers. She is not just the knowledge and power of enlightenment, but also the seductress that keeps one attached to life in the physical world. She is identified as Supreme Being, the source and controller of all forces and potentialities of nature.

Dehejia tells the story in the *Devīmāhātmya* that Durgā killed the buffalo demon, who threatened to destroy all the gods, after which the *Saptamātrikās* assisted her by drinking the blood. Durgā was associated with victory in the battlefield. In the *Mahābhārata*, Arjuna offered a hymn to Durgā, and in the *Rāmāyāna*, Rāma offers a similar hymn before the great battle (Dehejia 1991, 23).

Art historical evidence verifies the importance of the Devī through temple construction, gifts to the temples and statuary. Women and men both worshipped the Devī. The king Vikramadhitya (c. mid-fourth century to early fifth century)

was said to be a Devī worshipper, having mastered the *Aṣṭamahāsiddhis* or eight great powers. The Gujara-pratīhara rulers Nāgabhata II (805-833), Mihira Bhoja (836-885), and Mahendrapāla (reigned c. 890-910) worshiped the Devī, also known as Bhagavatī.<sup>26</sup> Between 700 and 1000 a tutelary Devī, particularly Durgā, was identified as a martial deity of the land and clan. Inscriptions and numismatics are evidence of royal patronage of this powerful malevolent aspect of the Devī (White 2003, 128-129).

Besides the Devī, there are devīs, ranging from local village goddesses to Lakṣmī, Pārvatī, Sarasvatī, Śrī, Amba, Ambikā, Umā, and others. It is hypothesized that various tribal deities, unknown through historical evidence, provide some of the names and attributes of these historic figures (Bhattacharyya 1996, 51).

As worship of devotional religion became more and more popular, and as Indian craftspeople learned to work in stone not wood, a harvest of temples and sculptures ripened to the male deities, with Śiva and Viṣṇu most prominent, and to goddesses and other sacred images especially aspects of Durgā and Parvatī. A brief discussion of examples uncovers many of these. Moreover, numismatic evidence of Parvatī/Śiva, Lakṣmī, Durgā, and Gangā has been found dating from the second century BCE through the first century CE, which throws further light on their importance. Images of goddesses were carved in rock-cut caves, like those at of the Mahiṣamardinī, Gangā, Yamunā, along with male figures of Varaha,

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26. The terms *bhagavan* and *bhagavatī* imply a more personally approachable deity.

Narasimha, and the Śiva lingam at Udaigiri, in the province of Madhya Pradesh, from 320-600 CE. Many temples were dedicated to goddesses; and other goddesses were a part of the didactic statuary on the outside of the temple walls and on the inside of the enclosure. One of the first was a sculpture of Lakṣmī from a Maharastran Temple of the second century BCE. In the fifth century, a temple was built to Parvātī at Bhubanesvara, then in the eighth century one was built to Cāmundā, and in the twelfth century to Gaurī. The Ellura Cave Temples (600-900) have images of the three river goddesses, Gangā, Yamunā, and Sarasvatī. Lakṣmī with her beneficent elephants is represented, and Śiva and Pārvatī playing dice are carved into the stone walls. In Ujjain, also in Madya Pradesh, the Harsiddhi temple has an image of the Himalayan mountain, Annapurna, with a Mahālakṣmī and Mahāsarasvatī image on either side. In the same temple complex is the Chaubis Khamba temple, with images of Mahāmāyā and Mahālāyā at the entrance (Misra 1985, 14). The Cāmundā temple with stonework of a goddess with a sword, Pārvatī, and Durgā is dated in the early ninth century (Morris 1996, 93). In 907, the Kalacuri king Narasimba built a temple to the goddess Ambikā, with images of Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī. In the year 915, Brahmadeva, a Kalcuri from Gujarat, built nine Pārvatī temples at Ratanpura (Misra, 1985, 13). Lakṣmī is on the lintels of Vaiṣṇavite temples at Aihole (sixth century) and Badami (seventh century). Aihole also has a sixth century Durgā Temple (Brown 1959, 52). The Sun Temple at Konark has an *aṣṭamātrkā* from the thirteenth century (Sarangi 1990, 29). An inscription at Mamallapuram invoked the goddess Śrī (Rabe 2001, 143).



From this sampling of temples from across the India subcontinent, we can readily claim that goddess temples and goddess images were a widespread part of Hindu life since at least the beginning of stone sculpture in the Common Era. More temples and more images have been found in the north, despite the destruction of many temples under Muslim rulers, but temples in Tamil Nadu have survived and are well represented.

The Purāṇic stories, which begin to be written down in the eighth century, elaborate on metaphysics, suffering and liberation, and theology, mostly *bhakti* to a personal god. They illuminate *karma* and rebirth. Further, they legitimize rituals in temple and image workshop. Their ontology is different from that of the *dharmaśāstras* in their acceptance of many cults and ways of life different from that of the Brahmanically sanctioned paths. Eighteen Purāṇas are considered to be the heart of the *purāṇic* literature, together with the two epics, that contain the stories of the *bhakti* literature, in a manner that is inclusive of Śaivites, Vaiṣṇavites, and Devī worshippers. The two most well known Purāṇas that focus on the Devī are the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, which includes the *Devi-Māhātmya Purāṇa*, and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The tenth chapter of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* explicates the Rāsa Līlā, or the stories of Kṛṣṇa, in Vrindāvan. The other sixteen include: *Agni, Matsya, Garuda, Padma, Skanda, Viṣṇu, Naradiya, Brahmanda, Varaha, Brahmavaivarta, Bhaviṣya, Vamana, Brahma, Kurma, Linga*, and *Śiva Purāṇas*.

The theology of *Śakti* is a philosophical concept, like the concept of *prakṛti* in Sāṃkhya, which infers a sovereign divine authority that is female.

Śaktism is defined as having a “supreme deity exclusively as female principle. [She is a] personification of primordial energy, and the source of all divine cosmic evolution” (Bhattacharyya 1996, 1).

This Supreme Female, who is revered for creation, sustenance, destruction, delusion and grace, can be inferred to have consciousness and wisdom in Her attributes. She is seen as an autonomous ruler over Her creation, hence the devotee also has her or his own consciousness and wisdom, through not divine, and that power gives one power over one’s own life (Gupta 1979, 94). In this manner, she can give aid to those ascetics looking to reach *mokṣa*, as she does those who follow Kashmir Śaivism. She can further aid those, embroiled in the phenomenal world, who desire children, wealth, and a healthy existence in Her many forms of Pārvatī, Lakṣmī, and others. From this can be inferred the magical goals of Tantra as well.

### *Śaktipīṭhas*

According to a story, the goddess Sati died, whereupon her husband Śiva, in grief, carried her body off. The other gods, to appease his sorrow, began to gradually cut her body apart, and pieces fell all over India creating the sacred *piṭhas* where they fell. These spots then became sacred pilgrimage sites. A temple in Kāmakhya in Assam has a natural cleft stone resembling the female external genitalia and this temple “bleeds” a red iron compound in June. This life-giving

power of the female is revered by those who cross India on pilgrimage for<sup>27</sup> a sacred viewing or *darśan* of this event. Because of these naturally occurring phenomena, this temple is one of fifty-four sites sacred to those who worship the strong feminine energy of Śakti. Mahāmāyā danced at Kamākhyā for her own pleasure. She is the subject; she controls her own space (Biernacki 2007, 4) in contrast to Sāmkhya philosophy, where *prakṛti* danced as an object to serve the *puruṣa*. These pilgrimages sites, added to those of the Yoginīs, and female images in temples, friezes, and statues, provided a variety of sacred female imagery.

#### *Saptamātrkās*

The Saptamātrkās or seven mothers illustrate how indigenous traditions were co-opted and integrated within new religious traditions. Some of the earliest sculptural traditions include a frieze usually of seven goddesses with often a male figure added at each end, which appeared in significant numbers before other goddess images had been codified. The first iconographical view of seven women was during the Indus Valley, as previously discussed (Kenoyer 1998, Fig. 6.1). Meister notes the Vedas refer to the seven mothers of Soma or Agni (Meister 1986, 238). Who these figures were, and what was their function has not been ascertained yet, due to lack of evidence, but we do find them in the earliest known sculptural representations in stone from the Kuṣāṇa period (first through second centuries CE) onwards across the subcontinent. Harper (1979) states that this line

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27. Darśan means much more to a Hindu than this sterile definition. See Diana Eck's (1998) book for a deeper understanding of this essential concept in modern Hinduism.

of figures that apparently stretches from the Indus Valley through the period of which I am speaking attests to “a sympathetic chord with village goddesses” and I would add with the Hindu penchant for the sacred number seven.

The number seven is significant in the Vedas including the septapartite cosmos; the seven *ṛṣis*; demons in groups of seven; the seven mothers of Agni; seven flames of Agni; and the seven earthly rivers (Harper 1979, 13-16 *passim*). The seven figures portrayed vary by region and across time. Sometimes they have children, sometimes they are seated, and other times dancing (Meister 1986, 233). The seven figures are framed by figures of either Vīrabhadra (Śiva) or Ganeśa. The first figure is usually Brahmānī, consort of Brahmā, and the last is Cāmundā (fierce representation of the Goddess) with *devaśaktis* (divine consorts) in between: Māheśvarī, consort of Śiva; Kaumārī, consort of Skanda; Vaiṣṇavī, consort of Viṣṇu; and Vārāhī, boar-headed incarnation of Viṣṇu. Meister considers the Saptamātrkās to be Śaivite, representing a Śaivite triad of Śiva, Cāmundā and Ganeśa (241).

Harper looks back to the roots in Vedic hymns to seven goddesses who supported the fertility of crops, herds, and humans. Like agricultural goddesses, they are both malevolent and benevolent (1979, 51). She cites the *Mahābhārata* (van Buitenen 1973, III.215.15), to illustrate her point. In the story, seven women were asked to kill the deity Skanda with his fearsome warlike power; however he talked them out of it as they were mothers. Their life-giving milk and children symbolized both fear and love. The visual image of the Saptamātrkās is benign, yet the later textual Purāṇic images of the Saptamātrkās are fearsome. The “Vana

Parva” story links the two with a strong Skanda taming the power of the Mothers. White suggests that when women’s reproductive needs are denied, they turn to demonic form (2003, 45).

Sivaji Panikkar (1997) argues the opposite, that these female figures represent the transformation of masculine power to feminine. He begins with the pre-Gupta Bālagraha belief in personified spirits to ensure conception, healthy birth, and the health of the child, as a place the figures could have come from. Both Harper (1979) and Panikkar see the original form of the seven figures as benign, mother figures who were used in childbirth and child-raising. He feels the iconography of Durgā as Devī began about this time and sees the development of the Saptamātrkās co-existent with the Devī. That the Saptamātrkās represent the female form of male deities (Brahma, Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Skanda) and that they are enclosed by a Śiva figure and Ganeśa figure, leads to the conclusion that in reality they represent “attempts to transform the male identities of the gods into goddesses,” though a “shadow” male personality remains in the names (Panikkar 1997, 170). As was mentioned above, the Devī at one point of the *Devī-Māhātmya* was also formed from the gods (*Devī-Māhātmya*, 2.12-18) and also is a warrior deity.

I disagree with Panikkar’s conclusion that the figures of the Saptamātrikas are attempts to transform male energy into female energy. I see the Saptamātrika figures, as attempts to blend original female energies with a later male energy in the same way that many pre-Indo-European goddesses are considered to have been married to male Indo-European gods to attempt to blend their energies.

Given the text quoted earlier regarding Devī as creator, protector, and the one who consumes or destroys, it is possible to give an alternative interpretation that sees the female energy as coming first. I feel the female energy came first, as procreative power, and that this blending was an attempt at bonding male energy to that original primal power.

Panikkar then hypothesized that the Saptamātrika figures gradually widen into Śakti figures. The Śakti cult originates at the beginning of known time, when agricultural was the province of women. Agricultural rituals were the original actions that created a type of magic that both supported the growth of crops and avoided their destruction through natural causes.<sup>28</sup> This agricultural philosophy led to Tantric practice and Sāmkhya philosophy, which, in turn, were the roots of Śaktism (Panikkar 1997, 163).

Perhaps surprisingly, Panikkar sees the cosmic female principle in many other practices—as I do, like *kuṇḍalinī* philosophy. He thinks the seven *cakras* on the *suṣumnā nāḍī*, within *kuṇḍalinī* yogic practices, represent the female inherent in each person. When the *kuṇḍalinī* reaches *sahasara*, everything returns to the Original One, which is female, an omnipotent femininity (Panikkar 1997, 170).

On occasion the Saptamātrkās are composite figures, with female human bodies and heads representing birds or other animals. Vārāhī, with a boar's head, is easy to understand as she represents the female incarnation of Viṣṇu as the boar, Varāha. Harper (1979), using Gimbutas' argumentation from Neolithic

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28. The agricultural imagery in the Indus Valley civilization has already been discussed; see Chapter 2).

Europe, contends that bird and animal-headed deities represent fecundity, embryonic life and regeneration. I disagree with her, feeling that they represent shamanistic figures. Looking back to the Indus Valley, where the archaic shaman was evident through the use of composite figures in both terracotta figurines and in the seals, a history of shamanic figures has been found. It is my contention that these figures also represent a shamanistic philosophy, little studied or understood.

### *Tantra*

Tantrism is defined in many ways and includes both left-handed Tantra, and right-handed Tantra. Right-handed Tantra may use the same elements in ritual as the left-handed Tantra, but will use them only symbolically. Within Tantra female gurus were revered (Magee 1995, 6).

Tantra is said to have been started by different authors in the fifth through sixth centuries, but it probably appeared prior to that. Gupta's book on Hindu Tantrism lists a number of characteristics of Tantrism: an alternative means of *mukti* from Vedic texts; a means of achieving *mokṣa* and also achieving worldly desires through magic; a special variety of yoga which includes the *kuṇḍalinī*; an observation of the body as a microcosm of the macrocosmic universe; uses of the mystic nature of speech; the use of *bīja*, powerful formulas which call the deity into oneself; the use of *mandalas*, *cakras*, and *yantras* as positions for the deity; worship of deities internally; the importance of female *saktis*; the necessity of initiation by a guru; and others (Gupta 1979, 7-9).

More recently André Padoux criticizes Gupta's views, holding that:

"Tantrism is, to a large extent, a category of discourse in the West, and not strictly speaking an Indian one" (2002, 17). However, he goes on to say that Tantrics could include Śaiva-Śāktism traditions with a Kāpālīka background, some of the Nāths, the Sahajiyā Vaiṣṇavas, and Tantrism within Mahāyāna Buddhism (22). Miranda Shaw feels Buddhist Tantrism developed from "Practices that had great antiquity in India's forests, mountains, and rural areas, among tribal peoples, villagers, and the lower classes" (1994, 21). I feel that neither the writings on Hindu nor Buddhist Tantra has identified a full representation of the sect and its practices; and that Miranda Shaw is on the right track, though much more work needs to be done to establish what the defining characteristics of the Tantra tradition were and when it was founded. It was a major tradition from the time of the Pala Dynasty in Bengal (the eighth through the twelfth centuries) that appears to have swept across the South Asian subcontinent, and it deserves to be clarified.

Tantra overlaps with Saktism. In Śāktism, the female goddess, or Śakti, is the center of the iconography and symbolism. In Tantrism, as White (2003) perceives it, however, the physical female's role was the essential symbolism for women. Tantra includes sects in wide-ranging styles, which were created to propitiate *siddhis*, special powers, in practitioners. The *Yogasūtra* admits that *siddhis* come from doing yoga, but instructs one to ignore them and continue on towards *mokṣa*. The Buddhist philosopher Asanga (c. 300 CE) is credited with introducing Tantrism to Buddhism, so puts the development of Hindu Tantrism before that date.



Semi-divine Siddhas were associated with Yoginīs (White 2003, 161). The valuation of the female organ and the female principle filled a gap in earlier male-specific religion (105). When the female sacred sexual is affirmed as it is in Tantrism, for the woman there is a connection with her own inner being, her relation to humanity, and her relation to nature. By affirming her sacredness, she and her partner affirm the sacredness of nature and the bounty that comes from nature. Within Saktism and Tantra, we find sexual practices, though still androcentric yogic techniques that were designed to transfer energy away from the penis to the head. The man is also supposed to “drink” the female essence so it will aid him, not her. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* mentions this technique briefly, “so great is the world of him who practices sexual intercourse, knowing this; he turns the good deed of women to himself. But he who practices sexual intercourse without knowing this—women turn his good deeds unto themselves” (BU 6:43).

Meena Khandelwal (2001), in her essay on sexual fluids, asks what might be similar in the Brahmanical textual tradition for women and men regarding the topic of sexual fluids? She argues for the view that the first, oldest texts equate milk *payas*, with semen, *retas*, as both are from blood, both are white, and both are from a “protuberance” of the body. Milk is creative as well as semen. Men influence the social traits of the children through their semen and women influence the children’s emotional and intellectual qualities through milk. Later texts equate menstrual blood with semen.

Hinduism holds purity and avoidance of pollution as high values.

Khandelwal looks at sexual fluids from a Brahmanical standpoint to attempt to understand Brahmanical logic. Men's purity is easier to control through *brahmacharya*, and Khandelwal feels women are "leaky" and less able to control their bodily fluids and so have more problems with purity (Khandelwal 2001, 165). A woman's milk will often flow spontaneously when she hears her child cry, and she bleeds every month, sometimes erratically, and after childbirth (166). Women also absorb men's semen during intercourse and so are considered to gain more from legitimate sexual intercourse. That's why Tantric texts encourage men to learn to exhale in ejaculation so they can inhale immediately afterward and "inhale" back into the penis the mixed fluids from intercourse. The center in Tantric practice, still in the texts I have read, is the man, what he needs to do to get his desires fulfilled; the woman partner's wants and needs are not discussed. However, that this subject has been addressed in Hindu texts gives it more consideration than European or Euro-American discussion. Much work needs to be done on the idea of sexual fluids to establish a positive milieu for women practitioners.

Turning to two Tantric texts as examples to illustrate the differences in terms of gender in different contexts, the androcentrism is apparent, though the texts vary from each other as to the extent of male-centeredness. The *Vāmakeśvarīmatam* (after eleventh century) is a masculine text with the focus on the male practitioner, telling him what he needs to do and what he can get from it. It also clarifies the Tantric predilection towards magical powers, even black

magic within the text. *The Yoni Tantra* (sixteenth century), also translated by Michael MaGee (1995), gives a gentler picture of Tantric meditation techniques. It begins with a ritual, a poster of colors and a palette of scents, describing how the *sādhana* should honor his partner, tantalize her, as from her he gets life and enhanced vitality. The text is definitely more woman-friendly than the *Vāmakeśvarīmatam*, but still it doesn't tell what the woman partner gets out of it. Does she get whatever he gets? Or does she remain only with a withered garland in the morning? The author of these two texts expresses pleasure both in semen and the menses in the Tantric tradition in these two texts, and the value is in the co-mingling of the fluids. In none of these texts have we seen a female point of view, a female discussion of the female body, or a list of all the lucky aspects the female has won as a result of her experience.

Tantra from a woman's viewpoint would portray the woman as spirit as well as body or matter; woman as object to be praised and a subject to be treated with respect. To respect the woman as guru, the man moves the point of view moves away from woman as object, to woman as subject (Biernacki 2007, 8-9). Still, both Tantra and Śaktism place the feminine at the height/climax of their discussions, she is sometimes, woman as creator, she is sometimes the woman as sexual equal to man.

### *Yoginīs*

Devotion to the cult of the yoginīs lasted approximately from the ninth through the twelfth centuries, and possibly into the sixteenth. Yoginīs, dākinīs and

sākinīs were all possessors of occult powers (Dehejia 1986, 13). Yoginīs (as noted earlier) can be benign or malevolent. This group is described by R. K. Sharma as follows:

The cult was known by the name of Yoginī Kaula, the founder of which was Matsyendranātha. Matsyendranātha was originally the founder of the cult of Yogic Śaivism but he developed the Yoginī cult when he lived in the midst of women in Kāmarūpa. Every woman in Kāmarūpa was recognized as a Yoginī and hence he named this cult after the....It was a Śakta cult as opposed to the old Yogic Śaivism. It aimed at propitiating the śaktis through the medium of Yoga as well as by external worship. (Sharma 1978, 30)

The Yoginīs are said to move in a group, flying across the sky on a dark night, and worshipping Bhairava Śiva in cemeteries. They appear sinister but often are helpful to people (Sharma 1978, 30). A halo of light surrounds them, and they wear a garland of skulls and carry a skull bowl (Dehejia 1986, 367). Their names are first seen in the Purāṇas where they eat flesh and drink blood. “When Cāmundā and Kālarātri drank the blood of the demon, the Mothers danced around in a circle,” according to Karambelkar (1955, 367). An equivocation exists between actual women (yoginīs) who were men’s teachers and with whom men copulated in Tantric rites, and those yoginīs who were seen as “devouring, semi-divine beings” (White 2003, 10).

Yoginī temples and traditions cover north India. Central India has over twelve yoginī temples including the Bundelkhand at Khujuraho, and ones in Bheraghat, Rani Hjarwal, Shahdol, Mitauli, Surada, Naresar, and Satna, in Madhya Pradesh; Pikhiam, Dudhai, Lukhri, and Tindwali in Uttar Pradesh; the Ranipur, Jharial, and Hirapur temples in Orissa; and Coimbatore in the south. In Rajasthan

no temples exist but cloth cakras of the sixty-four yoginīs are common so they were known there as well. Gujarat has two yoginī temples. Orissa has one built in the ninth century and one in the tenth, and Kashmir probably had a yoginī cult, as they are mentioned in the *Rājataraginī*, an epic text of the region (Dehejia 1986, 79-81). Though no epigraphy supports this, the temples are assumed to have been built by the royalty.

The yoginī temples are, unlike other Hindu temples, circular (from 25 feet in diameter to one hundred twenty-five feet in diameter),<sup>29</sup> and roofless—so the yoginīs can fly right in. A shrine is in the center, to Bhairava, a manifestation of Śiva, though some scholars think the shrines may be later than the original date of the temple. Sixty-four yoginīs (or eighty-one or forty-two) each have a niche around the outside, where they stand, dressed with a long skirt held by a girdle, and seated on an animal, bird, or human. Their heads are animal, bird, or human. The temple at Bheraghat has intricate sculptural detail of cremation scenes with flesh-eating ghouls (White 2003, 137).

Dehejia proposes that the temples are mandalas that manifest and produce psychic wholeness and influence the person who enters (1986, 43). She says the yoginīs circle Śiva, as Śakti embraces Śiva, and as the yoni opens for the linga (185).

#### *Other Sacred Feminine Representations of this Era*

In the eighth century, the great scholar, philosopher and saint Śankara, in his development of Vedānta, focuses on the relation of the self with Brahman,

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29. This is with the exception regarding the temple in Khajuraho, which is oblong.

defining terminology to make the pathway more clear, and describing more forcefully the stages along the path. Looking at Śankara's Vedānta from a female point of view, Vedānta doesn't speak about *prakṛti*, so the female is excluded from the system. Śankara proscribed females from entering his monasteries. However, in the present day, women are a part of his monastic system. The *Upadeśisāhasrī* makes a statement that Śankara had a heated debate with Maṇḍanamīśra, a philosopher of the Mīmāṃsā school, whose wife served as arbiter (Sengaku 1992, 8 ff). The wife, nameless, an astute and learned woman, was allowed by Śankara to arbitrate the debate.

The question arises as to how far reaching asceticism was for women from 700-1700 CE. Meena Khandelwal (2004) distinguishes between male and female asceticism by saying that men, who take a temporary *brahmacarya* while students, may also choose *brahmacarya* later in life. *Samyasinīs* are women who have been initiated into *samyasa* from a married state, giving up traditional family life for the goal of enlightenment. Contemporary accounts by Khandelwal (2004) and Denton (2004) find that most of the women ascetics are widows. Literary mentions of women ascetics in plays from 700-1700 CE are common.

Many stories are told about nuns. For example, Fa-Hsien (Faxien) who traveled through India in 399-414 to gather Buddhist texts with which to return to China, wrote: "the monks and nuns may be a thousand, who all receive their food from the common store, and pursue their students, some of them in mahayana and some of the hinayana" (Legge 1991, 51). He was referencing the Buddhist nuns still remaining in India at that time and noting that they were studying with monks

and studying two traditions of Buddhism. Another example is the story of Umā who is known to have done many austerities to gain marriage with Śiva. She stood in cold water, sat in the middle of four blazing fires, and subsisted on little food, for five hundred years to gain his favor (Śarma, 1970, 554-559).

According to White, the first mention of the *kundalinī* is in the *Tantrasadbhava Tantra* text, c. eighth century (2003, 230). The *kundalinī*, as developed in the Yoga Yājñavalkya (ninth century), is feminine. This divine feminine power is said to have eight aspects—earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, intellect, and ego—which were also described in the *Bhagavad Gītā* belonging to *prakṛti*. Coiled up as a snake, she obstructs the proper movement of *prāṇa*, water, and food, covering the “door to freedom,” with her mouth (YY IV, 21-22). She is awakened during yoga. Yājñavalkya continues by introducing the *iḍā*, *pingala*, and *susumna nāḍīs*, or channels, which carry *prāṇa* during yoga, and other *nāḍīs* and *vayus* (air or wind) in the body. The result of practice of the eight limbs of yoga and the raising of the *kundalinī* is the development of *tapas*, heat energy. Just as in the Vedas when heat was created by Agni in the sacrificial fire, just so, here anyone can create that same heat through yogic practices. In this text, Yājñavalkya calls Gārgī, his wife, “Best among those who have realized the ultimate truth,” “Realized One who is proficient in all the sastras,” and “One whose wealth is penance;” then finally he states that “Gargi, the pure one, attained the greatest and purest happiness forever. Then, in solitude, having clearly understood yoga which is born in solitude, which is the clue for freedom of all

beings, and having given up worldly bondage, [Gargi] entered a solitary place in the forest with total happiness” (*Yoga Yajnavalkya*, 43-44 in Mohan n.d, 133).

All that has been discussed in this chapter is a brief summary of one aspect, the cosmic female principle that was a part of Hinduism in the classical and middle ages, a rich and varied time. North India was ruled by four very strong states, the Rastrakūtas, the Pratihāras, the Pālas, and the Kashmiris. No foreign rulers sapped the wealth from the area for over four centuries. This allowed for the development of religious thought, religious temples, and philosophical *mathas*, where philosophers could study in relative peace and comfort. Families and kings still had Vedic rites done; others set an ascetic course; and *bhakti* in various forms was practiced by the rest of the people. Religion turned from a focus on a minority of religious figures, who studied Sanskrit and performed rituals only in Sanskrit, to a *bhakti* religion where the focus was on the individual.

The development of common literary dialects aided religious understanding for literary persons who were not Sanskritists. Temples served first for devotional *pūjā* rituals, then, second, as centers where classes and lectures were taught by those fluent in the Sanskrit Vedas, Epics, and Purāṇas on special occasions; and third served to remind people of the deities, their stories and the spiritual significance of those stories, via visual images carved into the walls of temples and surrounding gates and enclosures. Pilgrimage sites, such as the *pīthas*, or visitation to Yoginī shrines, where families would attend for high holy days or in response to a vow, increased in number during the millennium between 700 and 1700 CE. At those sites ascetics gathered in ashrams who would also



teach their lineage in return for food and clothing. Further, in one's own personal life, one could strengthen one's spiritual understanding by the performance of vows and the donation of gifts. One could donate to the construction of a temple or tank the dedication of a sculpture, the laying out and maintenance of a garden, and the patronage of poets. One could further donate money for the performance of life marking rituals or donate money to the temple itself for its upkeep.

Women found release in *bhakti* traditions where women became honored teachers, poets, and singers. In spite of looking at these women as primarily singers, and/or entertainers, Sanjukta Gupta focuses on them as theologians. Each has her own theology, evidenced in her own creation—her poems (Gupta 1979, 195-209). I agree with Gupta in looking to poems as evidences of a theology.

### Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, from my review of the prominence of the sacred feminine in various manifestations, we can come to the conclusion that this millennium from 700-1700 CE, was a time in which women's religious values flourished especially. It brought many female figures to the forefront textually and art historically who had originally been local indigenous deities. The first extant Hindu Tantric texts date from about the seventh century, and Śaktism was very strong for at least four hundred years of this period. Goddess temple construction blossomed, and the yoginī cult flourished. These symbols of the cosmic female principle balanced the overt androcentrism of the Vedic religion as practiced in the *dharmaśāstras*, and philosophical *darśanas*. Women found power in religion

that had perhaps existed earlier in the pre-Vedic era, both in the concept of the Devī and in the web of secondary goddesses. Women expressed this spiritual power in their songs of longing and of praise to the goddesses and gods.

It must be concluded also that, though I as a Western woman, have an interest in these manifestations of cosmic female principles, Hindu female philosophical ideas from the *Rg Veda* on down to the Purāṇas show a complementary set of female and male principles, much like yin/yang in Chinese philosophy in the God/Goddess, god/goddesses, and *prakṛti/puruṣa* ideas. It is important to note that this era in Hinduism was full of goddesses and gods, and not only one of exclusive gender. This cosmological complement interacts with all sentient beings, male and female. It is not just for the female, but provides a means for a man to access his female/feminine side as well. For example, the use of the *kunḍalinī* is necessary for both males and females in yoga just as the recognition of the Female Divine is a complement to the recognition of the Male Divine, for all sentient beings, male and female.

We can go forward now to the six female Hindu saints from 700-1700 CE, with the understanding that the female divine principle has been important in India from the Indus Valley onwards through the Vedas and the epic periods. We find also that an intense background of the divine female principle from 700-1700 CE. There is a large pattern of female divine principle already woven into Hinduism upon which these six female Hindu saints will draw to create their individual spiritual, philosophical and aesthetic designs.

## CHAPTER THREE: KĀRAIKKĀL AMMAYĀR–

### THEOLOGIAN

Kāraikkāl Ammayār sang her songs praising Śiva from which her ideas on Śaivite philosophy can be uncovered. She is most commonly dated to the seventh century and lived in Tamil Nadu in southeastern India. She is from the town of Kāraikkāl and her name means “Mother from Kāraikkāl.” She was the first of the great Tamil *bhakti* saints, who spread Śaivite teachings during the renaissance of Hinduism in that region.

Kāraikkāl Ammayār was *dvaita*, that is to say, dualist in regards to her deity, seeing Śiva as eternally separate from her. For her, the sense of place was key to her philosophy, her place in the world, her place at the feet of Śiva, her place in the metaphysical realm, as a symbol for the place her devotees need to access, in order to worship Śiva and, thus, receive his grace.

Kāraikkāl Ammayār was one of 63 Nāyanmārs, or Tamil Śaivite saints, and one of three women in the accepted tradition of saints.<sup>30</sup> She is celebrated for composing in Tamil the “Arpuda Tiruvantādi” of one hundred and one verses, and the “Tiru Irattai Manimālai” of twenty verses. Her hagiography is found in the *Peria Purāṇa* by Sēkkizhār in the twelfth century, which was translated into English by G. Vanmikanathan (1985).

Kârâvêlane translated Ammayār’s two works from Tamil into French in *Kāreikkālammeiyār: Ouvres Éditées et traduites. Introduction par Jean Filliozat*

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30. The other two are St. Mangaiyarkaraśiyar, who was a Pāndyan queen and St. Ísai Jñaniyār who was the mother of Sundara (Pillai 1955, 15).

(1956), which was reprinted under the title *Chants dévotionnels tamouls de Kāraikkālammai* (1982). It is the only complete translation of her compositions into Western languages. Two partial translations of Kāraikkāl Ammayār's works into English are available: N. Jagadeesan, "The Life and Mission of Karaikkal Ammayar" in N. N. Bhattacarya's *Medieval Bhakti Movements in India* (1989). My translation of her complete works from French is the first translation into English. It is an unpublished translation at present.

### Hagiography

The *Periya Purāṇam* by Sekkizhār gives the hagiography of Kāraikkāl Ammayār, which I will summarize, from his masculine slant. He relates that a rich merchant in Kāraikkāl had a daughter, Punithavathi, who married and who was an ideal wife: "Our lady of silken tresses who settled down to a wifely life as excellent mate to him, her husband" (Vanmikanathan 1985, 533). She was also known as being very devout and was especially careful to feed ascetics who came to her door. One day her husband sent two mangos to her to serve him for dinner. Shortly after that an ascetic came to the door, and, as she hadn't completed cooking dinner yet, she gave him one of the mangos. Her husband returned home for dinner, which she served him, along with the remaining mango. The husband enjoyed the mango so much that he asked for the second. She went into the kitchen in despair, for it was gone; but, because of her previous devout actions, Lord Śiva, out of his grace, caused another mango to appear, which she served to her husband. "This is not like the fruit you served before," her husband

exclaimed, “and asked of the bangled dame: ‘As this is unobtainable in all the three worlds, where else did you get it from?’” (534). Embarrassed and distraught, she told him the truth. He demanded that, if it were true that the mango had come from Śiva, she should get another mango from the Lord, and, sure enough, she did.

“Overcome with unallayable fear and his mind in a whirl, he thought the lady of bejeweled tresses was some strange goddess” (Vanmikanathan 1985, 535). Soon thereafter, he organized a mercantile expedition and took off for another land where he prospered, married another woman, and had a daughter, whom he named Punitavadhi after his first wife. When Punitavadhi’s family heard reference to his new marriage, they bundled her up in a palanquin and took her to him. Embarrassed, he bowed before her, and he introduced her to his child. Her family angrily demanded to know why he was worshipping his wife, so he confessed,” She, here, is not a human being: after I learnt of her being a very great god I left her, and I have named after her this child which I later begot; that was why I fell at her golden feet; do you too similarly worship her?” (536)

Punitavadhi went to the Śaivite temple and prayed in this manner to Śiva, “Ha! This is the point of view this man has in mind! In that case, this mass of beauty-laden flesh, which I endured for this man’s sake, I should discard here, and I should get an appropriate wraith’s form with which I may pay obeisance to your feet there” (536). She then became “a female wraith of shriveled breasts, swollen veins, white teeth, protruding eye-balls, white teeth, sunken stomach, fiery red hair, two protruding fangs, arched insteps and long shanks” (537). From then on,

in the form of a demonic spirit, she was known as Kāraikkāl Ammayār, the Mother from the town of Kāraikkāl. She took it upon herself to walk to Mt. Kailash to see Śiva and his consort, Umā, and walked on her head up the mountain. Umā saw her, surprised, as no human had been able to get there previously. Śiva replied, “Note! She who is coming up is a mother who cherishes Us” (538). Karaikkal prayed for undying blissful love for Śiva. He told her to go to Ālankādu to witness his great dance, which she enjoyed greatly and sang songs of praise to him. She lived long after that, singing her poems and glorifying him.

Reading the story again from the perspective of a Western woman, we can elaborate on some of the details of the story. We find the story of a beautiful and pampered young woman who was married to a very demanding man. She was a perfect wife, as the story tells, and she was devout as well, as wives are supposed to be. When her husband demanded his second mango which she had given away to an ascetic, his dominance caused her to despair in the kitchen where Śiva, because of her devotion in this and other lives, aided her in providing another mango. But that didn’t appease her husband, who further demanded that she get another one in the same manner, so he could be sure that was how she had obtained it. His chagrin at finding her better able to speak with Śiva than himself both demonstrates his androcentric views and his realization his view wasn’t valued by the Lord Śiva, though hers was. The grace that Śiva, another masculine force, bestowed on her was antithetical to her husband’s point of view. He felt inadequate in the situation, so he deserted her. He had left her well off, and as a merchant he was accustomed to go on trading expeditions, but after at least two

years of hearing nothing from him, her family finally heard rumors that he was living in another city, and, not only that, had remarried. The support this woman received from her family and for her marriage is well documented in the story, for her family took her to the other city, to ascertain what had happened, and, where her husband, who was supposed to idealize her, had gone. The husband, embarrassed, admitted he couldn't deal with her god-blessed spirituality. He concurred with accepted female devotional practices, but, for her to receive a boon from another masculine source was beyond his ability to accept.

I think this passage as told by Sekkizhār has been misread by several authorities. It was considered as depicting tension, or conflict, between the saint's intuitive calling to serve Śiva and her marital responsibilities in the social realm (Cutler 1987, 118). No tension occurred in the discussion of Kāraikkāl Ammayār's life as a devoted wife; it was the inability of her husband to accept Śiva's gift of miracles to her that suddenly caused her world, the world of the contented wife, to crash around her (Dehejia 1988, 130). However, I would say that she sacrificed nothing; her phenomenal world values were taken from her when her husband refused his marital responsibilities to her. He deserted her, which dashed all her feminine expectations for life within the phenomenal world. Then, with no future possibilities of an acceptable social life left in the phenomenal world, she asked Śiva to change her body to a "wraith's form." She felt that her beautiful body, which was to be admired by her husband, instead, could be compared to that of a demonic spirit, for he didn't care any more about her body than that of a hideous woman.

Vijaya Ramaswamy came to an interpretation similar to mine. She provided the following analysis: “Her husband feared her spiritual powers to such an extent that he could no longer look upon her as his wife. . . . In Hindu tradition where it is the wife who serves and worships her husband, there could be no greater reversal of roles” (Ramaswamy 1992, 140). The “casting away of her bodily beauty and youth . . . [was] in fact a symbol of the severance of all relations with her worldly life and earthly connections (Amalprana 1984, 131). The story exposes the societal limits any woman could attempt to break in her spiritual quest and continue to remain a member of society. That barrier was passed when her husband denied her, and she found herself, by means of Śiva’s grace and in her the demonic spirit form, understanding life on a more profound level.

When Kāraikkāl Ammayār turned to the Lord Śiva, the story changed, from a story of her husband’s demanding personality, to the exhilaration of her personal quest for Śiva. She became the only human to have met the deities Umā and Śiva in their home in the Himalayas, having walked up the mountain on her head. She was honored by Śiva as a mother, though she had no biological children in this lifetime, and was the only one he ever honored as a mother. Her motherhood is to all those who are devoted to Śiva, and, as such, she serves as a transitional figure who takes the devotee from one’s own life to the bliss of full understanding of Śiva. She received the honor of watching and singing to Śiva’s dance, one of the demonic attendants, which she did in the Tiru-Ālankādu, a



sacred banyan forest where cremation fires burned, and female demons ate half-burnt corpses.

Two competing traditions at this time also speak of existence at cemeteries. The first is Buddhist. In the *Therīgāthā* (500 BCE),<sup>31</sup> similarities to Kāraikkāl Ammayār's story are seen which disparage the body and deny worldly pleasures. A poem by Vimalā, formerly a courtesan, disparaged her body that she had used to earn her living:

How was I once puff'd up, incens'd with the bloom of my beauty,  
Vain of my perfect form, my fame and success 'midst the people,  
Fill'd with the pride of my youth, unknowing the Truth and  
unheeding!

. . . .Now all the evil bonds that fetter gods  
And men are wholly rent and cut away.  
Purg'd are the Āsavas that drugg'd my heart,  
Calm and content I know Nibbana's Peace.  
(Rhys Davids 1964, 52-53)

This Buddhist nun tells much more surely the experience, the feelings, of the woman who realizes that her form is *māyā*, unreal, constructed by society's formulations, which turn as leaves in the wind as it blows by. When Kāraikkāl Ammayār turned to Śiva, she realized his magnificence and chose a wraith's body, where she will not be fooled by societal constructions once again. Like Buddhist nuns, she not only disparages the "realness" of her body, but her whole existence as a wife and turns instead to more permanent pleasures.

A second Buddhist nun from the *Therīgāthā*, Dhīra, sings of her relief and joy at having left the phenomenal world behind.

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31. *Theri* means "women elders" or "women who have grown old in knowledge." *Gatha* are verses (Murcott 1991, 3).

Home have I left, for I have left my world!  
Child have I left, and all my cherish'd herds!  
Lust have I left, and Ill-will too is gone,  
And Ignorance have I put far from me;  
Craving and root of Craving overpowered,  
Cool am I now, knowing Nibbana's peace.  
(Rhys Davids 1964, 21)

As Dhīra sings her joy at having placed ignorance behind her, so too does

Kāraikkāl Ammayār look forward to a more valued life in full knowledge of the  
Lord Śiva.

A poem about Ubbirī in the *Therīgāthā* further speaks of the Buddhist  
value of spending time at cemeteries and cremation fields, in order to always  
remind oneself of the impermanence of life. When Ubbirī's daughter died, Ubbirī  
was weeping by the cemetery where the daughter was buried, when Buddha  
happened by and said,

O Ubbirī, who wailest in the wood, crying "Oh, Jīvā! O my  
daughter dear!" Come to thyself! Lo, in the burying-ground are  
burnt full many a thousand daughters dear, and all of them were  
named like unto her. Now which of all those Jīvās dost thou  
mourn?" (Rhys Davids 1964, 39)

Like these Buddhist nuns, Kāraikkāl Ammayār chose to disparage her beautiful  
body, to leave her home, and to spend time in the crematory grounds with Śiva,  
understanding in the blink of an eye the physical and mental constructions one  
makes in this life.

The form Kāraikkāl Ammayār accepted is very close to the description of  
the goddess Kālī from the realm of Tantrism. The *Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa*  
describes Kālī thus:

the Goddess, her lower lip trembling with rage, the pupils of her  
eyes resembling the doomsday fire...her mouth full of terrible

fangs . . . she appeared old, naked, her hair flying, her tongue lolling . . . brilliant as the doomsday fire because of the sweat on the hairs of her body. (*Mahābhāgavata Purāna* 8, 45-53, McDermott and Kripal 2003, 44)

I would extrapolate at this point, that, like Kālī, Kāraikkāl Ammayār must have felt suffused with anger, at her husband who had deserted her, at her family who was attempting to patch the situation up, and at society which set forth those constructions, those traps around her, with which to cage her; so she apparently opted for a figure to represent that anger. When one is abused for the gift of a beautiful feminine body, one may tend to despise or abuse that body.

Like Kālī, Kāraikkāl Ammayār identified herself with crematory grounds which is also a place where Tantric rituals were often located. The *Yoni Tantra* directs its followers that: “The best sādhanas should recite mantra within the yoni at a place where there is a Śiva linga, at the root of a bilba<sup>32</sup> in the cremation ground at an isolated spot or in a house” (Magee 1967, 23).

Kāraikkāl Ammayār’s hagiography presents a woman who attempted to live within the bounds that society prescribed for her, but, because of the grace given to her by Śiva, and because of her husband’s apparent unwillingness to acknowledge that grace, was transported outside of the realms of normative society and into a spiritual realm in which she lived the remaining years of her life. He acknowledged the bestowal of grace, but then decided he could no longer relate to her as his wife. One wonders how often Hindu men might have availed themselves of such an excuse in order to abandon a wife for a new one.

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32. The *Śiva Purāna* also mentions the sacredness of this vegetation to Śiva (Śiva Puraṇa: Vidyeśrarasamhitā, 22.30).

## Southern Śaivism

When did Śaivism, the worship of Śiva, begin? Many scholars point to the Indus Valley figurines from the seals who were seated in a yogic posture, which I have discussed in the introduction. These have been interpreted by some as a male deity and a representation of Śaivite ideals of asceticism and yoga, as a means to enlightenment. Like those images, the Lord Śiva of later centuries is the ascetic one, who sat in the Himalayas for eons, meditating. After my close review of these figures, I have concluded that at this time there is not enough evidence available yet from the Indus Valley to make any conclusions about these figures. It is not definite that these figures portrayed were practicing yoga, nor has any direct reference to Śiva been uncovered.

The later *Rg Veda*, about 1500-1000 BCE, spoke about Rudra, the father of the Maruts, who is one of the identifying labels for *saguṇa* Śiva from the phenomenal world (O'Flaherty 1981, 219-225). In Tamil Nadu, Buddhism and Jainism, from their inception in the fifth century BCE, had been quite strong, but in the fourth through sixth centuries of the Common Era, Hinduism was making a comeback, Śaivism in particular, through devotional religion. The Tamils were establishing a new form of *bhakti* blending Brahmanical and indigenous religious elements (Dhavamony 1971, 101). The Tamil deity, Murukan, the god of the hilly regions and a warrior deity, was discovered to have been Śiva's son, much as Skandha was his son (109). The Tamil Pillaiyār took the place of Ganesha. The sixth through seventh centuries CE mark a turning point across India. During this time important Śaivite texts, like the *Śiva Purāṇa*, were written; Śaivite Tamil

temples were constructed including the Kailasanatha Temple at Kanci and the cave temples to Śiva, Viṣṇu and Brahma from the seventh century; and Śaivite saints crisscrossed Tamil Nadu singing their hymns of praise to Śiva. In debates between the Śaivites and their co-religious movements, Buddhism and Jainism, Śaivites confronted opponents, challenging them to public debates, and competed with them in performing miracles (Dehejia 1988, 29-30).

Besides the philosophical debates on the Brahmanical level, Nāyanmārs were saints who sang and praised Śiva the length and breadth of the Tamil region. With their charisma, from their experience with Śiva and the intensity of their faith, they won over the hearts of the people, just as the philosophers were winning minds through philosophical debates. The saints stressed the worship of statues and temples, as places where Śiva resided (Champakalakshmi 1989, 165). From the sixth through the eighth centuries, Śaivism grew stronger as it incorporated Devī worship within it. This tradition of saints developed the regional language, legitimizing it as they developed their own songs from folk songs, Tamil poems of love and war, Sanskrit verses, and Vedic hymns (Cutler 1976, 6).<sup>33</sup> One of these was Kāraikkāl Ammayār. In the eleventh century Sundarbar wrote his famous text that defined the canon of sixty-two saints, followed by Sekkilār, who wrote his hagiography of the saints, the *Periya Purānam*, in the twelfth century. Their written hymns are sung in Tamil temples today.

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33. Cutler continues speaking about the value of Tamil grammarians who studied the language like Panini, and who separated the language into formal and colloquial, like Sanskrit and Prakrit (1979, 19, 10).

Kāraikkāl Ammayār holds a unique place among the women I am discussing, because she is recognized as a leader in the birth of Southern Śaivism. She is called a saint-philosopher who is known for scholarship and erudition, both of which are second only to her devotion to the Lord Śiva (Kamaliah 1977, 46). I wish to compare her thoughts with the Śaiva Siddhāntas, who came later but who also represent a Tamil Śaivite tradition. The Śaiva Siddhānta philosophy is derived from Kashmir Śaivism which moved south, where it found an accepting climate that blended well with their philosophy. A Tamil saying states, “Whatever the doctrine, was already there in the hymns” (Muthupackiam 2001, xiii).

Central to the Śaiva Siddhāntas are three ideas. Eternally, Śiva, the *nirguṇa* divinity without qualities, has always existed. Śiva has created *saguṇa* divinities, from his essence, which are available to devotees who desire him. Eternally, also, souls have existed concurrently, separate from Śiva, not his creation, as both souls and Śiva are eternal. Śiva has created matter, or *māyā*, or *prakṛti*, for the intent of souls reaching an existential wisdom that will enable them to experience the bliss that Śiva himself experiences. This tripartite ontological understanding is different from other Hindu schools, due to the eternity of the souls, and their not having been created by Śiva. It eliminates the question that arises in Vedānta, namely why did Brahman create *māyā* for souls to muddle their way out of? Brahman has created souls, but to what purpose, if their fate, to use the analogy of Sisyphus, is to be born again and again and live in sorrow throughout time?

The Śaiva Siddhāntas root their ontological hermeneutics in the Upaniṣads, central to all later devotional theology, in particular with the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, which integrates the metaphysical thinking of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads* with a theistic character. These later Upaniṣads, such as the *Kaṇṭha* and *Śvetāśvatara*, add a clear trend towards theism, especially the theistic concept of Rudra-Śiva in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*. They distinguish between *Paramātman* and the individual *ātman*; and further, distinguish between matter and spirit (Dhavamony 1971, 59). The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* defines matter as *māyā*, which is a mode of thought imposed on the Self, by the Will of Absolute Thought, Brahman, or the Personal *Nirguṇa* divinity (Balasubramaniam 1959, 8). *Māyā* is the material cause of the universe, in which ideas and words are derived from impressions created by delusion, which, like patterns formed in dreams, cause illusory schemata.

Śiva can be either *sagūṇa*, or *nirguṇa*, or neither *sagūṇa* nor *nirguṇa*. His *nirguṇa* body is beyond *māyā*, though his *sagūṇa* body appears within the realm of *māyā*. His own body includes his Śakti, his power, and his female part which is eternally in union with him. This eternal union produces the phenomenal worlds and the bodies of the *jīva* within it. The *sagūṇa* forms of Śiva and Śakti form the basis of all living creatures, male and female. Śakti is divided into supreme love, desiring the welfare of all living creatures; divine Will, *icchā*; *kriya śakti* that creates all worlds; and *jñānaśakti* which knows what souls want and gives it to them (Balasubramaniam 1959, 28).

Śiva's attributes and knowledge are love, and he is assumed to be here for the benefit of all souls. Śiva is the efficient cause of the universe, *māyā* is the material cause, and karma is the instrumental cause. Śiva gives each person a body, according to that person's past *karma*, and rewards the good and punishes the bad. The reward is grace from Śiva at turning points in one's life, that aid one to see who he is and reach towards him.

Grace has five functions. The first is *samhāra*, giving rest to souls who need it, turning a person away from phenomenal desires to rest before continuing. *Srṣṭi* enables souls to eat away past *karma*, and is given to those who are directly absorbed in Śiva, that allows the person to reach non-karmic consciousness sooner. *Stiti*, linked to *sriṣṭi*, is the process to destroy karma. *Ānava mala*, or bonds that pervade all souls, originating in *ātman*, screen from the soul aspects of phenomenal existence like will, good actions, and knowledge; thus *Tirobhava* is the maturation of other bonds by effecting *karma samya*. Finally *anugraha* is freeing souls from the bonds of the material world and its karma (Balasubramaniam 1959, 31).

The soul has differing characteristics depending upon its state of grace and knowledge. The *sakalar* is an ordinary soul, the *pralayākalar* is one that has been working towards *nirguṇa* Śiva longer, and the *vijñānakalar* is one who through knowledge, has reached another essence of existence. The Śaiva Siddhāna theory then expounds on the various coatings that cover the soul, and the listing of categories from Śamkhya making up the individual being. Only through *jñāna*, does one reach *mukti*, which is symbolized by the Sacred Feet of Siva.



In these theories, one sees similarities with most Śaivite systems in the *nirguṇa* Śiva and the creation of the universe. Differences include the separation of the soul itself from *nirguṇa* Śiva, and the judgmental characteristic of Śiva.

### Kāraikkāl's Ammayār's Philosophy

Kāraikkāl Ammayār's place in this scheme very much reflects this Śaiva Siddhānta ontology, though much of it is inferable rather than placed overtly in her songs. In her biography not much was said about her education, but her poems contain an amazing number of different metaphors and analogies. She also sang in *antati* form, which was a hundred stanza (*venbās*) work, the *Arpuda Tiruvantādi*, in which the last phrase of each verse was used to begin the next, a style which needs rigorous literary training (Dehejia 1991, 380). It was the first *antati* composed in Tamil (Jagadeesan 1989, 156). Music was central to temple worship in Tamil Nadu,<sup>34</sup> epigraphic evidence delineates the numerous musicians necessary to the temple. Kāraikkāl Ammayār was the first of the saints to combine music with her verses (Jagadeesan 1989, 157). Her reward is the bliss, *ānanda*, the *bhakta* experiences.

Philosophical discussion is objectified by philosophers like Śankara by separating themselves from their treatises, a separation of philosopher and subject.

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34. E. Hultzsch, et al. (1890/1987) give the following inscription: "the Lord Śrī-Rajarajadeva had given—for reciting the *Tiruppadiyam* before the lord of the Śrī-Rajarajesvara (temple—forty-eight musicians, one person who should constantly beat the small drum, in their company and one person who should constantly beat the big drum in their company). These fifty persons were to receive from the city treasury of the lord a daily allowance of three kuruni paddy each" (256).

The *bhakti* poets, both female and male, sing constantly of their subjective experience. They extol their joy which is derived from this experience, they tell about what they are thinking to aid their audience in experiencing this bliss as well. In an article on her philosophy, M. Arunachalam argues that her philosophy can be culled from her poems filled with ecstatic delight (Arunachalam 1969, 71).

I will also show also that Kāraikkāl Ammayār used profound philosophical reasoning in her many descriptions of her Lord. One should show three-fold devotion to Śiva: hearing, *śravaṇa*; glorifying, *kīrtana*; and deliberating, *mantara* (Shastri 1970, 17). Kāraikkāl Ammayār's *kīrtans* show great deliberation, giving the reader a picture of Śiva that is a uniquely Tamil one, very different from those of the cave temples of Elephanta that Stella Kramrisch (1981) focuses on in her definitive text *The Presence of Śiva*.

### *How to Live*

Śiva's values regarding how to live, as expressed by Kāraikkāl Ammayār, are in regards to his worship, not ethics in regards to one's relationships with other people. The lack of mention of *yamas* and *niyamas* and other ethical criteria from similar philosophical traditions indicates that the devotee/Śiva relationship is a primary and exclusive consideration for Kāraikkāl Ammayār. Discussion of ethics between the subject and others within her or his environment is not found in the *Siva Purāṇa*. The "Rudrasamhitā, 9, 24" of the *Śiva Purāṇa* lists its prescriptions for the way to live well, including a person's "subtle and keen vision," listening to the names of Śiva, witnessing worship rituals, observing

fasts, and keeping the mind concentrated—all of which have to do with the primary relationship between the devotee and her Lord.

It is assumed the devotee will act in accordance with social mores and ethical values, and that the devotee has received some grace from Śiva before proceeding. Next one needs to complete necessary rituals and observe fasting procedures. In her verse, Kāraikkāl Ammayār states, “I have done penance. My heart is light. I mediate the One-Who-Cuts one’s births (7). (These numbers refer to verses I have translated from the French in the text *Kāreikkālammeiyār: Oeuvres Éditées et Traduites par Kârâvêlane*. Pondichêry: Institut Français d’indologie, 1956.) Kāraikkāl Ammayār jumps then to uninterrupted concentration on her Lord, *dhyāna*, lamenting her separation from the Lord whom she has worshipped since childhood. She then closes the phrase with her ontological understanding of Śiva as “One-Who-Cuts,” or puts an end to, one’s births, so one may attain release from this world and life with Śiva.

### *Self*

Kāraikkāl Ammayār’s *bhakti* poems are both a medium for, and a description of, her metaphysical contact with Śiva (Cutler 1987, 10). The *Śivānubhava*, or experience of Śiva, is of prime importance to the Śiva *bhakta* (Muthupackiam 2001, xiii). Like the ontological division that will be seen between sacred and phenomenal space, the Self and its *Śivānubhava* is seen on two levels in Kāraikkāl Ammayār’s poetry, which emphasizes her place in the metaphysical realm, and that of her listeners in the phenomenal realm. Though she had reached an understanding of Śiva, she remained separate from Śiva,

longing for him, longing to take part in his dance once again. That hierarchical relationship is her understanding of and experience of the Śaiva Siddhānta division of the ontology of the universe into Śiva, the souls and the material world. Souls are eternal as Śiva is, and they are eternally separate from him.

On the metaphysical level, Kāraikkāl Ammayār understood herself always to be Śiva's servant: "I myself am the servant of the one who is served" (8). Her primary function was her servant role to his kingship, a hierarchal relationship, based on understanding that she was separate from him and his majesty. Her goal was not to be his wife or companion; she was not on that level. This was also understood by her devotees, as can be inferred from the sculptural portrayal in friezes where her small figure sits beside and below the large figure of Śiva dancing (Kârâvêlane 1982, Pl. 33). Kāraikkāl Ammayār stated that she had been his servant ever since birth, "Since I was born, since I learned to speak, since I laid myself out for love, I have attended your red feet" (1).

From the outpouring of her devotion, Kāraikkāl Ammayār had attained Śiva's grace, which she believed set herself free from phenomenal existence. Her hagiography tells the reader that her phenomenal knowledge fell away when her husband couldn't accept her spirituality. That moment began the transition of Kāraikkāl Ammayār from the subservient wife, whose devotion was part of her duties, to the saint, the person who had realized enlightenment through her devotion to Śiva. Her treasure was to be at his sacred feet (47), which implies the hierarchical separation, the metaphor for her devotion to him. He utterly

possessed her (92), and her *agape* love for him provided meaning to her life. She speaks of: “This affectionate heart, full of inseparable love of our father” (23).

The Self or soul is understood to be reincarnated through one’s *karma* until it reaches *mokṣa*. Kāraikkāl Ammayār’s understanding of the constant reincarnation of the souls is clear, for she says, “For seven births, I have been his servant” ( 3). From those seven births in particular, she gained grace from Śiva, which was utilized to construct the incident that destroyed her marriage (metaphorically also her attachment to this world), and established her as an ardent bhakta of Śiva. There is no necessity of future births, having gone beyond that need to the state of *mukti*. She exalts, “We no longer respect Yama on earth” (69), and Kāraikkāl Ammayār sees Śiva giving her grace, out of love so Yama will no longer exist for her (69). She tells her listeners that “We vanquish Death ourselves; we escape the terrible hell” (81). Death is no longer a necessary part of the life experience. *Mukti* is a tangible goal; she comes to this belief, she tells us, through her own experience of it.

Her audience, who is living in the phenomenal world, is challenged by her experience with Śiva, and it is clear Kāraikkāl Ammayār understands them not to be on her level. She tells her listeners not to be burdened down with their misfortunes; instead one shouldn’t pay any attention to them as they pay no attention to us (4). She tells them Śiva has created them and through his grace he will raise them up (5); that Śiva as a part of his grace has given them their path today, and that they must follow which wasn’t given previously [before Karaikkal] (19).

In the future, we save ourselves, we who have attended the  
feet of the Deity.  
In the future, to the point of torture for us, oh my heart,  
In the future we will have finished crossing the restless  
inexhaustible ocean  
Of births engendered in an ocean of karma. (16)

In this piece of poetry, Kāraikkāl Ammayār tells her followers that the path which has been established for them will enable them to finish crossing the ocean of births which derive from each person's inexhaustible *karma*.

Kāraikkāl Ammayār has no patience for readers of texts who digress without penetrating the mysteries therein, and who are caught up in endless lists (33), in the sense of the constant repetition of meaningless lines. She uses the analogy of the "illuminated full sky" for her listeners to explain, in phenomenal terms, the glory of the knowledge of Śiva (38). Then later she says a person should not linger at the point of the luminescent Heaven. It is impossible to be hindered there; one will desire to continue immediately to the unrecognizable (43).

According to Kāraikkāl Ammayār, those listening to her teachings ask how to see Śiva, how to get a vision of him and how to ask for his grace. She replies that one shouldn't look outside one's own self to find Śiva, as he is found within.

They practice a grand vision, the vision of the King,  
soliciting the profound grace of the King. You  
ask to live where the King does. He resides here, in the  
thought of my similarity [to him]—it is easy to see. (45)

Kāraikkāl Ammayār continues in the next verse that those who live without (human) love, like herself, live steadfastly with their internal thoughts of

the great Lord Śiva (46). Within one's own body, the understanding of Śiva is not from one's own thoughts, it is more than that. At this point in her teaching, it is my own feeling that this passage is speaking of different ways of knowing besides logical reasoning. We know the ways of the material world through our senses and our reason, but the ways of Śiva appear to her to come more from intuitive thoughts, thoughts she considers higher thoughts.

All of that which you think is above your thoughts then  
comes  
Instant perfection. I tell you this with certitude.  
Let it out and love, oh heart, at the lotus at the feet of the  
One-Who-Carries  
Us from great wave to great wave. (73)

Intuition is not the only means necessary to understand Śiva, but love and devotion are necessary too. Only those with love can see Śiva (96).

Kāraikkāl Ammayār's understanding of the self reflects the *Śvetāśvara Upaniṣad* that blends the ideals of *karma* and *moksa* to the supreme Godhead in phenomenal form, here Śiva. "When one has known God, all the fetters fall off; by the eradication of the blemishes, birth and death come to an end; by meditating on him, one obtains, at the dissolution of the body, a third—sovereignty over all; and in the absolute one's desires are fulfilled" (SU 1.11, Olivelle 1996, 254).

#### *View of Phenomenal World and Metaphysical World*

Within Kāraikkāl Ammayār's experience of being, two realms exist in her thinking, the phenomenal world and the mythological or archetypal one, so a sense of place is inherent in her philosophy. In the material realm, Śaivites at that time desired to worship Śiva in his temples. Four delineations of nearness to the

deity are expressed in the *Śiva Purāṇa* (Shastri 1970, 45). *Sālokya*, relating to the deity within the confines of daily life, is the lowest and least desirable of the four. *Sāmīpya*, is nearness to the deity, which is most achievable in a temple or near a *murti* or statue. The other two delineations involve (3) union and (4) assimilation with the deity. The importance of attempting to draw physically near the deity is the main teaching point from this listing.

The second realm is that where Śiva resides, which is not a part of the phenomenal realm, but rather a mythological place, much like the Christian idea of heaven, that can also abide within the mind of the devotee. The hagiography of Kāraikkāl established a profound vision where she goes to places in the otherworld, the metaphysical world, to worship Śiva, namely Mt. Kailash, for a heavenly experience, and for a Tantric experience at the mythological cremation field, Ālankādu. Her experience as she moves from the phenomenological world to the mythological one is much like that of a shaman who leaves a phenomenological body behind as he or she reaches out into another realm on a spiritual quest.

As noted earlier, it appears that shamanistic practices, where a shaman transforms into an animal shape, occurred in the prehistoric culture of the Indus Valley where a series of seals portrayed an image of a woman fighting a tiger where the woman transmorphs into a half-tiger herself. The shamanistic tradition as it pertains to Kāraikkāl Ammayār involves her transformation from a beautiful young woman to an old hag. It then continues through her symbolic movement from this world to the realm of the deities, the mythological realm, where



shamans travel to gain a token or discover a message, in order to aid others upon their return to this world. Kāraikkāl Ammayār's hagiography emphasizes the surreal walk to Mt. Kailash, the mythological home of Śiva and Umā, on her head, turning the real world topsy-turvy. Mt. Kailash was not usually penetrated by humans. Kāraikkāl Ammayār surprised Umā with her arrival, but not Śiva, who knew she came through his grace. She asked that she could see him dance at Ālankādu. Afterwards she wrote several poems about that magical experience.

At the dead of night to dance at the eminent  
Creation ground with the demons and the roaring fire...  
( 51)

Beautiful and broad, the full moon, in the immense red sky,  
grand,  
Rises. From its light appears the glory of the garland of  
skulls  
On the red locks of That which is, in part,  
An evil saint with red eyes (52).

In these verses, one catches the silvery beauty of the full moon shining down on the cremation field, glistening off Śiva's garland of skulls, as he danced accompanied by a troupe of demons (86), while Kāraikkāl Ammayār sang and drummed by the crackling fire and dense smoke, beside which he danced (58). His dreadlocks, like flames, leapt about him (70). The fire danced from his red palms (98) as he appeared on fire himself, a charismatic aura surrounding him.

Kāraikkāl Ammayār presented clearly her metaphysical perception of worlds beyond the phenomenal world which are in line with both the heavenly home on Mt. Kailash and the her vision of his dance in the cremation fields. The phenomenal world is represented by her intense descriptions of Śiva which will be discussed next as part of her theology.

## *Theology*

Here we turn to theology, the study of divinity. Two aspects of theology can be discerned in Kāraikkāl Ammayār's writing. The first, *saguna*, with qualities, is on the phenomenal level, where Śiva has manifested as an anthropomorphic god to aid the soul. The second level of reality is *nirguna*, without qualities, the metaphysical god that one must learn to know in order to reach *mokṣa*. In what follows, I will be closely analyzing specific theology found in her works regarding her perception of Śiva. The verses I am referencing are from my translation of Kārāvalēne, with the verse number following the quote.

In Kāraikkāl Ammayār's speeches about Śiva, her focus on his phenomenal appearance predominates. At the phenomenal level, Śiva's anthropomorphic manifestations are the most dominant form of her speech about him. Most frequently he has dreadlocks, a crescent moon in his hair, the blue-colored throat, the vibrant luminescence of either red or gold, his third eye, and a cobra hanging from his chest—descriptions that match those in the *Śiva Purāṇa* (Sastri, 1970, 196). Kāraikkāl Ammayār's descriptions of Śiva vary from benign to beneficent to Tantric. “All aspects of Śiva, terrible and benign appealed to her equally. It was actually immaterial to her whether Lord Śiva removed her afflictions and granted her salvation or not. She was sure her heart would enshrine Him forever” (Amalprana 1987, 131).

The descriptions tell the listener the any qualities of Śiva. Śiva's mythology emphasizes his compassion to the world and his protection of it. The blue on Śiva's neck is symbolic to the devotee of Śiva's compassion and his

power over death and destruction.<sup>35</sup> The Ganges that slips through his dreadlocks illustrates Śiva's compassion, for his hair intercepts the Ganges' roiling white water as it tumbles from heaven, slowing its course so it would not harm the Earth. Similarly, Kāraikkāl Ammayār sings in other poems of Śiva's grace, he who has blessed her with four miracles already.<sup>36</sup> Through worship of him, through being at his feet, one gains control over death, to be reborn no longer.

The splendid coloration Kāraikkāl Ammayār ascribes to Śiva correlates with the three *guṇas*, which are a part of everything he has created to bring the eternal souls to his understanding of the universe. The darkness of his blue throat stands for the darkness of *tamas*, which is a part of Śiva through his creation of the known universe.

Śiva's ruddy complexion is derived from the *rajas guṇa*. Kāraikkāl Ammayār sees his body as its red manifestation "coral, naturally as elegant as a red mountain" (39), and the "Great One with a Red Body" (44). The Vedic god, Rudra, the red one, who conflates with Śiva, was the "howler," the terrible one. In the Vedas, Rudra is associated with the fire god Agni as its destroying power, crackling and roaring like an all-consuming forest fire.

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35. At the beginning of time, the gods and demons churned the cosmic ocean with a churning stick that was Mt. Mandara. The tip of the stick was on the king of tortoises and the serpent Vāsuki was the rope. Wondrous things arose: the moon and sun, Śrī, treasures one after the other. But in balance, the terrible poison Kālakūta erupted, symbolizing agony and greed, which Śiva ingested and held in his throat turning it the color of lapis lazuli (Kramrisch 1981, 148-149—originally from the *Mahābhārata* 1.16:33-36 and *Matya Purāna*, 250.1-61).

36. The magical appearance of two mangoes, her change in appearance, and her visit to Ālankādu.

Śiva is further conflated with Rudra, who is associated not only with Fire, but with Time, Kāla, and its destruction. The understanding of the more benign Śiva form is also associated with time, and Śiva is beyond Time as he is beyond its creation. Time is the fourth dimension as it marches unstoppably forward with measured step, taking everything to its death and rebirth. It is a movement metaphor. Just as one's own life is its own movement within time, and, just as the dance of Śiva is a metaphor for movement, during Śiva's dance, so too Time progresses forward in its own splendid Kathākalī choreography. The crescent moon in Śiva's hair prompts the devotee to the passage of time month by month throughout one's lifetime. The cobra around Śiva's neck represents the yearly measure of time; the necklace of skulls and other serpents represent the passage of ages, and the extinction and generation of races of humankind. The power of his third eye (12) represents the past, present, and future.

The conflation of Rudra and Śiva calls forth an image of the warrior. This tremendous energy that Rudra engenders is the energy of *rajas*, the warrior energy that fires the *Māhabhārata*. The fire that Kāraikkāl Ammayār sees as part of Śiva when he danced at Ālanādrū is a cosmic element of this red and destructive characteristic, as is the halo of fire that surrounds the dancing Śiva figure. As a great Yogi, Śiva internalizes the tremendous power of sexual energy, which he withdraws into himself, where, as the Fire of Life, it burns perpetually upward (Kramrisch 1981, 205).

Śiva's golden aura relates to the purity of the *guṇa sattvas*. "Hanging in ringlets, his brilliant hair is like a mountain of gold" (26); "his body is as

resplendent as the light of the sun of the day” (65), and he lights up the world (15). Here, Kāraikkāl Ammayār appreciates Śiva in his beneficent role: “They crown our Master with spoken garlands, and attach to his golden feet garlands of flowers” (87). The spoken garlands are the *kīrtans*, the songs and mantras of the devotees who are the servants of the Lord. The garlands of flowers placed at his feet are metaphors for the devotion of his followers, who stand at his feet, in a hierarchical relationship through which he will aid them through grace in their quest for *mokṣa*. He is benevolent (25), magnanimous (43, 48), and the Protector of the Worlds (72). He lights up the world (15).

Just as asceticism quiets the three *guṇas* in our life, so does Śiva’s asceticism quiet the vibrant colors of his being. “His beautiful body, illuminated, is covered with ashes and adorned with the bones of others” (45). The listener realizes that asceticism is a means of overcoming the desires caused by the three *guṇas*. Kāraikkāl Ammayār, who has lived the life of a pampered rich woman as a dependent of her wealthy father and her wealthy husband, has calmed her passions by means of her ascetic role. She chided the ascetic Śiva for having his snakes hanging off him when he does his round of begging:

It is the same as when you beg through the whole world,  
you must  
Disencumber yourself of your miserable serpents, because,  
you see,  
The chaste woman, frightened, will not come to give your  
alms [when]  
The poisonous serpents dance on you. (57)

This humorous *venbās* may insert a bit of Karaikkal Ammayār's earthly personality into her work, but taken as a piece of literature, it warns that everyone may not be able to understand the message she is preaching.

One of Kāraikkāl Ammayār's poems teaches of the eight aspects of life:

It is the two lights,<sup>37</sup> the fire and space.  
It is that—the earth, water and wind. It is  
That life and eight incarnations. His form is  
Wisdom, when, immobile, he perceives. (21)

Śiva manifests in eight forms (*aṣṭamūrti*), which Kāraikkāl Ammayār delineates in this poem. The sun and the moon stand above us and measure the length of the year and of the months. The five elements, earth, water, fire, wind and space, make up all matter. The eighth element is the soul which is the impetus that causes one, after going through many incarnations, to reach for wisdom. Wisdom is the understanding that only Śiva's grace ends birth and gives *prajñā* to the devotee; Siva protects us and conquers death which allows us to avoid hell and destroy our *karma* (Jagadeesan, 1989, 157). As Śiva has created everything, Viṣṇu is part of him as well.

Another form of Śiva's manifestation is a *ardhanārī*, male/female, here Śiva symbolizes the unity of the male and female to generate life. Kāraikkāl Ammayār states the visualization of the concept in the following manner: "One part of you is Mal<sup>38</sup> who measured the world, another is Umā" (41). A later poem emphasizes his feminine side: "The beautiful one is partly feminine" (39).

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37. The two lights are the sun and moon.

38. This is Viṣṇu in the Harihara form.

Kāraikkāl Ammayār refers often to Śiva as “Father”<sup>39</sup> and as Father/Mother, “My two, Father and Mother, I have made them always the two treasures of my heart” (10). This image of Śiva in Kāraikkāl Ammayār’s poetry, as being both male and female is mirrored in the *ardanārīśvara* figure in sculpture which shows half a man and half a woman together as one figure, both ripe and at the height of their sexual powers. Kāraikkāl Ammayār accepts *ardhanārī* as mother/father, not as sexual man and woman, which is a difference in her understanding from the more usual interpretation of the bisexual or hermaphrodite statue. She says:

His grace fills the entire universe, the Mother’s grace  
Cuts the web of rebirths. It is for grace  
That I reach to the Object of Truth.  
All is mine when always possible. (9)

Kāraikkāl Ammayār understands their union as that of Śiva/Śakti, both immutably together for all eternity. She sees that grace of the Mother to be more active than that of the Father. The mother, like the Mahāśakti Durgā, is the one with the weapons, who can cut through *karma* and free the devotee from the constraints of this life. This sacred femininity gives Kāraikkāl the right as a person, who accepts “feminine” as a category that includes her, to desire the sacred for herself.

Most of Kāraikkāl Ammayār’s discussion involves the characteristics of the phenomenal Śiva, and she realizes they prevail in this phenomenal world more so than the metaphysical world. She asks what his form really is:

The other day I allowed myself to serve him without having  
seen the Saint’s form.

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39. She uses both the term *Endai*, “my father,” and *Appā*, “father” (Jagadeesan 1989, 157).

I still haven't seen the Saint's form. What makes me  
concerned is  
If one day he asks me, "What is the form of your King?  
What is that form? Have you a form?" (61)

Then she continues in the next verse, "What do you resemble? What don't you resemble? What do you become? What don't you become?" (62). Yet, understandably, she has few other words beyond these to question after the *nirguṇa* quality of Śiva, the reality of deity which is altogether without qualities. Yet, the fact that she asks these questions above is an indication that Kāraikkāl Ammayār also wondered if Śiva had no form.

Kāraikkāl asserts that knowledge of Śiva is wisdom, is the Truth. She is fulsome in her praise, giving Śiva many auspicious attributes. He is the Object of Truth (9), which is the object of knowledge (21). The separation of the soul from Śiva leads in Śaiva Siddhānta to a *dvaitic* sense of the Lord; he is forever separate from the soul. As creator of all life, he raises up all life and makes all life die (5). He is the One-Who-Knows (15); he is supreme (18); full of grandeur (30); and reigns over the firmament (72). He is the King of Deities (45). "He is the great Intelligence that is recognizable to others (30)." He presides over Heaven as well as Earth (44), the Highest of the Celestial Ones (93). He gives grace to souls who are worthy of it (9). His grace fills the entire universe (9), and he is filled with grace for each one of us (88). And she raises the question of how she might recognize him if and when he has no form.

Kāraikkāl introduces to her audiences a theology through her descriptions of Śiva's *sagūṇa* form whose symbols remind the devotee of his compassion, as protector of the world. Further, she teaches of the symbolic power of the three



*guṇas* to engender life-creating visions, and the necessity for asceticism to cut those visions. Finally she taps into the Devī tradition flourishing at that time to identify Śiva as both male and female.

### Conclusion

Kāraikkāl Ammayār shows herself to be a theologian in her exposition of the phenomenal and metaphysical attributes of Śiva's character to her listeners. Her idea of Śiva is different than those discussed in Kramrisch's definitive text on Śiva, which focuses on the benign *saguṇa* characteristics, not the appearance in the crematory fields (Kramrisch 1981, *passim*). She uses symbolism from Śiva's descriptions to tell her listeners of Śiva's presence, his attributes, and his care for those who worship him. It will be shown that Kāraikkāl's experience is different from that of Mahādevī Akka and Lalla Ded, who develop Śiva's *nirguṇa* metaphysical symbols more than his phenomenal iconographic emblems. Kāraikkāl Ammayār's emphasis on the details of his appearance takes the listener to the feet of Śiva where their devotion towards him must begin.

What is central to Kāraikkāl's teaching is that emphasis on place, on the places Śiva can be discovered, from the statues of him, with their astounding details that remind people of his phenomenal attributes, to his place in the metaphysical world, which only she herself has seen. Her poetry is not about human-to-human ethics, nor is it especially concerned about the Self, or the condition of the world, but rather, Kāraikkāl focuses primarily on the theological

subject of the whole field of wisdom and splendor, Śiva himself in his many phenomenal manifestations.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ĀNTĀL–BRIDE

Āntāl (ninth century) contributes to Hindu spirituality in her love for and spiritual union with the Lord Viṣṇu. Her experience serves as a model for Vaiṣṇavite Hindus of Tamil Nadu to have a view of female spiritual experience, and to gain spiritual benefits and boons through it. Of the three chief forms of love in Sanskrit poetry are said to be love forbidden, love in separation, and love in union (Ramanujan 2004, 70), Āntāl represents love in separation.

Two works in Tamil are attributed to Āntāl, the *Tiruppāvai*, of thirty verses, which appears to be earlier, and the *Nācciyār Tirumoli*, “Sacred Song of the Lady,” fourteen hymns in one hundred and forty three verses. Several English translations of the *Tiruppāvai* exist, including that of Mohan Ramanan, “Āntāl’s Tirupāvai,” in the *Journal of South Asian Literature* in 1989, Norman Cutler *Consider Our Vow: An English Translation of Tiruppalai and Tiru-Vempava* (1979), D. Ramaswamy Iyenger, *Thiruppāvai [with English Rendering]* (1967), and one French translation exists under the auspices of Jean Filliozat, *Un Texte Tamoul de Dévotion Vishnouite le Tiruppāvai d’Āntāl* (1972). P. G. Sundaram in 1987 and Vidya Dehejia in 1990 translated both the *Tiruppāvai* and the *Nācciyār Tirumoli*. The hagiographic texts include the *Kuruparamparāpirapāvam 6000* (6000 Verses on the Glory of the Succession of Gurus) written by Pinpalakiya Perumāl Jiyar in the fourteenth century, and the *Divyasūricaritam* (Characters of the Sacred Ones) by Garudavāhana Pandita in the fifteenth century. I will be using Vidya Dehejia’s translation for my analysis

of Āntāl due to her outstanding reputation in the aesthetics of Tamil art and literature.

### Hagiography

Like Queen Sītā, heroine of the *Rāmayāna*, Āntāl was discovered when she was a baby lying on the earth, when the Vaiṣṇava saint Viṣṇucitta<sup>40</sup> was hoeing his sacred basil, and, as such, she represents the Goddess Earth. She was named Koṭai of the fragrant tresses and was raised by Viṣṇucitta. Koṭai is both “one who uses language” and “one from the earth” (Ramanan 1989, 51).

As a child, as many girls do, Āntāl loved to dress in bridal clothing and pretend she was marrying Viṣṇu. Āntāl often absorbed herself in play with the garland Viṣṇucitta made each day to be placed over the reclining Viṣṇu that evening, but one day Viṣṇucitta caught her playing with the garland. He explained that a deity must have a fresh garland not worn by anyone, or the deity would become angry, because it was considered soiled if someone else wore it. That night, he didn't give Viṣṇu the garland as it was “soiled.” Viṣṇucitta dreamed that night that Viṣṇu spoke to him and told him that “the garland worn by Āntāl was especially dear to him and had an added fragrance” (Dehejia, 1990, 8). Viṣṇucitta realized that Āntāl was special to the Lord Viṣṇu and revered her well.

Āntāl wanted to marry Viṣṇu and Viṣṇu only; she would accept no mortal substitute. She spent her days in contemplation of Viṣṇu, and, according to the

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40. Dehejia uses Viṣṇucitta for Āntāl's step-father's name. He is known through other sources as Periyālvār.

hagiography, this was when she composed her verses that have been sacred to Tamils ever since she sang her poems. Viṣṇucitta listened to her and asked her which of Viṣṇu's manifestations she would like to marry. She decided on marrying Viṣṇu at Śrīrankam, where the image of Viṣṇu represents Viṣṇu as Lord Ranganātha resting on the cosmic snake, Adīśeṣa. Viṣṇucitta arranged a wedding procession to Śrīrankam, after which Āntāl stepped down from the palanquin and walked up to the serpent couch where Viṣṇu reclined, and—according to legends—disappeared.

The story is brief and is very mythological. It reflects three other stories, that of Sītā from the *Rāmāyana*, Kanya Kumari, and that of the goddess Śrī. Like Sītā, Āntāl was born or discovered in a fruitful field. The story of Sītā from Vakmiki's *Rāmāyana* has King Janaka, Sītā's stepfather, say, "One day, as I was plowing the ground for sacrifice, at the time of the turning of the ploughshare I found a girl, and as I got her in clearing the field for sacrifice, I have named her Sita. This earth-born child has been brought up in my house as my daughter" (Sen 1927, 44).

Sītā returned to mother earth at the end of her stay on the moral world according to the Uttarakanda chapter of the *Rāmāyana*, "a magnificent throne rose from the bowels of the earth. Goddess Earth took Siva in her embrace and disappeared below. Flowers were showered from above and the gods sang her praise" (Sen 1927, 609). Just so, Āntāl disappeared from this existence into earth, the stone statue of Viṣṇu reclining on the snake Adīśeṣa.

Sītā's life on earth was a sad time. Her childhood was happy, but she had little time to enjoy luxury as queen with her husband King Rāma for, in the *Rāmāyana*, she was the “textual lure” to tempt the demon Rāvana, so Rāma could destroy him. After Sītā was linked to Rāma by marriage, they spent most of their time together as ascetics; then Sītā was abducted by Rāvana; and her chastity was questioned by Rāma and others upon her rescue. Sītā accepted her role in the cosmic drama and accepted Rāma's denial of her afterwards. It was necessary to deny her initiative as a person in order to paint the heroic picture of a strong Rāma, who, as warrior king, destroyed Rāvana. Sītā told Rāma's brother, Lakṣmana, in tears, “Lakshmana! God has created me for suffering. I have been suffering and meeting with sorrows ever since the beginning of my life” (Sen 1927, 592). Sītā's suffering was not a spiritual suffering that would aid in her enlightenment, but a corporeal suffering of her body, while she existed here.

Though the external frame of the two stories is similar (born from a furrow, returned to the earth), the kernel of the Sītā story is very different than that of Āntāl. Āntāl's existence, from the little we know of her story, was happy. She did not accept life as it manifested for her, but Āntāl created her own autonomy through her love for everything from Viṣṇu. Āntāl's main object in life was to marry Viṣṇu, which she did in a timely manner and with the blessing of her adoptive father.

Another story from south India is the story of Kanya Kumari which relates to a town in Tamil Nadu on the southernmost tip on India, a sacred spot, where the confluence of the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Bay of Bengal

occurs. The story of the virgin Kanya Kumari is derived from the Devī tradition. According to this story (TempleNet 2000, ¶4) Bānāsuran, a demon, was wreaking havoc in this area. Mahāviṣṇu is said to have requested the Gods and humans to ask for the primal energy, Parāśaktī, to destroy the demon. Śakti appeared as a young virgin as Kanya Kumari. Kanya Kumari killed the demon Bānāsuran in very much the same way Durgā did in the *Devī Māhātmya* text. A virgin is by definition an ascetic, and other traditions in India use the concept of the virginal power to be the “one who kills,” as killing the demon, and also as the one who kills illusion, *māyā*. Further, as the supreme Goddess, Śakti, Kanya Kumari is the source of all things, metaphysical and physical, which she emanates out from herself (Dyczkowski, 1992b, 39).

Like Kanya Kumari, as a very young woman, a teenager, and as a pure virgin, Āntāl is by far the youngest of the women studied in this dissertation; she left the world at the age most women married in the eighth century. Āntāl’s youth, innocence, and strength of principle are her strong characteristics. After her merger with the statue, Āntāl became legendary as a person with whom young women could relate. Āntāl is also prayed to by other young women for a propitious marriage, which is considered central to happiness in women’s lives. Her actions do not echo that of the Kanya Kumari virgin; still her attributes of youth, purity, asceticism, and the power that is derived from them, conflate the two. The power of the virgin is an ideal that crosses the south Asian subcontinent from Nepal to Tamil Nadu.

The third mythological part of this hagiography is Āntāl's conflation with the goddess of fortune, Śrī, who is understood to reside with Viṣṇu on the snake Adīśeṣa at the beginning of time. The "Vīdyeśvarasamhita" of the *Śiva Purāṇa* described the scene: "Once, long ago, O foremost among Yogins, Visnu was having his nap on his serpent-couch. He was surrounded by the goddess of fortune and his attendants" (Sastri 1970, 52). As Āntāl chose to marry that image of Viṣṇu and traveled in her bridal entourage especially to the temple at Śrīrankam where the statue of Viṣṇu lies on a representation of that very snake in order to marry him, and, as she disappeared into the stone of the statue there, the relationship between her and Śrī appears appropriate.

Āntāl and Śrī both represent prosperity. From Āntāl's relation to the earth is extracted her affiliation with prosperity. Because Viṣṇucitta was hoeing his sacred basil plant when she was discovered, religious prosperity is hinted at. Śrī and Bhūdevī, another deity associated with Viṣṇu, are both propitious. Bhūdevī is goddess, *devī*, of the earth, *bhū*. Coming from an agricultural tradition, she symbolizes beginning, existing, arising, which things do when they grow from the earth. Śrī is called upon to give fame and prosperity, to be bountiful and give abundance, and to misdirect her sister Alakṣmi, who brings misfortune (Kinsley 1986, 20). Prosperity and fortune are well represented in the images of Lakṣmī on the shelf by a small shop owner's cash register in present day India. By doing some structural analysis of Āntāl's story, one finds several mythological elements to make her attractive especially towards women.



### South Indian Vaiṣṇavas

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the seventh through the tenth century includes the renaissance of theistic Hinduism out of the shadow of two atheistic philosophies, Buddhism and Jainism, in Tamil Nadu. Śaivism was the leader in the theistic transformation, as its proponents were more willing to take on leaders from the two religions in debates and magic contests. The Vaiṣṇava hagiographies do not discuss debates between Vaiṣṇava saints and Buddhism and Jainism, but Vaiṣṇavism quietly continued to grow based on Vaiṣṇava philosophical values. Vaiṣṇavism grew out of the worship of Vāsudeva in western India according to the Buddhist Niddesa Sutra from the fourth century of the Common Era (Bhandarkar 1965, 3). Out of the *Mahābhārata* (the central story of this epic is dated to eighth or ninth century BCE) and *Rāmāyana* (600-400 BCE), come many of the legends of Viṣṇu. The *Bhāgavad Gītā*, espoused by Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*, of especial interest to Vaiṣṇavites, is dated by Radhakrishnan to the fifth century BCE (Radhakrishnan 1948, 14). This demonstrates the importance of Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa from at least that point in time.

As with Śaivism, among the records of the growth of Vaiṣṇavism in Tamil Nadu are found the poems of its saints, the twelve Vaiṣṇavite Ālvārs, dating from between 600-900 CE. Āntāl is one of those twelve Ālvārs, and she is dated to the first part of the ninth century CE. The later *Bhāgavata Purāna*, which contains many stories about Viṣṇu's incarnations, was probably written in the ninth century and comes from the South Indian tradition, with additions from the northern texts including the *Brahmā* and *Viṣṇu Purānas* (dated about 500-700 CE).

The great south Indian Vaiṣṇava philosopher Rāmānuja (1077-1157 CE) is in this tradition, in fact he has been said to have utilized the philosophy developed by the Ālvārs as one of the sources for his material.

So, with the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana* formulated before this time period, though probably still being added to, and with the *Bhāgavata Purāna* and Rāmānuja, both from south India but later, what was the Vaiṣṇava philosophy like at this period? I will use S.M.S. Chari's *Philosophy and Theistic Mysticism of the Ālvārs* (1997) as the basis with which to compare Āntāl's thought to Vaiṣṇava philosophy from her lifetime and slightly thereafter.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* from the *Mahābhārata* recognizes *bhakti* as one of the forms for worship of Kṛṣṇa. Verse 9:26 states:

Whosoever offers to Me with devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water, that offering of love, of the pure of heart I accept.  
(Radhakrisnan 1948, 248)

Rāmānuja's *Gītābhāṣya* develops that brief statement further. The *bhakta* must hold Kṛṣṇa exceedingly dear towards him, "Whose mind has attained purity in the form of having such as offering as its sole purpose." Rāmānuja further says, "I enjoy it as if I was attaining a desired object lying far beyond the range of my hopes" (Sampatkumaran 1985, 241). For one whose mind has attained purity, Kṛṣṇa then accepts her or his *bhakti* as far exceeding his hopes, so *bhakti* from the pure soul is a desired approach by Kṛṣṇa.

The theistic Ālvārs, like the Nānmayārs, were more concerned with worship than with ethics, assuming ethical practices were already present in the devotee and concentrating on the practice of worship. *Prapatti*, or complete

surrender of one's self to God as the sole refuge, was central to their thinking. Worship includes *śravana*, listening to the glory of God; *kīrtana*, singing His glory; *smarana*, contemplation on his greatness; *pādasevana*, divine service; *arcana*, offering flowers with the recitation of His name; *vandana*, prostrating oneself before God; *dāsya*, being a servant of God; *sakhya*, a friendly disposition towards god; and *ātma-nivedana*, surrender to God (Chari 1997, 126).

To analyze the concept in more depth, *Prapatti* involves the will to do only acts that please God and the will to refrain from acts that don't please God. In its concentration of acts pleasing to God, *prapatti* emphasizes ritual acts as well as interpersonal ones. *Prapatti* involves qualities of humility recognized by one's helplessness to achieve this alone, and faith in God as sole protector. One must have the ability to ask for protection from God, and the ability to entrust oneself to God with prayer (Chari 1997, 133). A separation exists between the individual and God, which is hierarchical, calling one to trust the deity for assistance and protection.

Ontologically, the soul, the *jīvātman*, is separate from the material world and from Paramātman, or Mahāviṣṇu, who creates and destroys all beings and non-sentient entities in the universe. The sustenance of all beings and non-sentient entities also comes from Mahāviṣṇu.

The body is in bondage caused by *karma*, because the Lord has created bodies and sense organs for the soul that subjugate the body to *karma*. The soul can assume different forms, and the body veils those forms, like an actor on the stage. The soul is considered part of the body through the *antarātman*, the internal

self, the heart or mind, and all activities are controlled by one's will, *sankalpa*. Chari follows Rāmanuja's *viśiṣṭādvaita* hypothesis. The two entities, soul and the universe, are real and distinct, but their identity is with the One Spirit, Mahāviṣṇu. Viṣṇu is to the phenomenal world as the soul is to the body. Each individual soul has many incarnations and so too does Viṣṇu incarnate many times. Of his incarnations, ten are known when he incarnated to sustain the world which he had created.

Vaiṣṇavites accept the heaven of Viṣṇu, Vaikuṇṭha, where the Pāṇdavas went after their life on earth was done. They also accept the idea of *mokṣa* from the Upaniṣads. Rāmānuja says *mokṣa* is not just total freedom but a "positive state of the existence of the individual soul in a supramundane realm (Brahmāloka)" (Chari 1997, 144).

The Lord Viṣṇu is responsible for the creation, protection, and dissolution of the universe. He is the material cause of the universe that he creates through his *icchā*, or will. Being both transcendent and immanent, he is the omnipresent source of bliss, truth, and knowledge, an infinity of attributes, and pureness. Because he is Lord, like a King, he has strength enough to hold up the universe without strain. He has luster, charisma, and is considered the supreme spiritual light from which others derive light (Chari 1997, 76). His golden color resembles sunbeams, but as this is the *kali yuga*, Viṣṇu's color is blue-black. He has *śakti*, power to perform divine deeds that are impossible to others like the lifting of the Govardhana mountain by Lord Kṛṣṇa.

His power is also seen in his divine female Śakti, or power, named Śrī or Lakṣmī. One may meditate on the divine couple to remove past *karma*, as they together are a means for obtaining *mokṣa*. Chari says Śrī is equal to Nārāyaṇa (1997, 63). The Vaiṣṇavite monistic Goddess Mahādevī can manifest into Lakṣmī, who is the personification of compassion, or Bhūdevī, who is the personification of forgiveness, or Nīlādevī, who is the personification of the milkmaid, *gopī*, whom Kṛṣṇa enjoys for her beauty.

### Āntāl's Philosophy

Āntāl is much loved in Tamil Nadu even today; for it is said her image is in every Vaiṣṇava temple. At the Śrīvilliputtūr Temple the first *pūjā*, or worship service, of the day re-enacts her devotion to the garland given to the Lord Viṣṇu:

At the completion of this worship, even as the richly garbed bronze image of Āndāl, Āntāl stands freshly garlanded, the partially wilted garland, which she had worn all night is carried in procession through the temple to the shrine of the reclining Rankanāta. At the appropriate moment in the morning puja of Viṣṇu, Āndāl's discarded garland is placed ceremonially around his neck. At noon, this same garland travels to the shrine of Āndāl's father Periyālvār, and is offered to him. Honored visitors to the temple . . . may be blessed by having Āndāl's garland placed momentarily upon them, and they may be given one of its wilted flowers as prasātam. (Dehejia 1990, 6)

A garden at Śrīrankam was named after Āntāl in 1126, and at Śrīvilliputtūr an inscription dated 1454 is a love letter from Viṣṇu to Āndāl. The Cola Queen Śembiyan Mahādevī (tenth century) is said to have a bronze image of her made by her personal workshop (Dehejia 1988, 10).

Āntāl's *Tiruppāvai* is held in high regard by the Śrīvaiṣṇavites who consider it a "spiritual song of songs," and it is sung by young unmarried girls in the month of Markali<sup>41</sup> (Chari 1997, 24). The young girls take a vow and sing all thirty verses to get an auspicious marriage (Dehejia 1990 4). The sixth verse of the *Nācciyār Tirumoli*, a dream in which she marries Viṣṇu, is recited at many Śrīvaiṣṇava weddings.

I will use the verse numbers in my citation from Dehejia (1990) with a "T" to reference a verse from the *Tiruppālai* and "NT" to reference a verse from the *Nācciyār Tirumoli*. As the NT has numbered verses as well as chapters, both will be included.

Āntāl was a very young woman, a teenager probably, when she is said to have composed these two pieces which have made her well respected and adored within Tamil Nadu than Joan of Arc. Yet, despite her young age, Āntāl's verses show a high degree of philosophical education as well. Āntāl used six different rhymes in her verses, and a rhyming scheme which is particularly difficult, that of rhyming every first syllable in the line (Dehejia 1997, 9). As will be shown, her verses show a high degree of education philosophically as well.

Āntāl was unconventional in her thought, but not her manner, and she did not openly flaunt social custom as did Kāraikkāl, except in her desire to marry Viṣṇu, a decision that was supported by her adoptive father, Viṣṇucitta. One of the most traditional of the *bhakti* saints to be

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41. The month is January/February.

explored in this dissertation, Āntāl speaks still today to the collective unconscious of Tamil Nadu, to people who want more in their spiritual life, but, lacking definition within their own mental capacities, find her compositions to express their innermost thoughts. They turn to her then, both in relation to the saintly manner in which she led her life, and to her poems which they revere as their own.

*How to Live*

Like Kāraikkāl Ammayār, Āntāl was focused on divinity rather than relationships with other people. Viṣṇu and other celestials are the only sentient beings to appear in Āntāl's poems. She develops ritual activities primarily for her relationship with the Lord. In the *Tiruppāvai* we find a preparation for the worship of Viṣṇu:

Bathing at dawn,  
We sing the praises of the supreme one  
Who slumbers upon the milky ocean.  
We eat no ghee, drink no milk,  
Wear no flowers in our hair,  
No kohl in our eyes.  
We do no wrong, speak no evil,  
We bestow in abundance,  
Give alms humbly to those who seek,  
In this manner  
We gladly live. (T: 2)<sup>42</sup>

Here are listed the many accouterments of the devotee regarding purity for worship of Viṣṇu, proper eating habits, dressing as an ascetic, and ethics

in regards to one's neighbors. Other verses develop the concept of purity further.

I will use the verse numbers in my citation from Dehejia (1990) with a "T" to reference a verse from the *Tiruppālai* and "NT" to reference a verse from the *Nāciyyār Tirumoli*. As the NT has numbered verses as well as chapters, both will be included. The first chapter of the *Nāciyyār Tirumoli* is a chapter of preparation for Āntāl's betrothal to Viṣṇu, which also states the establishment of purity as necessity for the making of a vow to Viṣṇu. This chapter begins by speaking of preparations for the purity of the home by cleaning it and decorating it for the ritual, by sweeping the ground in front of the house, making "sacred mandalas of fine sand," and adorning the street (NT: 1.1). Āntāl decorates the walls of the home with a representation of Viṣṇu's great bow, *sāraṅga*, made out of sugar cane, along with his name (NT: 1.4.). She must prepare her body by bathing in the stream (NT: 1.2), then she dedicates her breasts to him (NT: 1.4, 1.5). She also treats fasting as important, vowing to eat once a day (NT: 1.8). Behaving like an ascetic is one of her vows; she will have her "body neglected, unadorned, tangled hair in disarray, lips pale and dry" (NT: 1.8). Her vows are meticulously followed for the purpose of the successful completion of a ritual activity, after which she may return to her normal activities. The practices she has outlined in these two preparatory verses are part of normal *bhakti* practice. Her reward for these activities varies from prosperity in the *Tiruppālai*, to heaven in the *Nāciyyār Tirumoli*.



Beyond these two rituals of preparation for which Āntāl describes her preparations, she spends her life in song and prayer to Viṣṇu. She assumes her own purity and that of her surroundings, as she did when choosing to wear Viṣṇu's garland, for which a strong prohibition was well known. Āntāl's worship began at the feet of Viṣṇu. Like Kāraikkal, physical closeness to the deity is valued: to be in the world of Viṣṇu, to be in the temple of Viṣṇu, to be at the feet of Viṣṇu. "We come to worship at your feet strewing fragrant flowers, your form held in our minds, your name upon our tongues" (T: 5).<sup>43</sup> Next she speaks of constantly singing his incarnations where he sustained the world:

Once you measured the worlds—<sup>44</sup>  
 Glory be to your feet.  
 You killed the king of Southern Lanka—<sup>45</sup>  
 Glory be to your valor.  
 You kicked and shattered the cart—<sup>46</sup>  
 Glory be to your fame.  
 Like a twig, you flung and killed the calf—<sup>47</sup>  
 Glory be to your jeweled anklet.  
 You held aloft the mountain as umbrella—<sup>48</sup>

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43. Temples as a place where the Lord resides are extremely important in Tamil Nadu.

44. This is Viṣṇu as Vāmana, his dwarf incarnation.

45. Here she alludes to Rāma in the *Rāmāyana*.

46. As baby Kṛṣṇa, he killed the demon Śakata who had morphed into a cart.

47. Kṛṣṇa killed the demon Vatsa who had manifested into a calf in the herd of cows with a kick of his leg.

48. Kṛṣṇa held the mountain Govardhana up over the villagers, like an umbrella, to save them from a vicious storm the jealous Indra had blatantly sent to annihilate them.

Glory be to your greatness.  
You destroy all enmity—  
Glory be to the lance in your hand.

In these many ways  
Do we sing your heroic deeds (T:24)

In this song of praise, the Lord Viṣṇu is valorized in three of his manifestations, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa , and Vāmana. Other manifestations of Viṣṇu's power are praised in other verses. Āntāl sings of his valor, his brilliance, and his glory. She says his glory benefits the luster of Śrī, from whom Āntāl is incarnated. In all intimate ways, through her personal purity, through the purity of her home, she wishes to praise Viṣṇu.

### *Self*

Āntāl understands her self as a being wholly devoted to Viṣṇu. Āntāl's relationship with Viṣṇu is a dualistic relationship. Viṣṇu is separate from her; and he is even separate from his wife, Śrī, though always near her. Āntāl calls herself an ignorant child in comparison to his might and magnificence, emphasizing this separation, which will never leave her. A child of her times, when Buddhism and Jainism were still strong and Śaivism was growing across Tamil Nadu, she realized that not everyone was devoted to Viṣṇu as she was. "We are not all from māmī's (auntie's) house—some are strangers" (NT 3.8).

Āntāl doesn't speak of concepts related to the individual Self which are important in the Upaniṣads, such as *karma* and the wheel of

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rebirths; nor does she speak of the many categories of the body listed in Sāmkhya philosophy; nor does she develop the body as her temple of worship as is done in yoga. She doesn't speak of the five elements. All of these refer to the illusory world, where materiality keeps the devotee from Viṣṇu.

Āntāl's desire for Viṣṇu is her connection with him, which sometimes causes her incomparable anguish, and at other times inexpressible joy. Chapter five of the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* expresses her personal anguish when she calls to the Koelbird to call Kṛṣṇa to her. "I pine, I languish, I waste away, losing beauty of breasts, pink lips and pearly white teeth" (KT: 5.5). Āntāl anguishes, she yearns for her Lord; she sheds endless tears and piteous cries. She is tortured by the fire of love, "that he should come and fold me in embrace" (NT 8.4). Āntāl fears he has tricked her when he made her his slave. She has no shame though she fears that everyone around her knows of her desire as an unmarried woman for Viṣṇu. Āntāl criticizes him for not pitying us in our misfortune and chides him that he should not make our hearts ache by teasing us (NT 2.2, 2.3).

Yet Āntāl's anticipated joy is unrestrained, for she knows his grace which has touched her already which causes her body stress: "So great is my desire to unite with the lord that emotion chokes my breath, my breasts rise and fall, and quiver in joy" (KT: 5.7). Āntāl asks for aid to find him, "Help me to find within me my beloved, when he folds me in close

embrace who melts my heart” (NT 10.8). In her religious quest, from his grace, she is irreparably tied to him. “I yearn for him, He has me in his thrall; I cannot resist his power” (NT 5.10). She wishes to become one with the “light of Venkata.”<sup>49</sup>

Āntāl is aware that these emotions she described are external. Yet, internally is where Viṣṇu is to be found. Āntāl is rooted at his feet, as close as she can be physically in this world. “I am bound to the spot where he placed his feet—I am powerless to move” (NT 13.6). He is centered in Āntāl’s heart, where many texts place the Lord. Āntāl realized her body is a hindrance to her desired closeness to Viṣṇu, because he is inside her, not at temples, statues, and other material objects a part of this world. Āntāl prayed to him to “help me to find [you] within me, my beloved” (NT 10.8). Āntāl was aware that in spite of her praise of all his forms, those forms belong just to this world, and she had been granted the grace to know his “form,” which is ultimately formless. Āntāl has a double or dualistic sense of self and Self, of the human self and the Self of the deity of two separated and yet intermingled, of the Lord’s transcendent Self being necessary within her own personal self.

So she desired not to be a part of this world, Āntāl wished to marry Viṣṇu to live with him in heaven, and when she did, she disappeared.

Āntāl had declared she wouldn’t marry a mortal:

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49. The Lord Venketeśvara manifested at Tirupati, today in Andhra Pradesh, but this is an often repeated aspect of Viṣṇu to aid in people’s enlightenment and joy.

These breasts of mine  
Clad in red *choli*  
Close their eyes,  
Draw back in shame  
From mere mortals. (NT 12.4)

Āntāl continued further, “If there is even a whisper of giving me to a mortal I shall not live” (NT: 1.5). Āntāl’s desire is both spiritual and sexual: “Make this plea—tell him I will survive only if he will stay with me for one day, enter me so as to wipe away the saffron paste adorning my breasts” (NT 8.7).

This erotic aspect of the poem, as in other *bhakti* poets, was used as an allusion for metaphysical union. “What makes Āntāl’s poem unique is its participation in a spiritual and philosophical discourse which lifts the significance of Āntāl’s love to the highest reaches of religious ecstasy” (Ramanan 1989, 53). Viṣṇu could love her physically, except that the material world is not the one to be imagined, the metaphysical one is. The lord loving Āntāl, metaphysically or physically, has consumed her womanhood (NT 8.6). By loving her physically she felt positively that Viṣṇu made her not desirable to mortal men, because she had become “used.” By loving Āntāl metaphysically, he made her not desire mortal men, because she had become one who belongs with Viṣṇu.

Āntāl’s self was then entwined with the one important yearning in her life, to gain that which she knows and desires, which is Viṣṇu in all his manifestations.

*View of the Phenomenal World and Metaphysical World*

Āntāl rejected the phenomenal world in order to pursue other-worldly bliss with Viṣṇu, and so she did not dwell on the systemization of the world and the heavens. She saw the world as undesirable, finding herself “in this ignoble world where she roamed” (NT: 31.6). Āntāl did not speak of reincarnation, of her past lives, or of the cycle of *samsāra*, being, instead, grounded in this world and this time. “Is it not better in this very birth to serve Govinda in little intimate ways, than wait for a life beyond?” (NT: 12.6).

This statement almost seems Buddhist in its emphasis on this life and temporal sense of the present, opposed to concern with other lives and other times. The Buddha in the famous *sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikāya*, explained to Malunkyaputta that:

The religious life, Malunkyaputta, does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal; nor does the religious life, Malunkyaputta, depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal; nor does the religious life, Malunkyaputta, depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal. Whether the dogma obtain, Malunkyaputta, that the world is eternal, or that the world is not eternal, there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair. (Burt 1955, 35)

Just as the Buddha didn't want to speak of future lives which are unknowable, so too Āntāl wished to concentrate on this life, on creating intimate rituals with Viṣṇu, which keep her focused on the present.

Because Buddhism was strong in Tamil Nadu at the time Āntāl lived, one sees the relationships between these two great philosophies in Āntāl's poems.

The *Nācciyār Tirumoli* chapter on sandcastles also invites a Buddhist interpretation. Āntāl chides Viṣṇu for breaking the sandcastles she and friends have made, an analogy for the lives and material goods constructed by her and her friends within this earthly life. Not desiring, or not building unsteady sandcastles, is one of the important teachings of the Buddha. Āntāl's thought went beyond Buddha's, which says not to desire; Āntāl's thought portrays that a desire for material objects or desiring emotional responses from the world are not as great as desiring Viṣṇu, who is so much more than all those material accouterments. By using Buddhist analogies and turning them towards theism instead, Āntāl serves as a catalyst for theistic change.

When she does speak of her goals, Āntāl does not speak of *mokṣa*, but speaks of Vaikuṅṭa, the Vaiṣṇavite heaven, to which the Pāṇḍavas and their wife disappeared at the end of the *Mahābhārata*, and which Viṣṇu and his wife Śrī rule over. As an incarnation of Śrī (Chari 1997, 14), this attitude is quite logical. Having left Viṣṇu, the good wife, Śrī, would miss him very much and desire to return to him, not desire *mokṣa*, like ordinary mortals would. Because one can only sing *bhakti* as a mortal on earth, the inference is that Śrī came to earth in order to perform devotion to Viṣṇu which she was unable to do in heaven. In this case, Āntāl as an incarnation of Śrī is as sacred as that the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa from Viṣṇu. That feminine energy manifested to praise Viṣṇu, as all humans should praise him as well. This incarnation of Śrī is an individualistic feminine tradition that

models psychical development of the feminine. Śrī did not come to maintain the earth as Kṛṣṇa did, and, separated from Viṣṇu, she poured out her heart to him:

My soul melts in anguish—  
He cares not  
If I live or die.  
If I see the lord of Govardhana,  
That looting thief,  
That plunderer,  
I shall pluck  
By their roots  
These useless breasts,  
I shall fling them  
At his chest.  
I shall cool the raging fire within me. (NT 13.8)

In this poem, Āntāl felt deserted by Viṣṇu and used the mark of her beauty, her breasts, as a weapon against him.<sup>50</sup>

Āntāl saw the world as a great illusion, a construction of the Lord in which sentient beings exist until they realize the illusion and reach liberation; to her, this world was a place that is keeping her from her Lord Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu may have created it; but she believes that she does not belong here; rather, she belongs at his side in Vaikuṅṭha heaven.

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50. The Tamil classic the *Shilappadikaram* written in the third century concludes with the heroine, Kanniki, ripping her own breast from her body in grief.

“Suddenly, with her own hands, she twisted and tore her left breast from her body. Then she walked three times round the city, repeating her curse at each gate. In her despair she threw away her lovely breast, which fell in the dirt of the street. Then before her there appeared the god of Fire in the shape of a priest. . . . He said:

‘Faithful woman! I have orders to destroy this city on the very day you suffered such great wrong.’”

And the city of Madurai, capital of the Pāndhyas, whose chariots are invincible, was immediately hidden in flames and smoke” (Danielou 1965, 131).



### *Theology*

Āntāl's theology is focused on Viṣṇu and his several incarnations, especially Kṛṣṇa. She sings their sacred stories from her own wisdom and understanding of their roles and interactions with humans. Āntāl perceives Viṣṇu in several different roles in her poetry. First, one can look at the significance of the incarnations of Viṣṇu she highlighted, the most important of which for her was Kṛṣṇa, and then also Man Lion, Vamana and others (explained below).

Just like, Āntāl was raised by foster parents. Kṛṣṇa is easily accessible to the devotee. Kṛṣṇa, like Āntāl, in her version of his deeds, did not openly flaunt social custom; she valued tradition in her poetry as in her life. From my observations from several stays in India, Kṛṣṇa is most commonly regarded as a charismatic figure who teased the *gopīs* and, through one's choice of him, caused one to reside in bliss along with him for as long as he desires. Āntāl's portrait of Kṛṣṇa varied slightly from this idealized Kṛṣṇa, who teased the *gopīs* and, to his most importantly manifested omnipotence, his power represented in the image of a wise king.

Āntāl sang about Kṛṣṇa's exploits as a baby, beginning with his birth. Āntāl claimed that though he was "born one woman's son, that same night you became the son of another" (T: 25). He was wafted away from his birth by Devaki in a cell in King Kamsa's dungeon to a new life in

Vrindāvan as a cowherd. This episode emphasizes the omniscience surrounding Kṛṣṇa, protected by the gods from King Kamsa, who desired to kill him. “Kamsa spread his net, you escaped at dead of night” (NT 3.9), Āntāl boasts, and, eventually, “put an end to [King] Kamsa’s cunning” (NT 4.6).

Kṛṣṇa was taken to Vrindāvan, where he became the stepchild of Nandagopa, who was well known for his strength, wealth and generosity, and Yaśoda who raised him.<sup>51</sup> Balarāma, the son of Nandagopa and Yaśoda, was his elder half-brother, with whom he successfully fought many demons. The many delightful butter stories where Kṛṣṇa tormented the cowherd wives by stealing their butter, are not mentioned by Āntāl. The third chapter of the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* is based on the story of Kṛṣṇa stealing the *gopīs*’ clothing while they bathed, but outside of this the stories of the “naughty” Kṛṣṇa, who disobeyed the *gopī* wives and who sported with the milkmaids are not told by her. Kṛṣṇa is a more conservative character in her view, not the charismatic rebel, who is more of a guardian than a torment to the pastoral community.

Kṛṣṇa’s wife was Nappinai, not known in the Sanskrit tradition, who was a transcendent being in the earthly form of the goddess Nīlādevī (T: 18), and of whom it was said he like to put his head on her breasts (T: 19). Kṛṣṇa as protector killed several demons, some of whom were sent by King Kamsa, and he eventually fought against King Kamsa and killed

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51. Some say he is the son of Rohinī, Vāsudeva’s other wife.

him. At one point, Kamsa sent the demon Vatsa, who was turned into a calf. Kṛṣṇa grabbed him and flung him into a tree, which was another demon in disguise. Another demon, the serpent Kāliya, was subdued by Kṛṣṇa. Kāliya's poison was so toxic that it caused the waters of the Yamuna to boil. Kṛṣṇa climbed high in an oak tree, dived into the water and wrestled him down, then he danced a dance on the many-hooded serpent head (Dehejia 1990, 138). Kṛṣṇa, the superhero, was the warrior king who will keep the earth free from demons, representing one's fears, by killing them.

There is almost a Zoroastrian sense of good and evil here in the killing of the "monsters" and the injustice of King Kamsa, a dichotomy which has been promoted in Western literature from King Arthur to Robin Hood. But, if one looks more deeply at the characters, the dichotomy doesn't hold, for they have come to earth either by having gained super powers through meditation or to do their dastardly deeds, but they are sentient beings and will eventually reach the Vaikuṅṭha heaven along with Āntāl.

Kṛṣṇa's royal characteristics are further promoted by other stories contrasting him with King Kamsa, and by Kṛṣṇa's reign over Dvāraka after having left the countryside. King Kamsa sent a vicious elephant, Kuvalayāpīda, against Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma. The warrior Kṛṣṇa grabbed its tusks and slew it (T: 15). Instead of the delightful naughty Kṛṣṇa, one is treated to the story of how King Kamsa set up a wrestling match in

Madurai between Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma and the best of Kamsa's warriors, which Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma won. Soon after, the King was killed by Kṛṣṇa. As King of Dvārka, Kṛṣṇa wished to marry Rukminī, who was to marry Śiśupala, so he carried her off and married her himself, while Balarāma held off the opposing armies, and they were set up as king and queen (NT: 4.7).

Kṛṣṇa's omnipotence is represented by the many stories of his superhuman strength. As a baby the demoness Pūtanā was sent by King Kamsa to kill Kṛṣṇa with the poisonous milk in her breast. He sucked her life breath out with the milk, killing her (T: 6). When he was a child, he split open the beak of a bird that had carried him off and killed it (T: 13). Kṛṣṇa was omnipotent over not just earthly matters, but bested Indra, Lord of the Vedic gods in heaven, as well. He convinced the peasants to worship the mountain Govardhana rather than Indra, who became quite jealous and angry and sent a violent storm to destroy the inhabitants, so Kṛṣṇa grabbed the mountain and held it over the villagers' heads.

Holding in victory  
the mountain as umbrella  
he saved  
from pouring rain  
the herds of cows.  
Take me to that Govardhana  
Of hallowed fame. (NT: 12.8)

In addition to Kṛṣṇa, Āntāl valorizes the exploits of King Rāma, another incarnation of Viṣṇu popularized in the *Rāmāyana*. As warrior and king, he built the bridge to Lanka (NT: 3.3), a town on present-day Sri

Lanka; cut off the many heads of Rāvana (T: 13), its demonic ruler; and razed Lanka to the ground (NT: 2.6). It is clear here the image is not of Rāma as the devoted husband of Sītā, but of Rāma as warrior, whose goal in life was to destroy Rāvana.

Another warrior incarnation of Viṣṇu was the incarnation as the Man Lion (NT: 8.5). The demon, Hiranyakaśipu, had gained a boon that he could not be killed by man nor beast, in earth or heaven, by day or night, and with no known weapon. Viṣṇu fought him as a man-lion, in the air, at dusk, and with his claws.

Viṣṇu's incarnation as Vāmana is an illustration of his omniscience. He asked for a boon that he be given as much land as he could cover in three steps, then grew to a huge form and strode over the earth and heaven (NT: 2.9). His incarnation as Varāha, who cherishes the earth is noted (NT 11.8). His primeval sleep on the snake Adīśeśa was one of the most frequent epithets to him.

When one looks at the chapters themselves of the *Nācciyār Tirumoli*, one sees other images of Viṣṇu. The first three chapters, the invocation, the sandcastle chapter, and the missing clothing chapter are done in a childlike manner with a child's perspective, but their topics are not childish. The invocation is a mature invocation, complete with the vows Āntāl will take to finish it. The sandcastle chapter, as mentioned previously, is a call to avoid the desires of this world, out of a greater desire for Viṣṇu. Here Āntāl teaches our phenomenal goals are like

sandcastles on the beach, beautiful and ephemeral. The missing clothing chapter is an analogy for one's relationship with Viṣṇu. There, Āntāl relates how Viṣṇu found the *gopis'* clothing while they were bathing and refused to allow them to have their clothing back. When we wear clothing, Āntāl is saying, when we "wear" our body, these images are masks of our true being. By taking the young women's clothing, Viṣṇu, as Kṛṣṇa, showed the women their truer form for their edification.

The fifth chapter of the *Nācciyār Tirumoli*, "Koelbird, Call Him To Me" and the seventh and eighth, "White Conch from the Fathomless Sea," and "O Dark Rain Clouds," all involve Āntāl's use of various symbols to call Viṣṇu to her, in much the same manner as Kalidasa's *Meghaduta*.<sup>52</sup>

"I Dreamt This Dream, My Friend," the sixth chapter, is a beautiful metaphor of a wedding between Āntāl and Viṣṇu. The dominant *rasa* is *śringara*, or love. Āntāl possesses the bliss of *Nāyaki-nāyaka bhāva*, the surrender of the lover to the beloved (Ramanan 1989, 52). Just like later Ragamāla paintings from Rajasthan, the verses in the next chapter move then to the united pair and their bliss in their oneness, "In the Grove of the Lord."

The final chapters of the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* develop the topic of Āntāl's desire for Viṣṇu, the final chapter being a blissful remembrance of

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52. Kālidāsa (c. first up to the fourth century CE) wrote the famous poem "Meghaduta" or "The Cloud Messenger," which expresses the longing of a lover for his beloved, who is far away. He entreats the monsoon clouds that will travel across India to look favorably on his beloved (see V. P. Joshi, 1976).

her sacred closeness to Viṣṇu, “We Saw Him There in Vrindāvan.” The form of desire for love of the deity with all its manifestations has been established in Āntāl’s poems for the later Rāgamāla paintings in her series of poems.<sup>53</sup>

Diving deeper into her poetry, Āntāl presented more metaphysical images of Viṣṇu. The most important of these for her is that he is the “great illusion master” (T: 5), who creates illusions, perceived as the material world, which keeps her from her true knowledge of him. That illusion has to be penetrated by the devotee, like the naked *gopīs* longing for their clothing, but who are more real without it. “Your words have some meaning we don’t understand” (NT 2.6), express the illusion of ignorance that everyone must push beyond to truly know Viṣṇu.

Not only the warrior faces of Viṣṇu have been recognized, but also the virtue of Harmony in ruling. Āntāl equates Viṣṇu with harmony (NT: 15.7). Harmony has not been emphasized enough in regards to Viṣṇu. A good king creates harmony in his kingdom besides fighting battles against intruders; the king rules wisely, doesn’t take too much from the workers, so the workers can live well, and judges when conflicts develop amongst his constituents. In this way he is the “impartial one” (T: 20) who judges according to truth, not to conflicting interests. He is our beloved (NT: 2.2), and when he enters Āntāl’s soul, it makes her melt.

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53. For further explication of this theme in Rāgamāla paintings and poetry, see Harsha V. Dehejia (2005).

Finally Viṣṇu is called the source of the Vedas and the essence of the Vedas (NT: 10.3, 11.6). During this renaissance of Hinduism, one can't leave old Hindu thoughts and patterns behind, so Viṣṇu must be related in people's minds to the Vedas. His superiority over the Vedic gods is further established by the Mt. Govindhara story in which Kṛṣṇa talked the villagers into worshipping Mt. Govindhara, not Indra, this is a story belittling Indra, who was a Vedic deity.

From this recounting of the many appearances of Viṣṇu, as himself and in various incarnations, we find that Āntāl's theology emphasized a Lord who was both a good friend and yet a good king as well.

### Conclusion

One sees many aspects of the pre-Śrīvaiṣṇavite religion in Āntāl's verses outlined at the beginning of the chapter. In Āntāl's *prapatti*, or complete surrender of herself to Viṣṇu, Āntāl demonstrates her devotion to god in many ways set forth in Ālvār philosophy, in her fixation in her mind upon her Lord, in her desire to wear his garland, and in her singing of songs for him which have lasted for centuries. Āntāl's self or soul, from which she sings, is separate both from Viṣṇu, and from the material world he has created.

An understanding of the veil of illusion from Śrī-Vaiṣṇavism is apparent as well. The chapter on the missing clothing illustrates that one must get rid of the accoutrements of the world in order to see Viṣṇu



without one's veil, to see Viṣṇu from the soul. Standing naked before the Lord allows the Lord to see one without one's finery as well. Āntāl neither speaks of the five elements nor the Sāmkhyan categorization of the parts and actions of the body, because they are part of the material world, which one must strip from oneself, in order to truly see from one's soul. Viṣṇu is responsible for creation through his manifestation in the primeval sea on Adīśeṣa. He is responsible for its protection through his other avatars and for the protection of humans especially through his incarnations as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa. His is transcendent in the Vaikuṅṭha heaven where he lives with Śrī now, and he is immanent when a person, with a pure heart, relates to him through *bhakti*.

Viṣṇu's Śaktā, or feminine power, manifested in Āntāl herself, is Lakṣmī and her manifestations of Bhūdevī, Śrī, and Nīlādevī, which affirms the feminine side of his devotees. And, as it was the thought that Śrī, came to earth as Āntāl, in order to devote her life to Viṣṇu. A devotee could then use this idea of offering one's feminine self to the Lord as a way to become one with his desire for her. The devotee could use Āntāl's path as a model for one's own devotion. Āntāl's experience in this world, of which she writes, is purely of Viṣṇu. Āntāl has devoted everyday of her brief existence to him, like a bride, and, in the end, she returned to him through his grace, given because of her pure devotion.

## CHAPTER FIVE: AKKA MAHĀDEVĪ-ĀCĀRYĀ, TEACHER, AND MYSTIC

Akka Mahādevī, a great Hindu woman saint, is the product of the drive for spiritual equality for women of twelfth century Vīrasaivism in the province of Karnataka midway down the west coast of India. As her personal quest culminated in living liberation (*jīvanmukti*), and because she had accumulated the wisdom to be thought of as a true teacher (*ācarya*), Akka Mahādevī taught the knowledge she had so arduously learned to the larger community. That knowledge is recorded in her poems, her *vacanas* or teachings, which are central to the study in this chapter. She wrote in Kannada.

Karnataka; a mostly Jain state in this period, was known for its active women. Not only did elite queens, mothers, and sisters build temples under their own names and financially support religious practices, but ordinary women too were celebrated in epigraphical inscriptions for their religious support.<sup>54</sup> This leads us to see her in the light of a female supported Brahmanical structure.

Akka Mahādevī 's work was collected and edited by L. Basavarāju in 1966 and I have found English translations of selections of her verses by Vinaya Chaitanya, *Songs for Siva: Vacanas of Akka Mahadevi* (2005), R. K. Ramanujan,

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<sup>54</sup> Padma (2001), who combed the epigraphical sources, gives some examples: (1) a female disciple of a Jain monk built a temple in 903 CE (2) Gomabbe consecrated images of the gods Keśava and Āditya in 938 CE and (3) Bijabbe built a front veranda for a Śaiva temple in 1137. Other women donated gifts to temples, donated money to feeding and rest houses, donated grants, flower gardens, provisions of oil, acreea nuts, sandal, ghee and betal for worship (34-48, passim).

*Speaking of Siva* (2004), and within a novel written by H. Tipperuda Swamy, *Soul Unto the Sublime* (1982). I have focused on Chaitanya's translation as it is the most complete, but have occasionally included Ramanujan's translations, due to their beauty. A biography of Akka Mahādevī does not exist, so my discussion of her life is drawn from the research of Chaitanya and Thipperudra.

### Hagiography

Akka Mahādevī,<sup>55</sup> like Kāraikkāl Ammayār, taught union with Śiva, but in contrast to Kāraikkāl Ammayār, she emphasized social action for improving the conditions and status women and the practices of caste prejudice. David Kinsley (Kinsley 1980, 84) terms Akka Mahādevī's life as "a kind of metaphor of the tension between *dharma* and *bhakti*—between conforming to social expectations and giving full reign to one's fervent devotion to god." Vīraśaivism was founded in the twelfth century by Basavaṇṇa, and its followers all were recognized by the devotional Śiva lingams they wore around their neck.

Akka Mahādevī's biography as given in Ramanujan (2004, 7) and Chaitanya (2005, 4-5) idealizes the power of women to oppose or counter political strictures against women. Born in Uḍutaḍi in Karnataka to Vīraśaiva parents, Akka Mahādevī was allegedly initiated into the sect, and learned Kannada, the local language, and also Sanskrit at an early age (Padma 1993, 182). The king, Kauśika, who was a Jain, fell in love with her and cajoled, then

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55. *Akka* means "elder sister" in Kannada; *Mahādevī* means "Great Goddess."

threatened her family until she would wed him, to which she finally acquiesced, under the stipulation that he could not intercept or interfere in her worship of Śiva. The king didn't live up to his promises to let her worship as she chose, so she left the palace, then wandered around naked, dressed only in her long hair.

In the narrative provided by Akka Mahādevī's biographers, one notes a conflict of political and religious power.<sup>56</sup> That she left her royal marriage, and that she wandered around naked, were both not approved for an ordinary woman or ascetic. Though a woman, Akka Mahādevī was able to break the bonds of marriage to the king and to wander through the kingdom as a realized being. It took tremendous courage for her; and that courage was a result of her strength derived from her religious practice.

After leaving her husband, Akka Mahādevī went to Kalyāṇa, where Basavaṇa and another key Vīraśaiva saint, Allama Prabhu, were teaching at the Anubhava Mantapa Academy (Hall of Siva Experience), an assembly of leaders of the Vīraśaiva movement. Akka Mahādevī was accepted at the Academy, after being tested by Allama Prabhu, its President. When she entered sky-clad, as nakedness is referred to in India, he asked her, "Who is your husband?" to which she replied, "I wish to be married only to Channamallikarjuna, the Lord." Next he asked her if she wasn't ashamed that she was naked, with only her hair to cover herself. She responded her veil of hair was not for her own comfort but for that of others. Finally he criticized her, saying she was like a piece of overripe fruit,

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56. In Tibet, Yeshe Tsogyel goes through the same conflict between Tibetan religious and political power (see Keith Dowman, 1984).

giving her the opportunity to teach him that only if one who feels lust, anger, greed and other emotions can one become rotten; *sacchitānanda* transcends all these. She then requested that he aid her in her quest for oneness with Śiva. After her work with those two saints, Akka Mahādevī went to Śrīśaila, a holy mountain where Ramanujan says, “she found him [Śiva] and lost herself” (Ramanujan 2004, 70).

### Vīraśaivas

Vīraśaiva, or Lingavata, was a Śaivite sect, founded in the twelfth century in the northern section of Karnataka in southern India, which was politically fragmented into the kingdoms of the Cālukyas, Hoysalas, and Sevvans, and was part of the strong south Indian tradition threatened by the ideas and forms that the new, strong Islamic regime to the north was inaugurating. Basavaṇṇa (d. 1167), who was the founder of the sect, was a prime minister under King Bijjala II (r. 1130-1167), who enlarged his Kalacuri kingdom through intrigues, conspiracy, cruelty, and violence (Ishwaran 1992, 6). This expansion was the impetus for the rapid expansion of the Vīraśaivas at that time. The Vīraśaivas reached their height in the Vijayanagāra Empire in 1425 and have remained important ever since. The Vīraśaiva sect spread beyond the bounds of the Kalacuri kingdom through five great *maṭhas*, or centers for learning: Karāra in the Himalayas, Ujjayani in the south, Śrīśailam in the east, Ramhapurī in the west, and Benares in the north (Majumdar III 1961, 445).

The Vīraśaivas revere the sixty-three Tamil Śaivite saints as well as their own local leaders. *Śaraṇas* (another word for the followers of Basavaṇṇa, or, also, “saints”) have as their goal the union with Śiva, and they also include social action to branch away from the Brahmanical tradition, both embracing women as leaders of their tradition and also lower caste leaders in their elimination of caste. Current *vacanas* include the works of thirty-three women. They were opposed to notions of pollution promoted by Brahmanism, such as the notion of pollution being associated with menstruation, that, here were disadvantageous to women. They link one’s spirituality with the eradication of various negative social structures supported by the Kālāmukhyas, an earlier dominant Śaivite sect. In the eleventh century, many Kālāmukha temples were donated by royalty in a symbiotic relationship between religion and the state. Ishwaran approves the Vīraśaiva sect, which he considered populist because it broke with Brahmanism, which he considered elitist and rule bound (Ishwaran 1992, 1). Nancy M. Martin (2003) argues that many bhakti traditions from 700-1700 CE supported the equality of all people over the stratification of Brahmanism:

The later devotional or bhakti traditions that began to appear in India in the sixth century in the south make even more radical statements suggesting that all are equal in the presence of the one divine reality of which we are all a part, conceived of in personalistic terms as God. The particulars of one’s current incarnation—including gender and caste—have no relevance before God. Religious authority lies not in heredity but in religious experience and the ability to draw others into relationship with the one divine reality who is loved by and loves the devotee. (275)

Ishwaran (1992) compares ordinary Hindu *bhakti* from other regions and other periods to that which Basavaṇṇa taught. He felt that Basavaṇṇa was not interested

in *bhakti*, per se. Traditional *bhakti*, Ishwaran says, concentrates on liberating people from the phenomenal world, whereas Basavanna was oriented towards social action, toward establishing a socio-economic reform within this world. Ishwaran holds that *bhakti* doesn't challenge the root cause of caste in other parts of India, but I disagree with him about this for *bhakti* frequently does provide its adherents with social and spiritual power beyond the normal bounds of caste. Ishwaran thinks *bhakti* is elitist, since *bhakti* requires an institutional infrastructure of temple donated by elites for the purpose of protecting elite interests. In contrast, Basavanna rejected Brahmanical authority by taking the focus of spiritual practice away from the large temples which were dominated by Brahmins (Ishwaran 1992, 10). His point is well made, but is overstressed in his text; the same socio-religious circumstances he decried pervade the South Asian subcontinent to this day and continue to pervade in the Kalacuri area to the present era as well. Similarly to leaders from across India at various times, Basavanna wished to eliminate caste as a socio-economic condition.

Vīraśaivism is *advaita*, non-dualist. It considers itself to synthesize all philosophy within it; it emphasizes religious thoughts, ethical practice, and divine experience. This religious movement uses the term *śaktiviśiṣṭādvaita* to describe its members, accepting the oneness of Śiva qualified by the power of *śakti*, the female force of creation. Paraśiva is supreme reality, omnipotent, omniscient, who created all souls and matter by His will, his play, and who is both material and instrumental cause of the universe. His power, the female divine energy, *śakti*, is inseparable from him. Creator of the earth, he is pureness exemplified. He, out of

play, created the universe through the expansion of his body in the same manner that a tree grows new branches and stretches to the sun but still retains the seed. Śiva then draws his body back in for the dissolution of the universe. In his play the universe exists, and, without it, the universe would not manifest. His play is continuous as his dance is continuous, constantly creating and recreating the universe. Śiva pervades all objects but objects are not Śiva, which reflects the partial non-dual *viśiṣṭādvaita* stance of the sect. Sentient beings eventually reach the point where they see nothing but Śiva in the world.

Vīraśaivism defines the soul to be, an *anga*, “a ripple risen from Śiva” according to Thipperudra, or “a part of” Śiva, in more general Sanskrit. Through lack of knowledge, *avidyā*, the soul is seen as a separate entity from Śiva and its purpose is to worship Śiva. With pure understanding it is not seen as separate but a part of Śiva (contrary to other schools of Śaivite understanding), as illustrated by the metaphor of gold and a gold bangle as both sharing the essence of the same metal.

#### Ācāryā/Teacher

Akka Mahādevī, after having left the king, clearly went to the elite in her sect to gain teaching. Later she uses that elite experience in order to teach others in her community about the values she had learned from her perspective. In her writings she comes across didactically as she gives teaching lessons to aid others to her understanding.



As a person wanders along her or his unknown path into the misted future, one occasionally meets someone who shows the way as a deep and true teacher. Such a true teacher was the ancient Hindu philosopher, Kauṭilya (fourth century BCE?), who distinguished seven steps of Vedic study from his observation of scholars. At first the student drinks in without distinction all the words of the teacher (*śuśrūṣa*), as the teacher expounds her or his understanding. After time, the student begins really listening to the teacher, truly hearing the words (*śravaṇam*), which causes the student to apprehend what the teacher is saying (*grahanam*). The student must then remember or retain that which has been taught (*dhāraṇam*). In these first four steps, the student is passive and the instructor active; however learning does not occur without the student exploring the ideas, trying them out in different manners, questioning them and comparing them with perceived thoughts. Discussion, *ūhāpola*, is the next stage, both discussion with others on the same path, and discussion with ideals already present in the student's mind. Now the full knowledge of the meaning of the instructor's lessons occurs (*vijñāna*). Kauṭilya concludes with a further step, *tattvabhaniveśa*, the comprehension of the underlying truths the teacher has used as presuppositions, not spoken, but the roots of the values the instructor is portraying. Kauṭilya himself teaches, "The student learns a fourth from his *ācārya*, a fourth by his own intelligence by himself, a fourth from his fellow-pupils, and the remaining fourth in the course of time by experience" (Majumdar, II: 583-584) The teaching brought forth here emphasizes both the teacher and the learner as active in the process of transmission.

Ancient India had two types of teachers, the hired teacher who was paid concurrently with the lessons, and the *ācarya*. Dronācarya who is found in the *Mahābhārata* is an example of an *ācarya par excellence*. Embraced into the family to raise the Pāndava brothers and their cousins, the Kauravas, Drona gave problems to his pupils to solve as a challenge and learning exercise. The famous story of Dronācarya and Arjuna illustrates this style of teaching.<sup>57</sup> This classical rendering of concentration and focus has been told to Hindu children since the epic was conceived. Drona taught nothing; the students elicited their responses from their own experience. But they had been prepared by previous lessons and study with Dronācarya. Drona was an established member of the family, sitting with King Dhṛtarāṣṭra's advisors at court.

As time went on, these private personal relationships between teacher and students became less mainstream as *maṭhas* were established by kings. But gurus became more important for those who were truly spiritually motivated. The relationship of the guru to his or her students, in the Vīraśaiva sect of which Akka Mahādevī was a part, was essential. First the guru must be able to enter the mind

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57. Drona assembled all his pupils in front of a tree with an artificial bird set in the obscuring branches. First he asked Yudhiṣṭhira, the oldest of the Pāndavas, "Do you see the bird in the tree top, prince?" Yudhiṣṭhira answered in the affirmative. Next he asked, "Now can you see the tree or me or your brothers?" Again Yudhiṣṭhira answered in the affirmative. Dronācarya, disappointed, told him to run off. Then he asked Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, who answered as Yudhiṣṭhira did and was sent away. The other brothers and other pupils were also asked and sent away. Finally Arjuna, the best warrior of the Pāndavas, was asked. "I only see the bird not the tree nor you," Arjuna answered. "Describe it to me," Drona asked. "I only see the head not the body," replied Arjuna. "Then shoot," said Drona, and Arjuna shot the bird's head off (summarized from van Buitenen 1973, 272-273).

of the student to ascertain where the student stood on the path the student was following, comprehending the student's talents and developed abilities. From that, the guru gives the student two gifts. The first is the *prāṇa*, or proper breath, power, or energy to carry forth. In truth, *prāṇa* refers here to the body.<sup>58</sup> Without this body work, the student will not be able to evolve fully. Second, the guru gives the student the *will*, *icchā*, to continue on the quest. The will derives from the mind, the *buddhi* that must be properly expanded through ethical practices, meditation, and one-pointedness.

Lack of evidence precludes a clear understanding of Akka Mahādevī as a guru, but her position as an honored teacher, or *ācārya*, is clear from her *vacanas*, or words that propound her doctrine. A *vacana* is not considered a poem in Kannada literature; it means “to give one's word,” or “to make a commitment” so, as one who adheres to truth, Akka Mahādevī gives words that are the center of her teaching. *Vacanas* are said to be responses to questions or situations by the writer (Chaitanya 2005, 9).

Rather than sorrowing about misunderstandings within *samsāra*, Akka Mahādevī teaches her followers how to live life as Dronācārya did. “If you jump into the sea carrying a stone, will your troubles be over, O Mother? If, even after eating, you say you're hungry, I'll say, ‘Too bad’” (Chaitanya 2005, 22). She recognizes the pain in those around her, especially women. This first line brings

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58. The *Yogasūtra* teaches the importance of *prāṇāyāma*, breathing exercises which schools of thought amplified through the centuries, and the point of *prāṇa* work is to amplify the body to its proper strength in good health, with the energy flows of the body all working properly.

into view the experience of a mother, who, for any of many reasons, despairs to the point of suicide, perhaps she is an outsider in the family attempting to forge bonds with her husband's relatives, or the mother of daughters not sons, or a mother whose children are starving or beaten due to the disdain for them from her husband—all realities for Hindu women at that time, a part of a patriarchal system that did not recognize women as equal with men. Akka Mahādevī reminds her students that even death doesn't eliminate pain—for one will still be reborn according to one's past *karma*. One's desires are never satiated; even after eating one craves more.

The followers to whom Akka Mahādevī is speaking are encouraged to realize and eliminate desire from their lives. Akka Mahādevī speaks to the experiences that her disciples lived in a personal manner, not giving them an answer to their sorrow, but causing them to look inside their souls for recognizing what is right and what must be done:

If I say I have left Maya  
Maya won't leave.  
If I don't leave maya,  
It will ride on my back.  
To the yogi, maya became a yogini.  
To the ascetic maya became  
A Female ascetic.  
To the one with self-control  
Maya became a flatterer  
I won't be scared of your maya  
Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender,  
I swear by you. (Chaitanya 2005, 24)

In the first four lines, Akka Mahādevī doesn't commiserate about the experience of *māyā*; she brings recognition to her listener of what one already knew in regards to *māyā*, that it will cause one to misinterpret the realities of life.

In the following lines she equates the feminine Sanskrit word, *māyā*, with the female ascetic. Many stories circulated at the time demonstrated the desire of ascetics for women, who are portrayed as seductresses, leading the male ascetic off his spiritual path. She recognizes the desire of male ascetics for women and the male ascetic's attempts to defile yoginīs and female ascetics, a real problem for women on the spiritual path. She crosses boundaries set in a world of stories that describe the female ascetic as initiator, as seductress, making it clear that her experience is of yogis desiring women, not women ascetics desiring men. Those ascetics, who have vowed to live under *brahmacarya*, a vow of celibacy, still desire. If an ascetic can still desire a woman's flesh, how much more do those of us, who have not the strength to become ascetics, desire objects in our own lives. Then Akka Mahādevī concludes these considerations with the belief that having strength in one's relationship with Śiva (whom she calls Channamallikārjuna in the poem) holds one to the proper path.

As teacher, Akka Mahādevī provided illustrations from her own experience and from the experience of her followers, so the followers can utilize their own thought processes, their discussion with one another, and their subsequent experience to establish their own path to liberation.

### *Ethics*

The Vīraśaivas emphasized behaving ethically within an ethical social system, which Akka Mahādevī's verses serve to clarify. The caste system was a large social problem which the Vīraśaivas worked to overcome. Akka Mahādevī

says, “What is there in caste? What meaning is in caste?” (Thipperudra 1982, 177). She disparages the Brahmanical tradition which denies to women and *śūdras*, who have not had the *upanayana* ceremony, full status. As a woman who doesn’t receive Brahmanical initiations, Akka Mahādevī questions: “What can I know of the initiations, O Lord?” Instead of adhering to those Brahmanical initiations, Akka Mahādevī promotes a more autonomous religious practice.

Akka Mahādevī’s interest is confined to the Vīraśaiva hierarchy through which one advances oneself spiritually. She asserted that “I shall ever remain a servant to the servants of the wise ones who dedicate themselves to the Guru, the *linga*, and the mendicant and thus am freed from egoism” (Chaitanya 2005, 28). Egoism here refers to the egoism of the twice-born whose initiations stratify the classes of society and don’t have any spiritual meaning.

She felt that eliminating the reliance on Brahmanical authority would eliminate the social stratification Brahmanical society epitomized. This social stratification includes the caste system and the social attitudes towards women. She felt that by awareness of personal experience, rather than reliance on scriptures, makes it clear the positive and negative aspects of Brahmanical scripture. Further, change occurs through reliance on positive and negative experiences to lead the way. Her focus was not on individual virtues but on the total change of the social system.

Akka Mahādevī condemns the use of Vedic learning as the sole method of achieving a valid religious experience. Akka Mahādevī teaches her listeners the value she places on scriptural studies:

Reading and rereading the Vedas  
Led to vain argumentation  
Learning after hearing of the scriptures  
Leads to confounding confusion.  
Saying I know, I know, the classics  
Became hard as rocks.  
Saying I have done, have done, the ancient lore  
Got lost in the wilderness.  
Where am I where is he?  
The Absolute is pure space  
O Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender. (Chaitanya 2005, 47)

The ancient texts, she says, have been argued about for so long that their essence is no longer clear to the people discussing them. Brahmanical thought no longer touches her personal experience, The essence or meaning of life, to her, is based on her own experiences as a *jīva*, or soul, not the religious texts which have hidden its her own personal value as a religious soul.

### *Self*

Akka Mahādevī's view of the self is rooted in her belief in reincarnation of the soul into a new body. The body is understood as a vehicle for enlightenment, but its condition, its gender, etc, is considered to be irrelevant.

Believing she has come through many lives, Akka Mahādevī remembers her sense of sorrow and discontentment from those previous life experiences. Her self is not limited to this life, as it is considered in Western philosophy, but has the cosmic infinity of Śiva, in which this life time is but a snap of the fingers. Ramanujan translates her words on her understandings of her own incarnations: "Not one, not two, not three or four, but through eighty-four hundred thousand vaginas have I come. I have come through unlikely worlds, guzzled on pleasure

and pain” (Ramanujan 2004, 74). Using terminology regarding the female body, Akka Mahādevī relates that she came from innumerable vaginas in her path through *samsāra* in effect validating women’s role in the life process.

Those countless life times have been filled with frenetic empty actions:

Monkey on monkeyman’s stick  
Puppet at the end of a string

I’ve played as you’ve played  
I’ve spoken as you’ve told me.  
I’ve been as you’ve let me be

O engineer of the world  
Lord white as jasmine

I’ve run till you cried halt. (74)

Akka Mahādevī’s *jīva* at this point in her interminable existence, through Śiva’s grace and through her work for countless lifetimes, has come to an understanding of this constant wheel of existences, an understanding that causes her to pause to understand how to rectify the situation:

Within the body, the bodiless came to be;  
Within the individuated,  
The non-individuated came to be;  
Within becoming, the becomingless came to be;  
Within the mind great remembrance came to be;  
O Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender,  
As you have nurtured me,  
Seeing to my head, breasts and such organs,  
I belong to your true way. (Chaitanya 2005, 94)

Akka Mahādevī teaches the path of the person here who can go from body to body-lessness, and from becoming to becoming-lessness, once again one with Śiva. She teaches that as a woman with breasts “and such organs” she does belong



with Śiva, because it is Śiva who has created and nurtured her and her female organs, validating women's sacred quest.

Seeing her female body as a sacred vessel for the attainment of enlightenment, Akka Mahādevī speaks out against the sexual harassment she experiences. Akka Mahādevī censures those who would attack her physically because of her nakedness, saying, "O brothers, why do you talk to this woman, hair loose, face withered, body shrunk?" (Ramanujan 2004, 88). She states:

Seeing bare round breasts and the beauty of full youth  
You came, O brother.  
Brother, I am no female,  
I am not a prostitute;  
Then seeing me again and again,  
Who did you think I was?  
Men other than Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender,  
Will not suit us, O brother. (Chaitanya 2005, 34)

Walking about sky-clad, Akka Mahādevī was aware of the male perception of her body, despite her personal lack of concern for the sexualized identity projected onto her by men. She becomes the teacher to her male followers, teaching them about herself and about other women as well. She chides men for only perceiving women sexually, or especially as prostitutes.

Akka Mahādevī teaches that she has no other desires in this existence; her desire is only for Śiva. Just because she has breasts and "the beauty of full youth" doesn't mean she looks at every man as a possible bed partner. Few women do. In another writing, Akka Mahādevī more graphically chides the male listener, "You came lusting after the female form. Not seeing that it is only a tube from which drips piss, you came, O Brother, blinded by desire, driving away supreme bliss by perverted intelligence" (Chaitanya 2005, 34). This writing takes the man's lust to

a graphic portrayal in the great Śaivite tradition of the negative aspects of the body, describing it in repulsive terms.

To her, male/female and masculine/feminine, because of their value in achieving enlightenment, are indications of the phenomenal world. Akka Mahādevī questions, “What does it matter, O Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender, how the body you have favoured is, if the inside is pure?” (Chaitanya 2005, 46). Since Hinduism believes that our body comes to us in each incarnations as male or female depending on karma, so “maleness” and “femaleness” are impermanent, not a part of the actual *jīva*. Thus Akka Mahādevī teaches a lack of concern for the body, its color, its sex, its caste, in contrast to a metaconcern for pureness, a function of learning, meditation and will.

In order for her listeners to reach enlightenment, Akka Mahādevī taught her listeners to regard the body only as a shelter for the soul, “Pot of refuge, vessel of piss, mat of bones, stench of pus—burn this body. Don’t be destroyed holding onto the body, you fool” (Chaitanya 2005, 61). For man or woman, the body is a temporal vessel, subject to the many disgusting illnesses that cause death . . . and rebirth again. Even if a man can grant a woman other desires for her life besides bed with him, still it remains that the body is an impure vessel for the *jīva*, and should not be desired at all.

Akka uses not just the body, but the trinity of the body, mind, and breath as three dynamic forces her *jīvā* is working with. These are tools humans are given by Śiva to assist in reaching enlightenment:

The body was consecrated and offered to you,  
The inner organs were offered to you;

I know nothing.  
You became my onward path,  
You became my mind,  
My breath was offered to you.  
I won't remember any other than you,  
O Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender,  
I swear. (Chaitanya 2005, 46)

Akka Mahādevī herself has given her body as a gift to her Lord. With the Lord Śiva on her mind, beyond *māyā*, femaleness and maleness are not a part of thought. Her breath, *prāṇa*, is not male nor female, but breath, air, which moves through a male or female body, but is not female or male itself.

First one must purify one's body by practices similar to yoga; then through ethical actions and meditation one purifies the mind; then last, the breath is purified through *kundalinī* exercises.

After the body takes your form,  
Whom shall I serve?  
After the mind takes your form,  
Whom shall I remember?  
After the breath takes your form,  
Whom shall I worship?  
After knowledge has merged in you,  
Whom shall I know?  
I know you, O Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender,  
Becoming you in your self. (Chaitanya 2005, 58)

When Akka Mahādevī's body is set on the path to Śiva, who else need she serve? When her mind has been cleared of the dross of many lifetimes, Akka Mahādevī only recollects Śiva. When her *prāṇa* is well established, what is the purpose of worship?

Akka Mahādevī's metaphors are derived from her experience as a woman. She realizes that desire leads to sex, that sex leads to the pain of childbirth, and that childbirth leads to the responsibilities of a householder, and so, in her desire

for unification with Śiva, Akka Mahādevī advocates leaving the major purpose of life, procreation, behind in her desire for unification with Śiva. For men the path is not so clear. Their seed can be spent fruitlessly or spent fruitfully, but they are not subject to the travails of pregnancy, the pain of birth, and the constant need to place a child's needs ahead of one's own. For a woman, the path of asceticism is clear and straight forward as the means to focus on spiritual goals rather than to spend one's life in caring for husband and children.

What do the barren know of birthpangs?  
Stepmothers, what do they know of loving care?  
How can the unwounded know the pain of the wounded?  
O Lord white as jasmine, your love's blade stabbed and broken in my  
flesh,  
I writhe. O mothers how can you know me? (Ramanujan 2004, 90)

Akka Mahādevī points out that birth pangs are central to women, and are their fate, but that she chooses not to experience them, so how can women who have suffered birth pangs and are now mothers know her and her experiences? Though female, she is separate from them because of her asceticism.

Akka Mahādevī goes further, however, and claims for herself a spiritually masculine form, "What if I am called by a woman's name? In meditation, my form is masculine" (Chaitanya 2005, 88). For her listeners, Akka Mahādevī uses feminine metaphors for their personal identification, but ultimately she knows she has chosen a masculine role for herself and advocates that her followers must as well.

Enlightenment does not separate her from this world but allows Akka Mahādevī to return to the earth as a *jīvanmukti* who sees the whole world as Śiva and works within the world to aid others on similar quests. Her doubts gone, she

is free and clear to return to the ethics that began her quest, spiraling up to a very different sense, that of an omniscient, omnipotent being who leads others to Śiva's grace.

*View of the Phenomenal World and the Metaphysical World*

The role of *samsāra* is taught by Akka Mahdevī from a very female point of view as will be shown below. Akka Mahdevī teaches both about the phenomenal world and the metaphysical world.

Akka Mahdevī educates her followers to see that the act of universal creation was as beautiful as and even more powerful than human procreation. A vision she had includes many extraordinary objects arranged in a mystic sense. “Within the self of the eight-petaled lotus creation was born; the tortoise swallowed the eight elephants which support the universe” (Chaitanya 2005, 31). But the beauty of the creation of the phenomenal world is all illusion, *māyā*.

Illusion has troubled body as shadow  
Troubled life as a heart  
Troubled heart as memory  
Troubled memory as awareness.

With stick raised high, illusion herds  
The worlds.  
Lord, white as jasmine  
No one can overcome  
Your illusion. (Ramanujan 2004, 74)

The stick of illusion beats the mind down from profound bliss into the ephemeral worlds, but as will be shown later, the answer to illusion lies within each and every one of us.

Akka Mahādevī speaks another time from a feminine perspective of the vanity of *samsāra* from a feminine perspective—*samsāra* wearing the mask of the father, the handsome youth, and in senile old age—reminding women once again that their lives are always subject to male desires—and that handsome youth courting them will eventually become the senile old man (Chaitanya 2005, 74).

In another teaching, drawing from her own experience, Akka Mahādevī warns, “Look at this woman who, entering the fireplace, has forgotten the fire” (Chaitanya 2005, 58). Her previous attachment to *samsāra* has caused her in previous birth after previous birth to burn through the flames of *samsāra* until she claims now, she has finally forgotten it, has become free of it.

Akka Mahādevī speaks of her own experience further when she describes how she scoops out the head of *kama*, desire, and puts out death’s eyes, after which, when she becomes one with Śiva, she eats the sun and moon (Chaitanya 2005, 48). This description of her mental attitude from her meditations illustrates her archetypal understanding of Hindu mysticism. Eliminating death, she became one with Śiva in the metaphysical world and was able to eat the sun and the moon, those symbols of light and energy within the phenomenal world.

These teachings all teach the same conclusion: *samsāra*, the eternal wheel of rebirths, is to be avoided. “With the two measures of sunrise and sunset, the grain-heap of life is being measured. Before it is all over, remember, remember Śiva. This life will not come again” (Chaitanya 2005, 18). The recollection of Śiva is the only meaning in the grain-heap of life. When one is born, *samsāra* is re-born and with it, ignorance of *prajñā*, desire and anger (72).

Again Akka Mahdevī reminds her listeners one should take refuge in Śiva before the end of their time in this existence: “Before earth joins earth, before water joins water, before fire joins fire, before air joins air, before space joins space, before the five senses wear out, Take refuge in Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender” (Chaitanya 2005, 65). She is reminding her students that at the dissolution of the universe, that which has separated, dissipated, turned to recognizable forms will reconnect as the universe draws back into itself. In order not to be a part of the new creation, turn to Śiva so as not to have to be reborn again.

It is necessary to leave behind one’s understanding of the phenomenal world:

Please cut away the delusion of my maya,  
Take away the darkness of my body,  
Please remove the restlessness of my spirit;  
Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender,  
May your grace loosen  
The bonds of the world  
That bind me. (Chaitanya 2005, 25)

The metaphysical or noumenal world is difficult to know. “Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender, hides as the being behind becoming; no one knows him” (23). In this world, we are becoming, but Channamallikarjuna is the Being behind becoming, the greater knowledge for which we should strive. However, striving isn’t even necessary for that understanding of the metaphysical world is within us. “Like the colour of gold, you were in me. Though you were in me I saw you as different” (23). When one sees truly who one really is—as the water in the river that flows into the sea and is indistinguishable from the water of the sea that the

*Chandogya Upaniṣad* teaches—then one has blended the two worlds together and reached one understanding (*Chandogya Upaniṣad* 6.10 in Olivelle 1986/1996: 153).

In sum, Akka Mahādevī speaks of the world as it is known, the phenomenal world, our countless lifetimes in which we have entered this physical realm through the vagina, and the ultimate escape from this wheel of rebirths, the understanding of one’s metaphysical oneness with Śiva.

### *Theology*

Akka Mahādevī is herself theologically an *advaitist*, a spiritual non-dualist. This means that for her Śiva is All, is the absolute. She sees everything, including the phenomenal world as a part of him. Her theological view that Śiva and the universe are one being, one intelligence, one body, just expressed in different forms, is expressed in her analogy of the taste being a part of the fruit, the oil being a part of the sesame fruit, and the fire a part of the wood (Chaitanya 2005, 23). The taste doesn’t exist without the fruit just as the universe doesn’t exist without the qualities of Śiva, playfully expressed in his dance of life.

Akka Mahādevī professes this *advaitist* stance: “The entire world art thou! The sacred trees within the world art thou! The birds and beasts that sport among the trees art thou!” (Thipperudra, 1968, 53-54). Akka Mahādevī’s writing focuses on the creation and maintenance of the universe by Śiva in his play.

Akka Mahādevī loves to describe Śiva in her *vacanas* as Channamallikārjuna. *Channa* means “beautiful or pristine”; *mallika*, jasmine; and



arjuna, bright or white. Therefore Śiva is “one who is as bright as pristine jasmine,” which emphasizes his brightness as a shining light and his pristineness unsullied by the earth on which he rests. Her theology that Śiva and the universe are one Being, one intelligence, one body, just expressed in different forms, is expressed in her analogy of the taste.

Most of Akka Mahādevī’s emphasis is placed on her bliss at union with Śiva. She describes this poetically, “I went watching the path of stars in the boundless ocean of glory shipping things from island to island. If I know the silent speech of Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender, he will take me as before” (Chaitanya 2005, 93). Through Akka Mahādevī’s union with him, she too pervades the universe. There is no need to speak while in union with Śiva because speaking is a quality of the body, which is not used in that communion. By understanding Śiva, Akka Mahādevī can go with him at any time or to any point. “When I did not know myself, where were you, tell me? Like the colour in gold, you were in me. Though you were in me, I saw you as different” (23).

How does one know Śiva? According to Akka Mahādevī, “[through] minds rubbing against each other understanding was born, and it burned the enveloping bodily qualities” (Chaitanya 2005, 95). She describes his countenance with a very different sensation than that of Kāraikkāl Ammayyār: “Listen my friend, listen. I had a dream: I saw a mendicant, seated on a hill; this beggar with red matted locks and pearly teeth came and loved me. Embracing him, I was afraid” (136). Like Kāraikkāl, Akka Mahādevī is overwhelmed by the power of Śiva, but, unlike Kāraikkāl, it is not the power of a king who kills with his

powerful bow and has the power to dance in crematory forests. Akka Mahādevī's Śiva has an inherent power that manifests, that is recognized in a dream, a dream that is made up of images from her unsullied mind:

He makes you take birth in wombs unborn,  
Makes you suffer untold miseries,  
Makes you eat what is not eaten,  
And traps you in fate, O brother.  
Will he spare you  
Because you say you are his own?  
He tore the skin off Bhrungi, his attendant;  
Will he be mindful of others?  
Channapallikarjuna, jasmine-tender,  
Is vicious,  
So don't let go of him. (Chaitanya 2005, 60)

Akka Mahādevī calls Śiva vicious; wonders if worshipping him will actually protect the devotee. But she recognizes that his grace is always there for her. Akka Mahādevī prays solemnly, "Please cut away the delusion of my maya, take away the darkness of my body, Please remove the restlessness of my spirit...may your grace loosen the bond of the world that binds one" (Chaitanya 2005, 25).

A great change has occurred here from the deities that Kāraikal Ammayār and Āntāl profess to. First Akka Mahādevī is not an onlooker to her deity at her highest points, she is one with him. Second, her deity is not a warrior-king who protects, but a beneficent power that underlies everything in the universe. In her teaching against theological hierarchy, she also teaches, by inference, a lack of caste hierarchy and male/female hierarchy. In essence, with her theology of Śiva, she democratizes her religion, forcing one to use one's personal autonomy to realize one's personal oneness with Śiva, the world and its environs.

In addition to the four categories of way of living/ethics, Self, phenomenal and metaphysical realms, and theology, which I discuss for each of the selected six Hindu women saints, with Akka Mahādevī I felt a need to add four more categories. The first is about her teachings regarding the path, the steps of the spiritual search for enlightenment that is particular to Vīraśaivism, the established steps of the spiritual search for enlightenment. The second (the next section) is about love and marriage. The third discusses her mysticism. The fourth focuses on women and the role of gender in spiritual seeking.

### *Path*

One of the teachings of Vīraśaivism that Akka Mahādevī promotes in her teaching is the standard description of the Vīraśaivas' practice regarding the six steps of the ascent upwards to full realization: *bhakti*, *maheśvara*, *prasāda*, *prāṇaliṅga*, *śarana* and *aikyasthala*. We find through a study of her teaching that Akka Mahādevī as a teacher guides the follower along this same path.

First one practices *bhakti* and uses action in the world. The Vīraśaivas placed an emphasis on their creed within its social structure, and thus they emphasized realized ethics as the basis on which their cult stood. Ethics are the external representation of an inner virtue or the development of an inner virtue.

Just as the *Yogasūtra* delineates the virtues of the *niyamas*<sup>59</sup> and *yamas*<sup>60</sup> as basic to further practices, so too do the Vīraśaivas utilize social action as part of their spirituality especially in actions against the oppression of lower castes, but also against class structure—for the two are closely linked and also on behalf of spiritual equality for women.

The next phase of the path is *maheśvara*, discipline and steadfastness, performing actions without concern for danger or social sanctions. Akka Mahādevī teaches, “Since your love was planted, I’ve forgotten hunger, thirst and sleep” (Ramanujan 2004, 79). Later she adds: “For hunger, there is the town’s rice in the begging bowl. For thirst, there are tanks, streams, wells. For sleep there are the ruins of temples, and for soul’s company, I have you O lord white as jasmine” (199). Akka Mahādevī’s ascetic discipline is such that none of these basics of life are necessary desires any longer, for she indicates in these *vacanas*; she has gone beyond these basic physical needs.<sup>61</sup> Her focus is elsewhere. Here again, Akka Mahādevī’s teaching uses her personal experience as a model for her listeners regarding their own questions.

The third step, *prasādi*, diligence or practice, brings the devotee to a regular life path that leads to liberation. In her discussion of her practice, Akka Mahādevī begins with right practice in regards to her body, to purify this vessel

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59. YS 2:32 The *niyamas* or observances include cleanliness, contentment, austerity, study of scriptures, and devotion to God.

60. YS 2:30 The *yamas* or restraints include non-injury, truth, abstention from stealing, continence, and abstinence from greed.

61. The Jains around her practice self-starvation as a means of not harming life, so her thought here is again not entirely without precedent.

for further mental work towards *mokṣa*. She understands and teaches many practices familiar from yoga. *Prāṇa* or breath, life, is that energy that moves through channels in our body and, moved correctly, can fill the body with bliss. Akka Mahādevī does not go into much detail as many yogic traditions do, but is standing on her experiences. She teaches the *kuṇḍalinī* and *cakras* as a function of the practice. Akka Mahādevī knows the result of the practice is the generation of heat, which leads to the delicious drip of ambrosia and the bliss-filled experience that this engenders (Chaitanya 2005, 101).

As another part of spiritual diligence and practice, Akka Mahādevī teaches activation of the *kuṇḍalinī* which involves an understanding of the potentials within the body which will be further developed in Kashmir Śaivism.<sup>62</sup> Akka Mahādevī states: “I am the serpent of the Kundalini: And if the hood is raised, the network that burns with three flames merges into the eternal Flame” (Tipperudra 1968, 215). The *kuṇḍalinī* is the serpent that rises through channel of the backbone, by means of physical and yoga meditation exercises that, when the snake is fully awakened, having traveled up the spine, its neck spread, merges with Śiva. Another *vacana* speaks of the results of yoga practices involving the *kuṇḍalinī*, “Stepping on the root of the primal centre, I climbed the space in the eyebrows; holding onto the root of practices, I ascended the peak of oneness” (Chaitanya 2005, 100). As will be seen with Lalla Ded this experience of the *kuṇḍalinī* is one of the basic tenets of *kuṇḍalinī* yoga. It involves an understanding of the necessity of an understanding of the feminine within the body, which

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62. This will be developed more fully in the next chapter.

requires an appreciation and toleration of the feminine in general. The naming of this exercise as feminine is necessary to understand the complement of the masculine and feminine within this understanding of Hinduism.

Akka Mahādevī sees everything as an act of devotion, using beautiful natural imagery, “Every tree in the forest was the All-Giving Tree, every bush the life-reviving herb” (Ramanujan 2004, 87). Just as nature gives its vitality to support life, so too should one become all-giving and life-reviving. Akka Mahādevī uses nature frequently in her *vacanas* in the same sense. It is not a background to her as it is for the epic poets; her keen sense of observation has led her to understand that she and nature are one entity.

The fourth step on the path to enlightenment or realization of god-consciousness is *prāṇalinga*, where one moves from the external to the internal plane of reality. Akka Mahādevī said of this experience: “Like an elephant lost from his herd, suddenly captured, remembering his mountains, his Vindhyas, I remember” (Ramanujan 2004, 89). In her experiences of the practices which facilitate this shift from outward to inward focus of the mind, *pratyāhāra*, concentration and withdrawal of the senses, Akka Mahādevī recognizes eternal truths like an elephant remembers past experiences.

In regards to the development of one’s mental capacities, Akka Mahādevī teaches that one can find what one needs of nourishment in this regard, as she has, saying: “The milk of creative imagination, the ghee of right knowledge and the sugar of ultimate meaning, they fed me” (Chaitanya 2005, 108). Her praise of creativity is different from other saints who do not recognize creative imagination

that to be a necessary experience or qualification for enlightenment. That she includes “right knowledge” implies that Akka Mahādevī bases her theories on the study of accepted spiritual texts.

Fifth, in the spiritual path is the *śaraṇa* experience, which is about awareness of one’s own self-experience. It implies integration into the companionship of those who know enlightenment. At this advanced stage of spiritual development, one is now free from *karma* and “rides the diamond horse.”

Changing bondage into liberations,  
Making the mind a diamond horse, and the soul the rider,  
Not letting it jump up or leap forward.  
Holding back the horse close, and dragging it somehow to stand still on  
the  
Beautiful petal... (Chaitanya 2005, 101)

Hindu philosophy distinguishes between the mind which puts images together in our dreams, and the soul, with which one is in communication in deep sleep, and this *vacana* makes that distinction too. Akka Mahādevī teaches that only by control by the soul itself can one proceed on the path; for it causes the mind to stand still, in all its power and energy on the petal of knowing.

The soul is said to reside in the heart and many *kuṇḍalinī* exercises have been established to work through the heart to provide deeper awareness. “I burn, desiring what the heart desires” (Ramanujan 2004, 73).

Akka Mahādevī chooses those students who are serious about their path as her constant companions, and she encourages her students to do the same. She prays to Śiva: “To play, to sing, to speak and to ask, to walk, to talk with your devotees in joyous harmony. As long as I have the gift of life from you, May I spend my days in the company of your devotees” (Chaitanya 2005, 12).

Finally, in the sixth stage of spiritual development, there is only oneness with Śiva, *aikyasthala*. Monier-Williams translates *aikya* as “oneness” or “the identity of the human soul or of the universe with the Deity.” *Sthala* comes from the root *sthā*, so it means “to stand firm,” so “standing firm in one’s identity with the Deity.” Akka Mahādevī expresses her self as an *advaitan*, knowing the world and Paraśiva are one: “I saw in you lord white as jasmine, the paradox of your being in me without showing a limb” (Ramanujan 2004, 75). She adds, “When all the world is the eyes of the lord, onlooking everywhere, what can you cover and conceal?” (85).

Akka Mahādevī’s understanding of Śiva also includes the understanding of the oneness of Śiva/Śakti. “I saw the Great One who plays at love with Śakti, original to the world.” This conception of Śiva/Śakti as one integrated being, like fire and flame, or wave and ocean, will be developed more when Kashmir Śaivism is discussed in Chapter Five about Lalla Ded. She takes the complement of male/female in the phenomenal world that Basavaṇṇa taught and that she understood and sees the same complement in the metaphysical world.

Here Akka Mahādevī has reached the *samādhi* that Patañjali advocates. Thipperudra summarizes this sense of oneness, “the philosophy that stood as the basis [for their] path of discipline did not remain a mere matter of academic inquiry to gratify the intellect, but became the course of [their] way of life, a source of energy that overflowed their hearts” (Thipperudra 1982, 67). Akka Mahādevī communicated her experience as well, heart to heart. Under the main



text, through Akka Mahādevī's poems, she illustrates the aspects of the Vīraśaiva path that she personally has experienced and knows. The exegesis is her own.

When one realizes oneness with the creative and sustaining force of the universe, one also has the power to create and sustain, because the two are one. Vīraśaivas advocate using that powerful understanding to create and sustain a better world, a world that will enable all souls to be provided with basic psychological worth that will enable them also to choose their path to enlightenment. Akka Mahādevī states that when one's mind is clear, so too is one's body clear of defilements. "If the woman is a woman, there is defilement from man, and if the man is man, defilement from woman; if the defilement of the mind stops, is there room for defilement from the body?" (Chaitanya 2005, 119).

In addition to the six steps for the realization of supreme consciousness, the Vīraśaivas had eight aids to their theology. The students' guru initiated them to the faith leading to a long and fruitful relationship, with the student learning the teachings the guru chose to transmit to them. The guru was very important to Akka Mahādevī for his or her teachings and their results:

Clarifying the inside,  
Purifying the outside,  
Removing the doubt of within-without,  
Causing to shine like a crystal:  
Like sowing suitable seed in a good field,  
Bringing the phenomenal conditionings  
Of the disciple to a stop,  
Instructing him in truth  
And leading him on the path to truth,  
Dwells the wisdom teacher.  
He is to be adored by the whole universe.  
I bow to his holy feet again and again,  
O Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender. (Chaitanya 2005, 66)

The inside referred to in the above passage is the *prāṇa*, the flow of energy through the body that *kuṇḍalinī* yoga taps so well; the outside is that which is seen by other people, therefore derived from the mind or *buddhi* and the ego, *aḥamkāra*. The chosen disciple is compared to a good field, which can be sown with the truths the guru wishes to transmit and that cause the desires of the disciple to cease. The guru instructs in truth; the guru demonstrates through her or his life the truths of what is spoken. Akka Mahādevī agrees with Kauṭilya's teaching that only one-fourth of learning is from the teacher, that one's own experience of watching the teacher is equal to the learning one gets from the person. One who can truly teach in this way is to be admired by the whole universe.

Upon initiation the guru gave the pupil a *linga* as a token of the essence of their being, the center of worship for the Vīraśaiva. The Vīraśaiva initiation, *linga darana*, replaced the *jata kama* and *nama kama* rituals from the Brahmanical tradition (Ramaswamy 1996, 17). In the lingam-ritual for the Vīraśaiva sect: "The guru draws out the conscious force inherent in the disciple and captures it in the *linga* and installs it into the person," according to Thipperudra (1982, 83). This essence is in effect, according to Thipperudra, not merely symbolic in the *linga* but actual; it is pure and spotless and formless and real.

Akka Mahādevī speaks of this initiation also. "When the true Guru blessing the disciple touches his forehead, it is like the philosopher's stone falling on metal" (Chaitanya 2005, 67), demonstrating for her listeners the power of the initiation process with a proper guru. When one is given the holy ashes on the

forehead, he is “anointed sovereign of the state of liberation,” the ashes are seen as the gateway to proper liberation. When the Guru blesses the disciple, the “Five vessels of the creator overflowed with the action of Siva’s grace” (67). These five vessels represent the five faces of Śiva.<sup>63</sup> Because of the complexity of the five faces of the God, the grace received covers almost any section of life experience.

The next physical aid is the *lingam* itself. Then the “mark of the Lord was placed in the disciple’s hand, like a gooseberry in the palm.” This refers to the *lingam* itself, standing for the mental forces and processes necessary for liberation, but is not symbolic; it is actual. Akka Mahādevī praises the *linga*, “Like a good girl I will bathe you; calmly will I worship. In harmonious life, I will sing your praise” (Chaitanya 2005, 74). Then she teaches:

The body breaking through the *linga* of action  
Inhered in the *linga*;  
The mind, mixing with knowledge, serving the mendicant,  
Inhered in the *linga* of the moving one.  
The mood, merging with the *linga* of the Guru, enjoying great grace,  
Became one with the *linga* of the Guru.  
O Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender,  
By your love, becoming differenceless,  
I myself became the *linga*, O lord. (108)

Here Akka Mahādevī teaches that inherent in the living *linga* are actions, the mind, and grace given to the devotee by the guru or the *linga* of the guru. When one becomes one with the *linga* of the guru, with its actions, mind and grace, then one becomes those powers oneself.

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63. Stela Kramrisch (1981, 183) gives the five faces of Śiva which are associated with various aspects of *samsaran* life, represented here graphically:

After hearing the initiatory chant and receiving the physical lingam, the initiate understands that the body then becomes the “abode of Śiva” its *prāṇa* pure and vital; the body then itself becomes the *linga*. Akka Mahādevī ends her teaching about initiation with a guru with this statement: “I was saved by the guru’s presence that showed me the way onward, liberating me from the past” (Chaitanya 2005, 67). She teaches her listeners the importance of both the guru and the *linga* to the devotee.

The *jangama*, monk, ranks with the guru and *linga* as the third most important aid to the disciples. It is a society of teachers within the organization, similar to the monastic tradition in Jainism, which provides monastic leadership and authority and compiles texts. Celibate monks were itinerant ritual experts attached to *maṭhas*, and non-celibate monks went out into the community proclaiming the virtues of Vīraśaivism. Akka Mahādevī praises those who dedicate themselves to the Guru, the *linga*, and the mendicant (*jangama*), (Chaitanya 2005, 72) who then became free from egoism.

Further aids to faith include *prasāda*, the gift of the deity to the worshipper; *pādodaka*,<sup>64</sup> bowing at the feet of the divinity; *vibhuti*, supernatural powers,<sup>65</sup> *rudrākṣi*, the wearing of the *rudrakṣa* beads, and *mantra*, a sacred

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64. From the Sanskrit *pada*, “foot,” and the root verb *udanch* “to ladle out.”

65. *Animan*, the power of becoming as minute as an atom; *laghiman*, extreme lightness; *prāpti*, attaining or reaching anything; *prākāmya*, irresistible will; *mahāman*, illimitable burk; *īśitā*, supreme dominion; *vaśita*, subjugating magic; and *kāmasavasāyitā*, the suppressing of all desires (Monier-Williams 1976, 978-980).

saying to be repeated again and again. Beyond these items for religious practice, Akka Mahādevī further elucidated on other points the other five didn't discuss, love and marriage, mysticism, and women.

### *Love and Marriage*

India typically looks at the relationship between female saints with their male gods as a relationship of love and a desire for marriage with the Lord, like Āntāl's relationship with Kṛṣṇa. In his commentaries, Thipperudra concentrates on Akka Mahādevī's desire for marriage with Śiva that she might be "loving queen of the Lord of the Universe" (Thipperudra 1982, 94). Ishwaran and Ramanuja also extol her marriage with Śiva. But when one reads Akka Mahādevī's *vacanas*, it is evident that her marriage to Śiva is alluded to in only eight of the over two hundred *vacanas*. The rest of her *vacanas* are teaching other principles, which are more important to her.

Akka Mahādevī's teachings express a broad range of spiritual insights, and neither of the two female scholars who have translated her works, Chaitanya, and Ramaswamy, makes the same assumption about her views. Krishnaswamy (Krishnaswamy 1993, 146-147) makes a feminist argument for her "erotic spirituality," through which he says Akka Mahādevī "carves out a co-space of refuge for herself." Now, looking at the number of *vacanas* Chaitanya has translated having to do with Akka Mahādevī's *advaita* experience of Śiva (44), versus the number which speak of her love for Śiva or marriage to Śiva, which are *dvaita*, since then she is considered separate from Śiva (9), Akka Mahādevī's

emphasis can be seen as focusing to a much greater degree on the merging with Śiva. One can say then that she looks at the marriage with Śiva as metaphorical. Even the following verse makes clear that it is a metaphor for the supreme felicity she received from her unions.

Well-being was the bed, glances ornaments,  
Embraces for clothes, and  
Kisses nourishment;  
Love talk was betel leaves,  
The ardour of passion the unguents;  
The union with Channamallikarjina, jasmine-tender,  
Is supreme felicity, O mother. (Chaitanya 2005, 118)

An important question for us to consider is why women saints are said to desire the marriage with their male gods? Ramanuja translated selected poems of which 14 of the 48 have to do with her love for and despair at separation from Śiva; Thipperudra has 9 out of 24 translated that show her desire for and marriage with Śiva. On the other hand, Chaitanya, who has translated all her poems (203), only finds 34 dealing with those issues, illustrating how the other two have skewed our picture of Akka Mahādevī's work through their selections.<sup>66</sup>

This is not to say that Ramanuja and Thipperudra are wrong in their presentations of Akka. Religious studies are a part of the humanities, not the social sciences, and as such consider various interpretations of religious teachings, which do not compromise a quantifiable field amenable to scientific precision. The field of Religious Studies is subjective. Ramanujan and Thipperudra each have a point of view to express and each utilized Akka Mahādevī's poems to

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66. Ramanujan has twenty-nine percent of the works translated; Thipperudra has thirty-seven percent of the works translated, and Chaitanya is sixteen percent of the total piece.

express it. To go further, the Hindu patriarchal structure in its relationships with female deities tends to look at them as “mother,” Kālī-ma, Durgā-ma, and even Mother India. Women are said to look at their male deities as wife/husband. Is the mother/son relationship most valued for men and the wife/husband most valued for women within Hinduism? If so, what are the causes of the gender disparity?

Like so many women viewed from a patriarchal perspective, Akka Māhadevī is so much more than a relationship to a son or a husband. Her *vacanas* reflect her perspective on Śiva, her relationship with the world, the various means of bhakti, and the path or pattern or ladder the Vīraśaivas formulated to understand and verify their quest for the Lord.

### *Mysticism*

Perhaps Akka Mahādevī can be best understood as a mystic. The *aikya* state of union with the divine is a state that can be defined as a spirituality in which the devotee establishes a relation between the totality of the universe around her or him and the individual in the phenomenal world. The state of supreme bliss is such that many traditions record that the bliss-filled person is unable to eat, sleep, or function within the bounds of normal society. In that state desire is gone, false objects are gone and attachment to doubt is gone. In Akka Mahādevī’s realization of liberation, the limitations and heavy weight of births disappeared. The karma that one has accumulated weighs one down figuratively

which she acknowledges, causing one to have difficulty perceiving true knowledge, *jñāna*. Desires hold one back, attachment to doubt holds one back but these aspects of existence are now gone from her life, she tells her students

At first, she says, fear occurs as Akka Mahādevī leaves this life she has known for so many lifetimes, but then she is wonderstruck by the experience. Akka Mahādevī teaches her experience, “I saw the whole, I saw the atom . . . I became boundless” (Chaitanya 2005, 51). She saw both the spatial extent of the universe and the minutest particles of the universe. She became boundless. A *vacana* quoted earlier uses as the metaphor of the path of the stars and the boundless ocean of glory. As a temporal metaphor, Akka Mahādevī sees the offering of the day, the sunlight, the dimensions of space, the wind that blows, the colors and objects of nature; and she sees the offerings of the night, the moonlight and stars (114). She sees the eternality of Śiva, sees the real, and her heart blossomed.

Akka Mahādevī is one with Śiva, bodiless, non-individuated and becomingsless, but she moves constantly, as Śiva does in his dance, within these observations; it is not a static experience. Akka Mahādevī’s joy is expressed in movement too: “I will watch with pleasure, and dance for joy, sing in ecstasy and join in devotion, and play in union with the eternal” (Chaitanya 2005, 111). Akka Mahādevī is one with Śiva; he is her soul-mate, she is fulfilled, and the soul, knowing itself finally as a “ripple of Śiva” becomes itself.

Vīraśaiva philosophy takes that person in those mystical heights of experience and set her back into the phenomenal world which has now become an



*advaitan* aspect of Śiva. The devoted then can perform from her oneness with Śiva her work within the phenomenal world while high from her ecstatic experience. The devotee becomes Śakti, who in her power creates the *prakṛti* of the world, but in this case with a concern for ethics. Though some religious traditions create rituals where one becomes the divinity<sup>67</sup> one is worshipping, feeling the power of the divinity flow through the limbs to the hands and feet to do her wishes, the devotee under Vīraśaivism feels not just the actions, but the underlying mental/emotional/rational capacities of divinity as well.

After reaching *aikyasthala*, union with Śiva, or liberation, one is assumed to be a *jīvanmukti* who returns to re-establish society under Vīraśaiva ideals. One is one of the *śaraṇas*, or wise ones. One is unable to distinguish god and society, so one worships society, keeping it pure, and performs *kāyaka*, positive work to reform society. One's vocation becomes *kāyaka* (Ishwaran 1992, 79), a person who works to reform people and their institutions within society. One becomes a *dāsoha*,<sup>68</sup> a servant in the phenomenal world, that world which we can comprehend. Akka Mahādevī's *kāyaka* is teaching the tenets of Vīraśaivism as one of the ascetic teachers who are attached to a temple and teach those who have the desire to learn.

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67. Tibetan Buddhism in the Tara meditations has the devotee create Tara in front of her, then worship her, then bring her inside, where she fills the body, then worships her own body as Tara.

68. This word comes from the Sanskrit, *dāsa*, servant, and the root *ūh*, comprehending or reasoning, therefore a servant who comprehends the dharma and essence of existence.

Akka Mahādevī's biography as well as her verses illustrates she has experienced a visionary part of her life, one that she utilizes in her teaching to her students.

### *Women and the Role of Gender*

Vīraśaivas invited women and *śūdras* both to play a large role in the religious practices. The teachings of thirty-three women have been saved. The four main castes are considered to be (1) *Brahmin*, the teachers and preachers; (2) *kṣatriya*, the warriors and rulers; (3) the *vaiśyas*, the farmers and artisans; and (4) the *śūdras*, the lowest group. Of these women writers within the Vīraśaivas, their castes include *śūdra* (9 women), followed by untouchable (5 women), then *kṣatriya* (3 women), and prostitutes (3), *brahmins* (2) and *vaiśyas* (1) The one *vaiśya* was Akka Mahādevī. The Vīraśaiva care for the lower castes is certainly shown in the low caste status of the known women philosophers in the group.

Of these thirty-three women, fourteen were married (Ramaswamy 1996, 22-26). We know that Akka Mahādevī spoke out against marriage in this life, “Can you have one husband for the here and another for the hereafter? Can you have one husband for the mundane and another for the ultimate? All husbands other than my Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender, are like puppets hidden by clouds” (Chaitanya 2005, 52). To her, Śiva is the only one worth marrying. Her own experience reinforces this teaching, “I am united with Śiva. All these husbands who die and decay, throw them into the fire, Mother” (55). These

aphorisms speak to the dominance of the male who requires so much of women's care, feeding, cleaning, birthing, and caring for his children, the physical care of his relatives that a woman, in order to fulfill her duties, immerses herself in samsaric cares.

Of the fourteen married women authors, most were married to another Vīraśaiva whose compositions have been saved as well—two of Basavaṇṇa's wives are on the list—so their proximity to core members of the sect by means of marriage was an important criterion. The question arises as to which unknown women wrote philosophical *vacanas*, but whose *vacanas* have been lost in the ebb and flow and white ants of time. It can be presumed that many more women in the Vīraśaiva tradition used their own thinking to create sacred space for themselves. Ramaswamy notes that “gender equality and the creation of sacred space for and by women” was an important Vīraśaiva tenet, she adds, “While radicalism can be perceived in both male and female Vīraśaivas, the impact is much stronger in the case of women because theirs is a dual defiance; a defiance of the Brahmanical system as well as of the patriarchal structure” (Ramaswamy 1992, 69).

We have noted that Akka Mahādevī had mixed emotions about being a woman. However, she uses feminine and masculine imagery in her teachings in order to speak of her own experiences, and to provide a point of identification, and connection to her for her women students. She sometimes addresses her teaching to “brother” but most frequently to “mother.”

Akka Mahādevī's writings provide a woman-originated point of view regarding the topics and analogies used. In contrast, male philosophers like

Śankara only include masculine experience because, first, they observe the world from an androcentric viewpoint, and second, because they are not teaching women.

While Akka Mahādevī expresses her preference for seeing her spiritual practice as “masculine” practice, she also, importantly, speaks of the balance of masculine and feminine. She teaches:

In front of man, maya  
Becomes the thought “woman,”  
And troubles him.  
In front of woman, maya  
Becomes the thought “man,”  
And troubles her.  
To the maya of the world,  
The pure ways of the devotee  
Seem foolish.  
The devotee in whom  
Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender, is pleased  
Has no maya, no forgetfulness,  
And no such differentiating thoughts. (Chaitanya 2005, 105)

Akka Mahādevī recognizes in her students both masculine and feminine and encompasses both in this teaching demonstrating for an adept that coming from either perspective; one must eliminate the *avidyā*, or ignorance, caused by *māyā*. Another *vacana* has the same theme, that “if the woman is woman, there is defilement from man, and if the man is man, defilement from woman, but in the end there is no defilement when one joins with Siva” (Chaitanya 2005, 119).

Other Vīraśaiva women’s verses are more traditionally devotional than those of Akka Mahādevī; still they support Vīraśaiva ideals. Some humor manifests in the writing of Basavaṅṅa’s wife, Nilamina, who was treasured by him. When he was about to “merge with the linga,” he asked her to join him in

another town where he was at the time. She responded, “Oh, did he say he wanted me to go there. . . . Tell me, does it do credit to a great soul to create a dualistic skepticism on who is there and who is here?” (Ishwaran 1992, 78). In other words, why should she go there when no difference exists in the great soul’s mind between here and there, demonstrating her greater knowledge, it seems, than that of her husband.

### Conclusion

Akka Mahādevī then was a great teacher and mystic whose teaching focused on the *advaita* philosophy of Śiva. Like that of Śankara, her experience of this religious teaching, on the path the Vīraśaivas had achieved oneness with Śiva. One reaches that point through the use of one’s body which is a tool for reaching enlightenment. The body is not “beautiful;” although some may think so, but it is a tool. The body is not “ugly,” some may think so, rather it is a tool. One uses the path established by the Vīraśaivas, which begins with outward activities, like ethics, then progresses to inward ones, devoted to the development of one’s mind, then to the ultimate experience, and beyond.

## CHAPTER SIX: LALLA DED AND HER BODY

Lalla Ded lived approximately 1334-5 to 1372 CE in the Kashmir Valley of north India. Lalla Ded's poems have a diversity of intensely rich metaphors and similes specific to her Kashmiri home, but their true value lies in the image she presents of an embodied spirituality as an adherent of Kashmir Śaivism—what was important to her in its philosophy, and how she presented that material to her cohorts in a manner that made her a figure of affection and reverence to the Kashmiris for centuries. Her work has been saved through a Kashmiri oral tradition.

Lalla Ded's work found recurring interest during the twentieth century, both in India and the West. George Grierson did the first English translation of Lalla Ded's works in 1920, *Lallā-Vākyāni or The Wise Sayings of Lal Dēd: A Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir*, followed by Richard Carnac Temple's text, *The World of Lalla the Prophetess, Being the Sayings of Lal Ded or Lal Diddi of Kashmir (Granny Lal) done into English Verse from the Lalla-Vakyani or Lal-Wakhi*, in 1924. Anand Kaul translated many of her verses into English for the *Indian Antiquary* from 1930-1932. J. L. Kaul published *Lal Vaakh* in 1956; then Jayalal Kaul published *Lal Ded* in 1973 followed by B.N. Parimoo's *The Ascent of Self: Reinterpretation of the Mystical Poetry of Lalla-Ded* in 1978. Recent translations include Maina Kataka's translation to French, *Paroles de Lad Ded: Une mystique du Cachemire (XIV siècle)* in 1998, and Jaishree Kak Odin's *The Other Shore: Lalla's Life and Poetry* in 1999. I will be working primarily from Odin's translation which has the most modern English; she translates Lalla Ded

from a literary point of view and from the point of view of an Indian woman. I will refer to Grierson, whose language is now archaic, but whose greater understanding of Kashmiri Śaivism and whose valuation of Lalla Ded's writings as philosophy is readily apparent. Most importantly, I refer to the original Kashmiri as well, which is not that different from Hindi.

### Hagiography

Lalla Ded was born in a Brahmin family and studied under the saint Siddha Srikanta where she learned various *sādhanas*. She mentions reading texts so we can assume she was literate. Women were educated at the time she lived, so she probably had education on more than purely religious subjects. A number of queens listed in the Kashmiri historical and mythological text, *Rājatarāṅginī*, written by Kalhāna (twelfth century), held the throne under their own power, and education for women is well authenticated in the text.<sup>69</sup> The time frame in which Lalla Ded lived was when Islamic rulers first fought their way into Kashmir, which she does not note, even though it was very disruptive to Kashmiri society, and many Kashmiri Hindus fled south to avoid harm. Not one complete

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69. According to Bazaz (1959): Sugandhavevi in the ninth century was married to Shankaravarman and reigned when he died; Didda, in the tenth century reigned after her husband died and she killed her grandchildren; and Kotadevi in the fourteenth century reigned on her own. Suryamati in the eleventh century overruled the king's licentious parties, Jayamati in the twelfth century, though a dancer of lowly birth, was a well loved queen; Raddadevi in the twelfth century was known for her serenity and reserve, and Kalhanika in the twelfth century established a peace museum during a period of war. Silla in the twelfth century was trained in warfare and experienced in leading the troops, and Chudda in the twelfth century was from a family of statespeople and soldiers. When her husband was killed she became the commander of the army.

hagiography of her exists; one finds instead a collection of short vignettes on her life.

Lalla Ded is said to have known her previous lives. When she married at fifteen or sixteen and moved to Pampor, she knew her husband had been her son in a previous life, and that she had passed six existences after he was born, including that of a horse and a dog.

Her mother-in-law and her husband both victimized and abused her. One story told about how her mother-in-law served her dinner with a stone under the rice to make her plate look full. Her mother-in-law accused Lalla Ded of infidelity when she went out each morning to meditate. One time Lalla Ded returned to the house from drawing water to find her husband angry. Her husband hit the pitcher on her head with a stick, breaking it, but, miraculously, the water stayed over Lalla Ded's head, not falling, as she went about her work putting it in the necessary vessels. What was left of the water was said to have been thrown out of the house, where it formed a pond that remained for several centuries.

A further story told about Lalla Ded talking with a cloth merchant who gave her two pieces of cloth, one of which she placed on each shoulder. On the street, as people treated her negatively or positively, she placed a knot on one of the respective cloths. When Lalla Ded returned to the shop that evening, she asked the merchant to tell her which cloth was heavier. Of course they were the same weight, despite the knots in them.

Lalla Ded eventually left her household, an “empowered” woman, Neerja Mattoo says (2002, 69), and wandered around half-naked, singing her verses. She



died at an advanced age. It is said of her “The Hindus say that she is one of them. The Musalmans [Muslims] claim that she belongs to them. The truth is that she is among the chosen of God. May God’s peace be on her!” (Kaul 1956, 25).

Lalla Ded’s hagiography illustrates the love that both Hindus and Muslims had for her. It is that love with which she is enjoyed by Kashmiris today, where her verses are still quoted and known in Kashmiri oral tradition.

Next Lalla Ded’s hagiography demonstrates reincarnation and the oneness of all sentient beings, humans and animals alike through the story of her previous lives. It recounts the abuse of patriarchal power by both her in-laws, for whom, a new bride was seen as a threat to the power the other women had already established for themselves. Husbands wielded more authority than wives, to the point where he felt he had the right to hit her with a stick as a weapon. She was not fed well; she was watched every minute by in-laws looking for infractions. She chose to leave her marriage which wasn’t the choice of many women, but this served as an example of how an educated woman could control her life. Kashmir had more independent queens than other places in India, and like the queens who ruled under their own right; Lalla Ded conceived of and actualized her ideals and actions to create the life she desired.

Finally the parable of the cloth-merchant was a good teaching story, emphasizing Lalla Ded’s disdain for social judgments. Positive remarks and negative remarks to her were the same; their only value was the power one gave them. Feuerstein calls her “a Self-realized adept who knew first hand the secrets

of Laya-Yoga, which culminates in the dissolutions (*laya*) of the individual self into the transcendental Self' (Feuerstein 2001, 269).

### Kashmir Saivism

How was Śiva worshipped in Kashmir, a crossroads of the north-south Silk Route and one of the centers for learning in India from the Buddhist period on forward? This dissertation has explored Karaikkal's relation with Śiva, when she imaged the ghoulish Śiva dancing wildly at the cremation ground. It has looked at the social action of Vīraśaivism in Mahādevī Akka's ability and necessity to return as *jivanmuktā* to clean up the world which humans have spoiled through their *avidyā*, lack of knowledge. Lalla understands Kashmir Śaivism as a profound metaphysical creation in which a person, through one's bodily work of yogic practices and meditation, gains knowledge of one's soul, in its overpowering magnificence.

Kashmir Śaivism is non-dualistic, *advaita*, in a monistic sense, not a theistic one. That is to say, everything is One, and One is not conceived of as an anthropomorphic deity. Everything is, was, and will be Paramaśiva, which is defined as the Consciousness that is both the universe and that which created it and organizes it. Paramaśiva includes Śakti, masculine and feminine are conceived of as one being, like fire and flame. Nothing is illusion, except what one's mind perceives as *avidyā*. *Māyā* is defined as a failure to discern the true nature of principles. The Paramaśiva is defined thus:

The form of the conscious nature, supreme and pure, is that of the power of its possessor. It is emission and when phenomena emerge

from it, it is the supreme state of Being as the undivided flux (of universal consciousness) of the diversification of time and space. (Dyczkowski 1992, 59)

Paramaśiva has created the universe out of play. He manifests everything in the whole universe by the evolution or extension of Self, which later regularly involves back into Śiva again. This extension and return are the primal qualities of the universe, called *spanda*, that are constantly manifesting. Neither Paramaśiva nor Śiva is a personal deity, like Brahma or Viṣṇu, but are the “first phase of the Supreme in the universe”(Grierson 1920, 37).

Kashmiri Śaivism uses an aural metaphor for this Consciousness. The supreme is unobstructed sound, as in the syllable *om* that resides in the heavens, in the same manner the *sahasrāra*, the ultimate life changing peak of the *kundalinī*, resides at the top of the head. This monistic Śiva is both transcendent and immanent and is the principle which corresponds to the effervescent light (transcendent consciousness) of one’s own nature. The universe is Śiva; it is not separate from Śiva. Everything that exists is real; everything that exists is spiritual, because everything is the manifestation of absolute reality which is Śiva (Pandit 1997: 15).

Kashmir Śaivism is unique in its comprehension of the feminine and masculine both as the ultimate consciousness of the universe. Śiva and Śakti, like the two sides of a coin, are eternally together, transcendent and immanent, static and dynamic, consciousness and awareness. Some authorities use Śiva as the major term in their discussion; some use Śakti; yet all understand that ultimately

both masculine and feminine power are inseparably linked in the will and action of creation and manifestation of the universe.

Śakti is the action resulting from Śiva's knowledge which is sound, the word. The Gospel of John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1.1). In the same manner, in Kashmiri Śaivism, the Word is essential to the life and being of Kashmiri creation, because the Word is the cause of sound vibration and is the ordering principle of that which is formed. Without it, chaos would ensue.

From the Śakti, a sound vibration resonates through the cosmos. Parāvāc (feminine in Sanskrit) is the primordial, uncreated Word, luminous, pure consciousness, the ultimate reality, that throbs with the orgasm of Śakti and Śiva. She contains in her essence "all the words, actions and objects that will be produced to form the universe" (Padoux 1990, 173). She is primal speech. Everything is born from her *yoni*. One breath out from Parāvāc is Paśyantī. Paśyantī is an "initial vision of what will be manifested with the gradual emergence of the universe during the development of the next stages of Speech" (Padoux 1990, 189). It is the first moment of cognition, when one is wondering, rather than really aware. Paśyantī is related to *icchāśakti*, the power of willing something to be, the first precognitive impulse. Madhyamā is between the undifferentiated paśyantī and speech, *vaikharī*. It is both creative, *vācaka*, and is the creation which must be expressed, *vācya*. It is where objectivity appears. Differentiation comes from oneness and returns to it here. The final stage is

*vaikharī*, corporeal speech, where differentiation has manifested and where time exists which is *māyā*.

The feminine in universal consciousness on the macrocosmic level is matched by the feminine at the individual level, the *kundalinī*, the maturation of which will end one's cycle of rebirths. Vasugupta (ninth century) in his *Śiva Sūtra* describes the primal power of the Śakti and its importance.

(This power is called Kumārī, the Virgin) because (through it the yogi) penetrates into the unobscured consciousness nature and so She is the one who destroys the abhorrent round of rebirth. (Dyczkowski 1992, 39)

Ksemarāja (eleventh century), one of the great initiators of Kashmir Śaivite thought, valued Śakti as the primal principle and the Goddess of Consciousness:

She Who perpetually reveals Herself as the entire order of existence from the Earth principle to Śiva evolved by Her out of Herself (and reflected), as is a city in a mirror, on the screen of her own pure and free nature is the Goddess of Consciousness. She is the vitality of Mantra, ever blissful, the endless pulsating radiance of Perfect Egoity made of the potencies of speech (*sabdarāśi*). It is She, the Goddess Sankari, the power of spanda, Who excels all in the universe. (Dyczkowski 1992, 54)

One learns of this enwrapping universe and the penetration of it through intuition, which is developed through *prāṇayāmas* and the insight derived from meditation.

Yoga is an important part of Kashmir Śaivism, and it is taught in several texts. I will compare the yogic text *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra* which is a chapter of the *Rudrayāmala*, with Lalla Ded's personal compositions in order to make clearer her relationship to the Kashmir Śaivite traditions. Yoga in Kashmir Śaivism does not emphasize control, instead emphasizes a constant focus on

Paramaśiva, keeping it always in one's mind, placing oneself in its position, feeling the creative and the returning energy, until one reaches a sense of bliss. Once one has discovered that experience of bliss, then one can keep one's mind on track without restraint. The body is the medium and instrument for experiencing liberation from the wheel of rebirths. As Śiva/Śakti is the body of the universe, from which energy flows and returns, so too it is necessary to know one's body and how the energy moves within it. Much Kashmir Śaivite literature is devoted to the many physical and mental exercises that aid one on one's path. The focus of yoga is on the attainment of liberation.

It is not necessary to be an ascetic to practice this type of yoga. A *guru* is helpful to one's practice, however, as the *guru* through initiation, gives power to the initiate. The world being the magnificence of eternal consciousness is not to be denied, only utilized for one's understanding of one's link between the soul and primal consciousness. Abhinavagupta (middle of tenth century to middle of eleventh century), a major proponent and synthesizer of Kashmir Śaivism, enjoyed the sensuous pleasures of life and wrote the classic Hindu text on aesthetics (1998). Because everything is Śiva, because everything is spiritual, sensual reality can be engaged as part of one's spiritual practice. The adherent should keep one's mind on Paramaśiva and practice devotion to that entity.

### Philosophy

Lalla Ded's poems include some of the earliest surviving compositions in Kashmiri and so illustrate Kashmiri philosophy. As a forerunner to other northern

*bhakti* poets like Kabir and Guru Nanak, she made significant contributions to the establishment and continuation of regional languages. She wrote in the old Kashmiri verse form, *vakh*, which is four unrhymed lines. Her poems are beautiful, using similes and metaphors which are evocative of deep thought; that is why they were written down and saved by others who appreciated them. Even to this day, her poems evoke a sense of Kashmiri consciousness for Kashmiri people (Zutshi 2004, 21). She appears to have been upper class, because she uses upper class images of, for instance, the goad used to force elephants to do the mahout's will, and horses which only the wealthy would utilize. She also uses specifically Kashmiri references to specific Kashmiri mythology derived from the unique position of Kashmir in the bowl of the Kashmir Valley.

A good image of Lalla Ded's philosophical ideals and her practice comes from her compositions. This image tells the later reader how the religion fit into the lives of the Kashmiri people and, as such, they are a unique treasure in the history of the Hindu religion. Neerja Mattoo praises her role as philosopher. "In the process of translating its highly evolved, in fact highly subtle, concepts and her personal mystic experiences into the language of the masses, she not only made these accessible to them, but also enriched the Kashmiri language" (Mattoo 2002, 80). Approximately two hundred *vakhs* have been collected from various oral traditions and have been attributed to Lalla Ded.

Just like her hagiography, the poems do not evidence a systematic narrative of Lalla Ded's thoughts for they have no natural coherence, except the overlying metatext of her philosophy. They present work that has been deemed

important enough to be remembered by the Kashmiri people and thus what is attributed to her can be seen as objective statements of her listener's valorization of her memory. What Lalla Ded really said is unknown.

### *Ethics*

Certain ethical behaviors are central to the practice of Kashmir Śaivism, according to Lalla Ded. That deeds are more important than words and serve in place of offerings is a key tenet in Lalla Ded's thinking. Experiential learning is essential, which is the essence of Kashmir Śaivism (O.70).

For citations in this chapter from Lalla, I am using Odin's (1999) translation and will use O and the numbers of the verses she used. (These are not the numbers from Grierson's (1920) or Temple's (1924) translations; each has moved them into their own theory of alignment.)

The recitation of mantras is important to proper yogic practices. Because Kashmir Śaivism looks at the world as "very good" due to it being a part of Śiva/Śakti, Lalla Ded doesn't prescribe denial of the senses. She says:

Don't torture your body with thirst and starvation  
When the body is exhausted, take care of it  
Cursed be your fasts and religious ceremonies  
Do good to others, for that is the real religious practice. (O.116)

Vedic rituals are not important; nor does Lalla think *pūjās* are important; what is important is doing good to others. One must control one's thoughts to keep them from folly, and, by this concentration, one wins reabsorption into Śakti. Lalla Ded echoes the *Śiva Sūtra* here: "When lust, anger, greed, or fear arise or



when one feels happy, experiences a sudden fight or even when intensely joyful, delusion extends its sway everywhere” (Dyczkowski 1992, 107).

Lalla Ded’s practice is very difficult in its concentration; it is not an easy path, but involves much understanding which runs counter to normative Kashmiri life and custom.

For a religious quest to reach enlightenment, one needs to create a spiritual realm, rather than a societal realm, in which to work. First Lalla Ded thinks one should have a guru to take one into knowledge. “Whoever trusts the guru’s words seizes the mind-horse with the reins of knowledge, and controlling the senses, attains bliss” (O.121). The guru acts as reins holding the mind under control and allowing one to develop one’s intent further. The guru aids in the definition of Śiva/Śakti through the benefit of his or her initiation.

Again and again I asked my guru  
What is the name of the undefinable  
Repeated questioning tired and exhausted me  
Something has come out of this nothing. (O.16)

Her understanding has come from her relationship with her guru, who is, according to her hagiography Siddha Śrīkānta, but eventually her guru became her own inner self. The importance of knowledge within, her own individual ballast and correction is central to her thinking and is essential, as judge, to guide her in the most positive manner towards understanding.

Full of love, I set out  
Day and night I spend searching  
In my own home, I met the Pandit,  
Whom I caught and this became my auspicious moment. (O.12)

Repeated questioning does tire and exhaust the seeker; and reading texts exhausts the seeker, so one should use one's inner sense. "Reading and writing wore out your lips and fingers, but the inner confusion never left you" (O.108). Reading texts is like parrots reciting "Rama" in a cage. "Reading the Gita becomes an excuse. I have read the Gita and I am still reading it" (O.96). Books are holy, but will disappear, and then all that will be left is *om*. Though questioning and reading texts can be used for guidance, the real support comes from the *guru*, who, through his or her understanding of the soul of the seeker, is able to guide the soul in the correct direction.

Lalla Ded takes on the role of *guru* for some of her listeners when she says:

Wear the clothes of wisdom  
Inscribe Lalla's verses on your heart  
Through pranava Lalla became absorbed in the light of consciousness  
Thereby she overcame the fear of death. (O.94)

*Pranava* is meditation on the syllable "Om." Through repetition of "Om," focusing on the energy of Śiva/Śakti, Lalla Ded reached enlightenment, where she no longer fears death because she knows she will be born no longer, making her a *sadguru*, a *guru* with the wisdom to peer into her followers to ascertain what the follower's needs are. Lalla Ded's verses are written to serve as the words of a *guru* to those who follow the spiritual path. After seeking far and wide, Lalla found her *guru* within herself, her own self and soul.

Pilgrimage, like reading and writing, is not a favored path. Lalla Ded criticized ascetics who wander from pilgrimage place to pilgrimage place looking for the Supreme experience, enticed by the activity of pilgrimage. If one "accepts

the teacher's word in simple faith" and remembers Śiva/Śakti everyday, one becomes liberated (O.84). "Reciting the name of Shiva . . . while conducting worldly activities day and night, liberating one's mind from desires and duality" (O.71). One needs to be physically and mentally absorbed in Śiva/Śakti as the spiritual universe, which leads one away from anger and fear and into a place of joy and harmony with the world.

### *Self*

Lalla Ded regarded the self as made up of the many elements that Sāmkhya philosophy enumerates. How these elements work together for the purpose of gaining enlightenment, Lalla Ded lays out according to Kashmiri Śaivite yogic practice.

Christian teaching regarding the sins of the flesh, and the negativity of the body, in contrast to the pure mind, has destroyed for some a sense of the beauty of the body as an instrument with which to reach knowledge. This knowledge of the sacrality of the body in reaching knowledge is one of the great pieces of wisdom that comes from the Yogic traditions.

The Self is made up of the individual soul; *prakṛti*, the body parts and functions enumerated in Sāmkhya; space; time; and the five elements (earth, water, fire, air, and ether). The body is the only instrument through which enlightenment can be reached. Lalla Ded demonstrates her knowledge of Sāmkhya philosophy of the body.

What will I do with the five, ten, and eleven  
They have all emptied out the cauldron

If all had come together and pulled the rope  
Then the eleven would not have lost the cow. (O.6)

The five are the five *bhūtas*, or elements, of which everything physical is composed: earth, air, fire, water, and ether. The ten are the five *buddhindriyas*, (hearing, touching, seeing, tasting, and smelling), and the five *karmindriyas* (speaking, grasping, walking, excreting, and procreating). The eleven refers to the ten *indriyas* and the mind. The rope refers to the soul which has been used and abused through many lifetimes until it was empty. If the mind and the *indriyas* work together, they can bring the cow home for milking.

The mind is the most important part of the Self. When the mind is fixed in the heart, it is the root to the destruction of illusion. Lalla Ded's own heart burned in the fire of her love for Śiva/Śakti and out of that fire, she states: "I ground my heart in the mortar of love." The result was that "Evil thoughts left me and I became calm. I burned and roasted the heart" (O.67). The love in her heart, when she examined it from all angles, took her to a place of peace. Kṛṣṇa, in the *Bhagavad Gītā* echoes this sentiment, "The man who is not troubled by these [five senses], O Chief of Men, who remains the same in pain and pleasure, who is wise, makes himself fit for eternal life" (Radhakrishnan 1948, 105).

According to the *Śiva Sūtra*, empirical knowledge (*jñāna*) functions through sensual objectification which infers cognitive awareness. Lalla Ded avoids that type of knowledge for her religious interpretation "This is bondage, the veil which obscures the mind's essential nature" (Dyczkowski 1992, 96-97). Instead one should use *vimarśa*, reasoning and intelligence, through meditation practices, to intuit religious ideals. When one transcends "(the lower) function

(*vr̥tti*, of consciousness) in this way, one's own true nature dawns within the Self . . . Just as the householder is master in (his own) house (similarly) by virtue of its freedom, the Self (is master) in this body which consists of the five elements and is the support of consciousness" (Dyczkowski 1992, 104). The Self pulls a veil over itself and performs for the senses. "The Self is the actor. The experienced actor, who knows about (the forms) of sentiment (*rasa*), emotive states (*bhāva*) and acting, and who possesses the correct state of mind (*sattva*), speech, physical appearance and dress, is said to act his part well. Similarly, the Self manifests itself in accord with its own inherent nature everywhere" (Dyczkowski 1992,113).

The individual Self is the same as eternal consciousness.

Whosoever regards the self and the other as equal,  
and the day and night as the same  
Whose mind is free of duality,  
She alone has the vision of the Lord of Creation. (O.95)

The discriminating insight which (operates) in the midst of (the many and) diverse limiting conditions is the right discernment of the single uninterrupted awareness (*vimarśa*) of one's own true nature which serves to attain the recognitive insight (*pratyabhijñā*) that the Self is Śiva (Dyczkowski 1992 48). The pure state is achieved by the power of the (illuminated) intellect through *vimarśa*.

Yogic practices are essential to Kashmir Śaivism. Lalla Ded understands, that after constant yogic practice by the yogini, the whole expanse of creation dissolves into nothingness. Temples are only made of stone, as are the carvings of the deities, created only for superficial understanding, fingers pointing the way;

and what is of prime importance is to learn to control one's mind's breath (O.113).

Kashmir Śaivism utilizes the *kunḍalinī* in its *prāṇayama* and meditation practices. The *kunḍalinī* is feminine spiritual energy perceived as a snake resting normally as latent energy at the bottom of the spine.<sup>70</sup> *Prāṇayama* is the suppression of the breath to obtain union with the Supreme. Exhalation and inhalation are controlled by the yogi or yoginī. With *prāṇayama* work, the *kunḍalinī* rises through six *cakras*, to where one experiences Śiva/Śakti, and bliss. Lalla Ded begins her yogic practice with, “Doors and windows of my body I closed, My prana-thief I caught and brought under control” (O.33). It is necessary to close down the senses to develop the *kunḍalinī*.

*Prāṇa*, also known as breath or life force, is used in Kashmir Śaivism in different manners. It is the link between body, mind and consciousness, having evolved from consciousness, and is the medium for “awakening and ascent of consciousness.” Second, it is linked to *prāṇasakti*, which is the creative aspect of pure consciousness in Śiva/Śakti.<sup>71</sup> Individual *prāṇa* draws its energy from this cosmic *prāṇasakti*. In its third understanding, *Prāṇa* is breath, which is important for one's well-being, balance and harmony (Satyasangananda Saraswati 2003,

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70. VBT 154, “Prana and apana, having moved swiftly in a distinct direction, by the wish of *kundalini*, that great goddess stretches (elongates herself) and becomes the supreme place of pilgrimage of both manifest and unmanifest” (Satyasangananda 2003, 418)

71. VBT 24, “Sri Bhairava said: “Paradevi, whose nature is *visarga*, or creation, manifests as the upward *prana* and downward *apana*. By fixing the mind at the two points of generation (of *prana* and *apana*), the state of fullness results” (Satyasangananda 2003, 148).

34). The two principle movements of air in the body are *prāna*, inward, and *apāna*, outward. “The breaths are the supports of the vital channels while their support is the ubiquitous Lord of Consciousness” (SS: 104), and the channels are *nāḍīs* that radiate out through the Body. Lalla Ded compares them to a bellows which pumps energy through one’s body.

After traversing six forests, I awakened the orb of the moon  
By controlling my breath, I gave up attachment to worldly things  
I burned my heart in the fire of love  
Thus I found Shankar. (O.42)

The six forests or *cakras* are referred to in this poem. A *cakra* is a vortex of energy that must be traversed. The *cakras* include *muladhara*, in the perineum; *svādhistāna*, at the genitals; *manipura*, at the navel; *anahāta*, at the heart; *visuddhi*, at the throat, and *ajñā*, at the third eye. *Sahasrāra* is the final culmination from which comes the bliss of the most intense bodily experience. Many *nāḍīs* converge and redistribute this *cakra* energy to different parts of the body. There are seventy-two thousand *nāḍīs* that carry subtle energy in the form of consciousness throughout the body (Satyasangananda Saraswati 2003, 165). The most important *nāḍīs* are the *susumna*, *iḍā* and *pingala* that transverse the spinal column.

The “orb of the moon” refers to the top *cakra*, the *dvādaśānta* at the *sahasrara*, where Śiva resides. When the *kuṇḍalinī* reaches here, then one begins to have cosmic experiences of Bhairava or Śiva. By using the *khecharī mudra*, in which one places the tongue farther and farther back in the throat until one can taste the *amrit* which descends from the nasal passages, and by use of the mantra, the mind rises to the *dvādaśānta* where one’s mind, pervaded by Śiva’s energies,

will, cognition, and action, merges with the supreme primal energy. The sun, on the other hand, is at the lowest *cakra*. When both the sun and moon disappear, the devotee is in the ultimate consciousness (Grierson 1920, 31). Lalla Ded develops the moon imagery further.

The day will pass into night,  
The earth will reach out for the sky  
The moon will swallow Rahu on the day of the new moon  
Shiva's worship is the realization of the self as consciousness (O.139)

Hindu myth describes the moon as having nectar within it that, each day in the waning moon, the deities drink. In an eclipse of the sun by the moon, the demon Rahu swallows the sun in order to drink the nectar. The metaphysical interpretation of this verse is based on this mythological one. When one becomes enlightened, the “day of earthly illusion,” or the sun, disappears; and night comes. Instead of the demon Rahu swallowing the moon, the moon in *Sahasrāra* swallows the demon of *avidyā*. To take the verse one step deeper, the thinker is able to “swallow the moon,” think away the phenomenal world, but she can't dissolve it, until one reaches a higher consciousness which absorb the thinker's consciousness into its Void (Grierson 1920: 44).

The experience begins truly at the *manipura cakra*, “The region of the navel is naturally ablaze, the breath moves up to the throat, to the *brahmarandhra* from where the river flows.” The *brahmarandhra*, also known as *dvādasānta*, is connected with the central canal of the spinal cord, which is the anterior fontanel



in the upper part of the head.<sup>72</sup> Once *kuṇḍalinī* energy reaches *manipura*, it doesn't turn back. It is termed "the place of fire" as it is where gross experiences are burned.<sup>73</sup>

I became absorbed in the sacred syllable Om  
I burned myself like coal  
After traversing six paths, I seized the seventh  
Then only did I, Lalla, reach the abode of light. (O.43)

This verse describes the process just recounted. The abode of light is the Sahasrāra experience.

Like Akka Mahādevī, Lalla Ded speaks of the "mind-horse" (Chaitanya, 2005, 101), an analogy for the benefits of yogic practice. The mind can ride the body using its cumulative experience to control the senses; and the soul can ride the mind through its intense oneness with ultimate consciousness. Māhadevī Akka terms it a "diamond horse, and the soul the rider." Lalla Ded terms it "to ride a horse"<sup>74</sup> and defines Śiva/Śakti as the rider. As Kashmir Śaivism understands the

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72. Padoux (1990) separates the *dvādaśānta* and *Brahmarandhra* quoting Abhinavagupta who states there are five centers of the subtle body, the heart (*hrd*), throat (*kantha*), forehead (*lalāta*), *brahmarandhra* and *dvādaśānta*, which is above the *brahmarandhra* (425). According to Grierson (1920), at the bottom of the *kundalini* is the City of the Bulb, the *kandāpurā* or *nābisthān*, that stands near the navel, Here is where the sun resides and Śakti. From this *kandā* come the *nādis* or channels, through which circulate vital air. *Prana*, or expiration breath, rises directly from the *kandā* and is expired through the mouth. Because it arises from the *kandā*, it is considered hot. The moon is cold so air going down the *susumna-nāḍī* is cold. When it meets hot air, coming up from the *kandā*, that hot air is deprived of its heat by the down-flowing steam so the expired air is cold (75-76).

73. VBT. 68. "One should throw the blissful mind into the fire (*manipura cakra*) in the middle of that *susumna (nāḍī)* Then one is united with the remembrance of bliss."

74. It is *Ashvavar pyeth cedyas* in Kashmiri.

soul and Śiva/Śakti as the same, the terms mean the same. “Shiva is the horse and Visnu is the saddle and Brahma is on the stirrups. A yogi through yogic practice recognizes the One who is riding on this horse” (O.45). Lalla’s thought on the horse continues in another verse:

The unstruck sound of Om  
All permeating, whose abode is void  
With no name, no color, no caste, no form  
Self-introspection reveals it as the unsounded resonance  
That is the deity who rides the horse. (O.46)

Om, the *Omkāra*, is an important syllable beginning in the Upaniṣads. It is explained in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* thus:

The essence of these beings here is the earth; the essence of the earth is the waters; the essence of the waters is plants; the essence of plants is man; the essence of man is speech; the essence of speech is the Rg verse; the essence of the Rg verse is the Sāman chant; the essence of the Sāman chant is the High Chant [Om]. This High Chant is the quintessence of all essences; it is the highest, the ultimate, the eight. (CU 1.2)

Abhinavagupta (1998) developed the use of sounds as meditation devices and *om* is the ultimate sound, as related by the Upaniṣads where it is said that the mantra *om* was the first sound to originate in the cosmos; it is believed to reverberate through the cosmos still today. It represents the three stages of awareness: *jagrat*, *svapna*, and *susṛpti*, the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious. If one focuses enough, one reaches the *turīya* or transcendent state (Padoux 1990, 173). One can imagine a bell that rings, with the sound waves emanating out from it. The idea here is an unstruck sound emanating out from the

void, in the same manner that Śiva/Śakti emanates out into the creation of the universe; it is that same pulsation, that same *spanda*. She continues:

She who holds an Om in the navel  
And through breath control raises it to brahmarandhara  
And is absorbed in only this mantra  
She has no need for other mantras. (O.126)

She who holding Om at the *manipura cakra*, the *cakra* that burns up gross activity, through breath control, *prāṇayama*, raises that energy to the highest *cakra*, from which the experience of bliss occurs.

Recite So'ham with every breath  
Renounce the ego and meditate on the Self  
She who renounces the ego finds the Self  
Negation of the ego or "I" is the teaching. (O.133)

The practice of *ajapa japa*, "spontaneous repetition," or meditation using *so'ham* or *hamsa*, is done with *prāṇayama* exercises. The inflow and out flow and stoppages of air help negate the ego, *ahamkāra*. When one exhales, one naturally creates the sound "ha" and when one inhales one creates the sound "sa;" one has been using this breath naturally and spontaneously since birth; thus, using so'ham is a natural way of turning awareness towards the inner self.<sup>75</sup> It is a "self-born" mantra (Saraswati 2003, 422). Controlling the inhaled breath causes one not to hunger or thirst (O.63), and controlling the *nāḍī* ends our suffering (O.64). The use of these *prāṇayama* exercises is one of the basic tenets of Kashmiri Śaivism.

Lalla Ded understands first the practice of Kashmir Śaivism on her own level; she knows her body intimately, from its inner Self to its *nāḍīs*, to its sinews

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75. VBT 155, "The breath is exhaled with the sound 'ha' and inhaled again with the sound 'sa'. Thus the individual always repeats this particular mantra Hamsa."

and bones, to its five sheaths of *kośas* that surround it. She has used her body as a tool through her *prāṇayamas* to reach the bliss of understanding of Śiva/Śakti.

Slowly through the practice of breath control  
The lamp shone and I saw my true nature  
Inner light I realized  
Caught it in the darkness and seized it. (O.65)

Her practice of *prāṇayama* is the major technique in yogic practice. Next is meditation, which is necessary to develop the imagery of Kashmir Śaivism into one's own qualityless understanding of the essence of consciousness. One who follows one's teacher's word and meditates on Śiva will reach that which is beyond Śiva/Śakti. "Through meditation, I realized that God and the world are one, the manifest world became merged with the unmanifest" (O. 36). Through *prāṇayāma*, one's body becomes the perfect tool to reach enlightenment, and through meditation, one receives the proper knowledge for enlightenment.

Having found that, Lalla Ded's next task was to communicate this understanding to her followers. She turns outward with other of her *vakhs*:

Search for the Self within this body  
This body is the abode of the Self  
Forsaking greed and attachment will brighten up your body  
And it will illuminate the sun. (O.138)

Using normative ethics she instructs her listener to eliminate greed and attachments which shield our bodies from our sense of the infinite. Only then can one see the ultimate Self within. One needs further to do *prāṇayāmas*. Don't bother to go on pilgrimage, don't give up one's home, just do *prāṇayāmas* causing that tremendous energy to surge through your body, taking you to the peak of enlightenment.

Some renounce their home and some their hermitage  
All this is futile if the mind is not brought under control  
Meditate on your breath day and night  
And stay where you are. (O. 104)

Lalla Ded's knowledge of Sāmkhyān principles of the body components and her knowledge of Kashmir Śaivism's yogic techniques show her to be a person learned in philosophy, who utilizes those philosophical principles and techniques to aid her listeners in their quest for spiritual understanding.

*View of the Phenomenal World and Metaphysical World*

As with the previous Hindu women saints studied, Lalla Ded emphasizes the suffering in the world, our many lives that have been lived, and the imperative to leave this world of suffering. Her beautiful Kashmiri allusions, and Kashmir is indeed a beautiful valley, contrast with her didactic message.

Lalla Ded begins her philosophy, as the Buddhists' did, with the fact of suffering. Her hagiography supports this in the story of her being served a stone under her rice by her mother-in-law and in the stories of abuse at the hands of her husband and mother-in-law. But beyond that extreme suffering, Lalla didn't seem to find much else to appreciate in the world either; her spirit was strong, and she longed for religious liberation. The world, though beautiful and made to be enjoyed, is ephemeral. Lalla Ded says:

Just now I saw a flowing river  
And then I saw a vast expanse of water without a bridge or ferry  
Just now I saw a shrub with blossoming flowers  
And then I saw neither flowers nor thorns,

Just now I saw fire ablaze in the hearth  
And then I saw neither the smoke nor fire

Just now I saw the mother of the Pandavas  
And then I saw her as the aunt in the potter's home. (O.47, 48)

Lalla Ded stands aside from the world and looks at things that are (were) a part of her life as a wife, the river outside of the home, the flowers in the family garden, the fire on the hearth that she cooked from. Their ephemerality varies with the image. The fire quickly burns and must be constantly fed to continue. In the summer the shrub blossoms, but only for a week. The river constantly changes. Lalla Ded uses a feminine image in the last two lines, referencing women's lives in the poem. Kuntī, the mother of the Pāṇdavas, lived at a potter's house incognito during the wanderings of herself and her sons. The disguises the family took during their wanderings were masks, just as our bodies are masks for our true Selves, who act a role in the phenomenal world.

Our lives too are ephemeral. Lalla Ded asks how many times she has drunk from the waters of the sacred Indus River in her many lifetimes, and how many different roles she has played in those lives. Another poem expands her consciousness beyond her humanity. She says, "Three times I saw the lake overflowing . . . .Seven times I saw the manifest world vanish in the void" (O.49). "The lake overflowing" is the partial dissolution of the universe, and seven times she has seen the world absorbed in the Void. This poem teaches the eternal existence of the soul and its eternal recycling through its many rebirths (Grierson 1920, 69).

The metaphor of the lake is derived from the *Śiva Sūtra* which says, "(The Yogi) experiences the vitality of Mantra by contemplating the Great Lake" (SS.

59). Each person has a conscious nature which is analogous to the “Great Lake” with waves of cosmic magnification rolling across it. In *kuṇḍalinī*, it relates to the flow of *amrita* that is derived from the arrival of *kuṇḍalinī* energy at the moon center at its top. When one’s awareness remains at the moon center, inner enlightenment, speech, and the pulse of the *kuṇḍalinī* results in a cosmic mantra that keeps one there. Lalla Ded explains that everyone can drink from this transcendent lake which cannot hold a grain of mustard (O.132). She continues, “I, Lalla, have become a lake. Where shall I find my shore?” (O.50).

This allusion can be taken physically. On that far shore Lalla Ded will eventually rest when she settles herself back in the phenomenal world. Dal Lake in Kashmir is all that is left of an ancient lake that filled the whole Kashmir Valley, and Kashmiris in their legends in the *Rājatarāṅginī* have a numinous regard for that all-encompassing lake as a primal force. Or the allusion can be taken metaphysically. In Buddhism, the sense of the far shore is of the metaphoric place where one crosses over to the next realm, beyond the phenomenal realm.

Lalla Ded teaches the wheel of rebirth, *samsāra*. One birth comes, then a life, then a death.

Birth and death continue uninterruptedly  
As long as day and night come and go  
From where we came that is where we must return  
What is there in it if not something. (O. 79)

One eventually returns to where one came from, the oneness of Śiva/Śakti, and that is the goal she had established for herself. The universe is a manifestation of the Supreme, and, when the devotee realizes it, the universe dissolves into the dualism of Śiva/Śakti. Then one goes to the final Supreme without name and

form. As Śiva/Śakti manifests and returns so too do we manifest and return. What is real, however, is our Self, which is the same identify as Śiva/Śakti. True bliss is returning to that knowledge of our Godhead. Lalla Ded uses an analogy from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.13 (Olivelle 1996 154-155): “Even though you are completely absorbed in the Self like salt is dissolved in water, then also it is rare to know the truth about the Self” (O.81).

Even though one is a part of Śiva/Śakti, it is rare to be aware of that. Instead one is “in love with illusions.” She takes a Sufi analogy to create the tension of our life and lack of knowledge.

Below you a pit and above it you are dancing  
Tell me, O dear, how can you depend on it  
Everything you accumulate will be left behind  
Tell me, O dear, how can you enjoy your repast? (O.78)

There is a Sufi legend that I know that has morphed into different stories in many cultures. A person is trapped on a cliff, hanging to a branch, with a tiger above and a dragon below, but as the branch begins to pull from the earth, the person sees a drop of honey on a leaf, and licks it. In Lalla Ded’s version, one dances on the edge of the pit, about to fall, how can one enjoy life in the presence of the life-threatening danger? One needs to remove oneself from the situation and turn to Śiva/Śakti who looks after us. “You do not know when your hunger will be satiated. Meditate on the all-permeating unobstructed sound alone” (O.92). Lalla Ded’s reference here is to the meditation exercises Abhnavagupta established regarding sound.

In summary, then, regarding the phenomenal world, Lalla Ded perceives the cycle of birth and rebirth, saying many people are born, but people are given



different talents and wealth and abilities. Out of those thousands, only one is saved through her or his perseverance. The world has no lasting pleasures, and, it is by practicing *prāṇāyāma* and meditation on Śiva/Śakti, one can realize one's true existence and approach to the goal of blissful union with the deity who is beyond all forms. To her, this life is just an empty breath.

### *Theology*

The profundity of Kashmir Śaivite thought on theological issues is one of its great strengths. Lalla Ded recognizes the difficulty for the devotee to reach an understanding of the inner aspects of Śiva/Śakti. One is to comprehend the nature of Śiva/Śakti, from the creation of the universe, its extension, and folding back within itself. Further, one is to see one's own part in that cosmic energy force.

Lalla extols her experience of Śiva/Śakti that has led her to her experience of the Supreme Being. Her Śiva has six attributes: omniscience, contentment, knowledge of the past from eternity, absolute self-sufficiency, irreducible potency, and omnipotence (Grierson 1920, 55). One is aware of these attributes from the discussion of Kashmiri Śaivism. The principle of irreducible potency is probably the most important to her, for that potency is a part of her own potency to discover the meaning of existence.

One sees the over powering presence of Śiva in Lalla's life. Whatever she breathes, whatever she sees, whatever she feels is all drenched and permeated through with Śiva's overpowering proximity. Lalla supports this:

I, Lalla, entered the door to the garden of my mind  
I saw Shiva and Shakti in communion

I became immersed in the nectar of bliss

I died while still alive  
Nothing worries me. (O.58)

Such a beautiful *vakh!* Śiva is consciousness and Śakti is the power to manifest that union is what is desired in Kashmiri Saivism. Lalla Ded looks at the *kuṇḍalinī* as Śakti, or as herself as Śakti. The *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra* identifies the Śiva/Śakti pair. Śakti is analogized as the power to burn, and is not separate from fire, Śiva. “Just as spaced, direction and form are revealed by the flame of a candle, or the rays of the sun, similarly Śiva is revealed by the medium of Śakti” (VBT: 21). The *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra* identifies the Parāvāc, the first emanation from Śakti is the primordial, uncreated Word, luminous, pure consciousness, the ultimate reality, that throbs with the orgasm of Śakti and Śiva. Lalla Ded teaches that beyond Śiva/Śakti is nothingness, *śūnyatā*, for that which can be named is not the true nature of existence; it is beyond that.

Śakti is identified with the *kuṇḍalinī* (VBT: 24-29).

The supreme mistress of consciousness emits the entire universe (out of Herself) beginning with the power of the will right up to the gross object of perception. (She is) the Great Lake because She is endowed with (Countless) divine attributes, thus She stimulates the activity of the Wheels of Khecarī and all the other currents (of energy) and is pure, unobscured and deep. (SS: 61)

Lalla Ded accepts Śiva/Śakti as true in her verse, and she talks of Śiva and she talks of Śakti. When Śiva/Śakti are one, it is idle to distinguish between the two. One of Lalla’s great contributions is that realization that combined Śiva/Śakti is the real essence of Kashmir Śaivite teaching.

Lalla Ded explains about the power of the experience of the Ultimate. She states, "I Lalla, suffered the fire of love, before death I died without a trance" (O. 28). From the fire of her love for Śiva/Śakti, her Self died, and she achieved enlightenment, after which she could extol:

You are the sky and you are the earth  
You are the day, the night, and the wind.  
You are the grain, sandalwood, flowers and water.  
You are everything, then what shall I offer you? (O. 59)

From that experience, Lalla Ded taught the meaning of the supreme goal. When teachings disappear, the mantra remains. When the mantra disappears, consciousness remains. When consciousness disappears, nothing remains. Nothingness merges with nothingness.

The monism of Kashmir Śaivism is well explicated in Lalla Ded's theological verses.

### Conclusion

Lalla Ded's spiritual practice and teachings are centered in her experience of the divine through the disciplines of yoga, the practices which focus on the body in order to become one with God. She uses strong female metaphors and allusions in her development of Kashmir Śaivism. Her body is not a thing of shame, nor is it a sexual object. Because everything is Śiva/Śakti, and thus perfect, her body was the perfect tool for her yogic practices. Her practice was to not always cover herself showing her lack of concern for society's eye.

The understanding of the philosophy of Kashmir Śaivism is inherent in Lalla Ded's verses, an understanding which places her as one of the major

proponents of the system in its practice. Lalla Ded's teaching was to utilize many Kashmiri meditation practices based on the experience of her body as the most effective means to attain her goal, thus leaving for posterity a teaching by a person who practiced what was advocated in the texts. Her sayings clarify the difficulty of her task and also expand upon the benefits from her practice. Lalla Ded relates her experience as a spiritually powerful woman through her poetry, expounding on her own spiritual quest and aiding her followers in theirs.

Many themes run through Lalla Ded's work. First it is written from a woman's and a householder's point of view. The reader has visions of roses in the garden blooming in the sunlight, the flame of the cooking fire, crackling under dinner, the restless child at her mother's breast. Second, Lalla Ded's path is that of *jñānayoga*. She believes that *pūjā* is not valuable for her needs, nor is *karmayoga*. What is important is closing off her senses and putting her mind towards meditation. Third, in her discussions Lalla Ded demonstrates the importance of her understanding of the theology and yogic practice of Kashmir Śaiva philosophy underlying the devotional manner, or *bhakti*, of them. Lalla Ded's poems do not mention *bhakti*, though they are termed "*bhakti*." Lalla Ded's verses are poetic aphorisms concerning one woman's yogic practice in Kashmir.

The strong feminine sacred imagery in Kashmir Śaivism aided Lalla Ded to see the balance behind the feminine and masculine on the sacred plane. The feminine cause of the manifestation of the world is a model for Lalla to manifest her own self using her feminine energy, which is present in her *kundalinī*. This

feminine energy of creation and sustenance can be drawn upon by anyone, male or female, who will look to their feminine side. Lalla Ded used her female body to develop the feminine *kuṇḍalini* physiology as an example to Kashmiris of the important of yogic techniques in the process of enlightenment. Unfortunately that feminine energy isn't always drawn upon as evidenced by Lalla Ded's husband and mother-in-law in her hagiography, whose values are conditioned by the patriarchal social system of their time.

This energy is a separate path that can be undertaken by males like Abhinavagupta, Vasugupta, and Ksemarāja, and by females like Lalla Ded. With the later intrusion of androcentric Persian values and androcentric European values on the Kashmir Valley, this gender-balanced portion of Kashmir Śaivism has been shunted aside and the emphasis placed on the transcendent masculine, by pundits studying in a more patriarchal environment and by scholars who come from their own patriarchal customs.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: MIRA BAI—SINGER

Mirabai (1498-1546?) is a singer from Rajasthan in north central India; her songs sing about her love for Kṛṣṇa. Her love for Kṛṣṇa is deeply devotional in character, a profound *bhakti* construction focusing on her painful separations from Kṛṣṇa and the ensuing sorrow and longing. She worshipped a compassionate Kṛṣṇa, who, as universal teacher, with compassion and omniscience, aids those who worship at his feet.

In order to pursue her devotion to Kṛṣṇa, Mirabai had to take a stand against her familial and the state's political power, when she rejected accepted female roles in the home. In her ecstatic madness she danced as an ascetic through the countryside; and in her exalting songs, she celebrated her love for Kṛṣṇa. According to Kumkum Sangari, she is a “woman who resisted the power of feudal patriarchy, the social codes of family pride, honour, decorum, and became a critic of certain forms of social oppression” (Sangari 1990, 1465).

Many stories and legends are extant about Mirabai's life. Both Sangari, and Asher and Talbot reference the text *Bhaktmala* by Nabhadās, written in 1667, a little more than a century after her death)<sup>76</sup> for their discussion of her. For my depiction of her life, I will use their chronology of her life supplemented with autobiographical references from her poems.

Mirabai is most popular for her ecstatic, very singable songs that have been vocalized by laypeople since she reportedly composed them. They are written in the *padāvali* style, a “short song conveying instruction on the spiritual

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76. Unfortunately this is not available in the U.S. I was unable to access it.

life, usually rhyming and composed in simple rhythms, adaptable for singing. The melody (*rāg*) to which they should be sung is specified” (Alston 1980, 27). The author’s name is usually in the last line. Her verses are said to be anywhere from 200 to 5000 in number, so an actual “text” is difficult to procure also.

Songs by Mirabai have been found in the languages of Rājasthānī, or Braj Bhashā, Gujarati, Punjabi and Hindi (Alston 1980, 28). Translations have been done by Alston (1980), Bahadur (1998), and Subramaniam (2005) into English. Her verses have been collected in Hindi in *Mīrām: Vyaktitva aura Krtitva* by Padmavati in 1973 and many other anthologies. I will be using Subramaniam’s work as it is the latest scholarship available and it includes both the Rājasthānī and English for reference.

### Hagiography

Mirabai lived in Rajasthan at the end of the Delhi Sultanate (1210-1525) when the Mughul emperor Babur invaded from Afghanistan (Davies 1959, 38) establishing the Mughal Empire under Babur (r. 1526-30) and Akbar (r. 1556-1605), the Mughal emperors who ruled during her lifetime. It was a turbulent time where Hindu territories were being taken over, and taken back from Muslim states and Hindu rulers wrestled amongst themselves to increase their holdings. It was a time of war. The kingdom of Mewar, ruled by the Śīśodiya family, which Mirabai married into, was considered the most prestigious of the Rajput kingdoms (Asher and Talbot 2006, 99).

Mirabai was said to have been born about 1492 CE into a Vaiṣṇavite home in Rajasthan, where she became very attached to a picture of Kṛṣṇa at an early age (Alston 1980, 2). She married Prince Bhoja Rai, and lived a Vaiṣṇava life. She speaks of Raidās as her guru, which is possible because he was the guru to an earlier queen (Sangari 1990, 1465). It is evident she was devout at an early age and continued her devotions after having married.

Mirabai was literate; a song of Mirabai's states: "I will read the [*Bhagavad*] *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata* [*Purāṇa*]" (Subramanian 2005, 25). She had no children and her husband died quite soon after the marriage, most likely in battle. After that, as a widow, her life deteriorated. It is said that she left the women's quarters of her family home to visit the nearby Vaiṣṇava temple to listen to the *sadhus* and to dance, which did not please the royal family.

Mirabai's door was bolted and a guard set outside to keep her in her room in the palace, and under the control of the patriarchal structure (Subramanian 2005, 141). The angry king, her father-in-law, feared she had a lover in the room, as she was speaking in a lover's voice, but when he burst in, sword raised, no one was there. This is proof of both her devotion to Kṛṣṇa and her concern with behaving as a proper wife.

A *sadhu* was sent to her who demanded to have intercourse with her because "Kṛṣṇa wanted it." She agreed and prepared the bed as joyfully and elaborately as she would prepare it for Kṛṣṇa. Noting all her preparations, shamefaced, he relented and asked her for permission to study under her. Mirabai had obeyed the *sadhu* as wives were supposed to obey their husbands. As she is



rewarded for doing what she was told to do, so too, will a dutiful wife be rewarded eventually. This story encourages the subordination of the female to the male.

Mirabai complained that the “Rana [brother-in-law] mobilized the whole world against her!” (Subramanian 2005, 79). However, “Meera has sought refuge in the all-powerful Lord. How can the Rana hurt me?” (79). No matter what happens to her, she kept her focus on Kṛṣṇa, and Kṛṣṇa kept her safe.

In Song 62 Mirabai enumerates all the problems and evil deeds perpetuated upon her by her husband’s family:

Meera has lost herself in joy,  
Singing of the glory of her Lord who destroys sorrow!  
The Rana sent a snake in a basket  
To be placed in Meera’s hand  
When after a shower, I came and looked at it,  
It turned out to be a Saaligraam.<sup>77</sup>  
The Rana sent a cup of poison  
But it was turned into nectar by the Lord.  
When I washed and drank it, Lo! It became nectar!  
The Rana sent a bed of thorns for Meera to sleep on!  
When dusk came and Meera slept on it, it became a bed of Flowers!  
Meera’s Lord always protects her and removes obstacles!  
Meera swings in God-intoxication  
Offers herself as a sacrifice to Giridhar,  
The Lord who upheld the mountain. (Subramanian 2005, 143)

In another place, we hear that poison was given to Mirabai, but she said “it turned to be pure water for me. For, trusting the Lord, I drank it, deeming it the water from the Lord’s feet” (Subramanian 2005, 79).

Understandably Mirabai doesn’t speak highly of her family. “Let mother-in-law scold me! Let sister-in-law tease me! Let brother-in-law the Rana be angry

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77. This is a holy stone.

with me!” (Subramanian 2005, 141). Still that was not her emphasis; her emphasis was on Kṛṣṇa and how her life had become blissful after having known him. She sings for her listeners that, despite all your troubles here in this world, Kṛṣṇa waits for you in order to call you irrevocably on his flute.

Some of her verses, like the one above, are autobiographical. These miracles serve the place of a *guru* lineage for a philosophical text; they legitimate her as a person for whom the grace of God has manifested. She kept her sensibility and her self understanding, saying “Family folk may forbid any talk about it, but my restless heart will not listen . . . Let people say good things or bad things, I will bear them all!” (Subramanian 2005, 47).

Mirabai left the palace and wandered about, singing her verses and dancing her bliss. When she left the palace, she left all patriarchal and androcentric authority behind. Wandering as an ascetic, she wore few clothes, showing her rejection of the strictures of societal control. Beyond that, she utilized the conventions of an ascetic to keep her mind on her proper path. She exulted:

To the handsome dark-hued Lord,  
I have surrendered!  
Yes! I will give up my life for Him!  
Because of You,  
I have given up worldly modesty and family restrictions!  
Without seeing You, I am restless!  
Tears flow from my eyes!  
My beloved! To whom shall I speak:  
Where will I go?  
The current of separation is too strong!  
Meera says: Lord!  
When will I get the support of Your feet? (Subramanian 2005, 127)

In several of her songs, Mirabai was perceived as mad, “mad, not conscious of my body” (Subramanian 2005, 53), and mad from the joy of her union with Kṛṣṇa. That joy caused her to sing and dance with bliss to Kṛṣṇa.

Mirabai spoke positively of yogins. One verse spoke of the joys of the area named Vrindāvan, where Kṛṣṇa was a cow herder. “Yogis will come to do yoga. Sages will come to do penance. The good people of Brindavan will come to sing bhajans of Hari” (Subramanian 2005, 29). She speaks to three of the paths within Hinduism in this verse, the path of yoga, the path of wisdom and the path of *bhakti*.

As for her self, Mirabai sang, “Long ago I have given up pearl, diamond and gold ornaments. Now I wear the garland of Tulsi beads and apply sandal paste on my forehead” (Subramanian 2005, 81). If Kṛṣṇa wanted her to become a yogin she would.

For your sake, I shall become a Yogin!  
I shall wander in the city  
Looking for you in every bower!  
I shall smear ashes on my limbs and  
Tie the deerskin around my neck!  
After all, the body is to be turned into ashes. (Subramanian  
2005, 69)

According to legend, her singing was so enjoyed, that even the Mughal emperor Akbar came down from his throne, disguising himself as a common person, to hear her speak. (This is not impossible as Akbar was known to have been very interested in religious ideas.)

She is said to have gone eventually to Vrindāvan in Uttar Pradesh, where Kṛṣṇa had legendarily lived, and spent time there, then eventually went to the

temple of Ranachor, where it is said that her body melted into the image of the Lord. The date of her death is set about 1546. Since she was born in 1498, she would have been about 48 years old when she died.

### Philosophy

Mirabai is one of the best known and best loved of the female *bhakti* poets from north India. Whereas copies of Lalla Ded's poems in our own day are very expensive and difficult to procure, Mirabai's poems are in almost every anthology and many books have been composed that include her poetry. It is said that some of the Sikh *Granth Sahib* are her verses (Callewaert 1990, 253).

Mirabai's philosophy is totally dualist, *dvaita*. This means that she sees Kṛṣṇa as separate from her, and her poetic mode is one of longing for Kṛṣṇa to be with her once again. She utilizes the poetic references of nature as a background for her verses in the same manner that temple architecture uses stone friezes of the fruits of agricultural prosperity, and, in the same way Mughal painting calls attention to every little detail in the image and its environment. The inspiration of both is evident in her poetry.

Her philosophical concerns include how best to worship her Lord, her concerns about the wheel of rebirths, her desire to leave the phenomenal world, and her worship for Kṛṣṇa.

*How to Live*

O mind! Drink the nectar of the Lord's name!  
Drink the nectar of the Lord's name!  
Give up bad company!  
Always keep company of good people!  
Listen to the legends of the Lord!  
Banish from your mind: lust, anger, arrogance, greed and delusion!  
(Subramanian 2005, 163)

This poem summarizes many activities Mirabai feels are necessary for Kṛṣṇa's grace. First and foremost is to worship Kṛṣṇa by the recitation (*japa*) of Kṛṣṇa's name. *Japa* was a great pleasure for her and a means to keep Rama/Kṛṣṇa always on her mind. "My mind recites the name of Rama ceaselessly! When you recite the name of Rama, a millions sins are destroyed" (Subramanian 2005, 105). By the repetition of Kṛṣṇa's name, one first of all keeps one's mind from other activities from the phenomenal world that detract from one's love for Kṛṣṇa, and second, focus one's mind on that ultimate Lord, just as standing at the feet of the image of Kṛṣṇa, focuses one's mind on Kṛṣṇa and eliminates the boundaries of space between the devotee and the Lord.

Second, she sings that a person ought to stay in the company of saints; she emphasized this over and over again in her verses. Keeping company with *sadhus* was one of the complaints against her when she was in the palace, however by keeping good company; one is able to keep one's mind on one's devotion, which was essential to her religious goal. She had spent her life listening to the legends of her Lord (which will be enumerated below under theology), legends which illustrate the traits of the Lord and give one a full and elaborate picture of his importance to her.

Next, the poem further tells one how to live one's life ethically: banishing lust, anger, arrogance, greed and delusion from one's mind. In the course of reading many of her *padas*, or verses, I can see that this statement is not taken lightly by her, for it is referenced in her actions towards her married family as well. After her husband's death, she had no lust towards anyone as illustrated by the story with the *sadhu*. She showed no anger at the terrible things the royal family did to attempt to kill her, nor showed arrogance against the royal family. She demonstrated a sense of joy and of gentle teasing in her relationships with those who attempted to torment her. Her lack of greed was fulfilled in her life as an ascetic. She laughed:

O devotees of God! Cleanse me clean of my sins!  
Cleanse me in such a way that I won't be coming and going!  
Wash me with the soap of meditation and  
Using serenity and forgiveness as washing materials,  
On the ghat of Sushumna so that I will be pure! (Subramanian 2005, 115)

The value of meditation to her is demonstrated in this poem as well as the virtues of serenity and forgiveness. The use of these techniques causes energy to rise in the *sushumna nāḍī*, from well-known yogic practice *kuṇḍalinī* that Lalla Ded had taught.

Mirabai worshipped at the feet of Hari, or Viṣṇu, drawing her body as close to him as possible. Standing at his feet crystallizes awareness of the hierarchy between him and her and attempts to lessen it.

She longed constantly for the Lord. She moaned that she was "sad without seeing you ever since you left" (Subramanian 2005, 49). She felt as sad as the Chātaka bird which won't drink from a scummy pond but must drink the pure

raindrops as they fall. “As the Chātaka bird pines for the rain cloud, as the fish longs for the water, Meera is restless and yearns for her separated Lover! She has forgotten her intelligence” (61).

While she enjoined followers to keep the company of saints, and to desist from immoral behavior, her primary focus was on her devotion to Kṛṣṇa. Her way of life was an example of the worshipper devoted to the lord more than it was an example of how to live in society. However, she demonstrated both of these in her life as well as her teaching.

### *Self*

Like the other Hindu women saints already studied in this dissertation, Mirabai’s major concern is with the suffering of the world, the wheel of rebirths, and the necessity to leave the phenomenal world behind.

Mirabai’s discussion of her self begins in the phenomenal world. Living in the palace, she felt “carried away by the currents of the ocean of the phenomenal world” (Subramanian 2005, 73). She complained that she has no father, mother, relatives or brothers, having broken family ties. Knowing Kṛṣṇa called to her, “Her mind became like the elephant controlled by the goad. Openly giving the signal, I walked out” (Subramanian 2005, 79).

Having left the palace, she felt the loneliness of the wandering ascetic who relies on no one. But she felt it was necessary:

To get a human body is difficult  
Short is life span!  
To cross the ocean of samsara  
Chanting his name is the boat. (Subramanian 2005, 113)

Mirabai recognized the fact that her body had passed through past lives and will pass through future lives, unless she uses the boatman named Kṛṣṇa. Her body was nothing she is interested in; she knows a new body is born each lifetime. She tells her listeners, “Do not be proud of this body, it will soon merge with dust” (Subramanian 2005, 195). Whereas Lalla Ded felt that her body was the tool with which she could reach enlightenment, in contrast Mirabai deemed her body a useless extension of her real self. She doesn’t develop a philosophy of self because she had already mentally left her body and ego and crossed the line to enlightenment. The comparison of her and Lalla Ded illustrates the different modes of religious behavior exhibited by the saints—Lalla Ded learned every inch of her body to develop her strengths; whereas Mirabai’s strength came from the grace of the Lord, and the body could be psychically discarded.

*View of the Phenomenal World and Metaphysical Realm*

Mirabai recognized the major outlines of Hindu thought as developed in the Upaniṣads, the idea of *karma*, or one’s actions, causing *samsāra*, rebirth again in the wheel of rebirths, which may be eliminated through *mokṣa*, or liberation. Mirabai saw the phenomenal world as unreal, and looked behind the phenomenal world to her real Self. As a servant of Kṛṣṇa, she felt that her understanding has changed from that which she had previously.

I have obtained the accumulated capital of several births  
After searching in the entire universe.....  
The boat is truth, the good teacher the boatman  
I have come to cross the ocean of samsara! (S.10)



Mirabai believed that for several births, she had lived in a positive manner and gained positive *karma* while building up little negative karma. She had discovered Kṛṣṇa, who, as teacher, gave her the grace that she could understand truth, which will guide her safely into port and off the sea of *samsāra*.

The major point in Mirabai's teaching of *samsāra* is that one needs to make a decision right now about whether one wants to continue, life after life, to swim through the sea of *samsāra*, or whether one seeks to eliminate it, to go in comfort and speed by boat to reach one's goal of *mokṣa*. She pleads:

We are guests for two days!  
Why quarrel with anyone?  
We are guests for two days!  
He who sleeps on the golden bed now  
Will go to the funeral pyre tomorrow!  
Ultimately one has to give up  
Father, mother, son and spouse and remain distressed!  
The king also goes, the chief also goes  
Even the mighty Kumbhakarna<sup>78</sup> had to go!  
Worms, birds, even the Creator does not remain in the end. (S.39)

Each life is a short period in the great expanse of time, and one lives here as a guest, a transient, an impermanent person. No matter how luxurious one's surroundings are, one will eventually die.

Mirabai warns that “the currents of the ocean of *samsara* are very strong!” (S.28) By this vivid warning, she wants her listeners to be aware they could become lost for a period in this ocean and should “take the plunge” now to reach liberation.

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78. Kumbhakarna was the brother of Rāvana, who ordered him to fight with him against Rāma and who was killed by Rāma.

Mirabai's philosophy teaches two major images, that we are here in each life only for a while and that the boatman and teacher, Kṛṣṇa, can guide us across the sea of *samsāra* in his boat, Truth to the other sublime realm, where he lives. In the noumenal realm of God is where Mirabai longs to dwell.

### *Theology*

Mirabai has a *dvaitist* relationship with Kṛṣṇa. Longing always for reunion with him, she herself, the *bhakti yogin*, smeared with ash, resides in a very different world than the stunningly beautiful Kṛṣṇa she portrays. Her pleasure is in her ascetic's rags because, turning from the world, she perceives Kṛṣṇa's magnificence waiting to give her grace.

Mirabai has a different idea of Viṣṇu than Āntāl did; she focuses on Kṛṣṇa, not so much on the other incarnations of Viṣṇu, though they are mentioned. Āntāl focused on the warrior/king aspect of Viṣṇu, and Mirabai focuses on the compassionate aspects of Kṛṣṇa, the playing of his flute and Kṛṣṇa as teacher.

One of the epithets mentioned most frequently was that of Kṛṣṇa, the flute player. Kṛṣṇa is called "the enchanting one with the flute," "Oh darling with the flute," and the "one who plays the bamboo flute in the bower and dances in tune with the cowherds" (S.12). As flute player, Kṛṣṇa is calling the devotee to him, the undeniable call that pulls one into a religious quest. Once one is called, one has to follow one's own way to the enticing music, which causes the devotee all kinds of problems. Mirabai realized these problems, and, rather than address them directly, she taught Kṛṣṇa's grace as the way to begin one's attempt to be with

him. Kṛṣṇa is the boatman that guides one over the water of *samsāra* (Subramanian 2005, 41). As flute player, he is her beloved. She turns her head to listen to the “nectarlike music” and kept her focus on Kṛṣṇa. Several iconographical images of desire from literature are evoked by Mirabai’s longing for Kṛṣṇa:

1. *Abhisarika* is the one who meets her beloved secretly at a tryst
2. *Vasakasajja* is one who decorates or embellishes her body or home to attract her beloved
3. *Utkanthita* is one who longs for an absent lover
4. *Khandita* is one who is disappointed because her lover is spending time with another
5. *Vipralabdha* is one who is unhappy because her lover fails to keep his appointment with her
6. *Kalahantarita* is one who quarrels with her lover and continues to reject him even if it causes her pain
7. *Prositabhartrika* is one whose lover has gone away
8. *Svadhinabhartrika* is one who controls her lover with pleasant experiences (Rosen 2004, 234)

Many of the well-known tales of Kṛṣṇa are alluded to by Mirabai. She emphasized the strength of Kṛṣṇa in the episode where Kṛṣṇa held Mt. Govardhan, to protect his village from the anger of Indra. “They upheld the mountain Govardhan and destroyed the arrogance of Indra” (Subramanian 2005, 41). This shows Kṛṣṇa as a teacher, teaching the people not to necessarily follow Vedic ways. Is it a story that was used in an area where Aryan religion was imposed on an earlier religious tradition, where most likely people already worshipped the mountain and Kṛṣṇa aided them in continuing their old beliefs?

Kṛṣṇa rarely fought as a warrior-king in any of the stories Mirabai told about him. She said, “You protected Draupadi’s modesty by increasing the length of her robe” (Subramanian 2005, 31). This was a compassionate act, an act of

grace, when Draupadi called upon him. “Oh Kṛṣṇa!” she cried, wanting him to aid her as Duśasana began unwrapping her sari. Though Mirabai gave up worldly modesty herself (43), she appreciated Kṛṣṇa’s aid to Draupadī in her struggle for self-worth.

However, Mirabai does tell the tale of Hiranakasipu. “For the sake of your devotee you wore the form of Man-lion and killed Hiranakasipu” (Subramanian 2005, 31). Though this was a battle, and Viṣṇu killed Hiranakasipu, not on heaven or earth, not at day or night, and without normal weapons, she prefaces the statement with a comment: “For the sake of your devotee.” Viṣṇu did this out of compassion for his devotee.

The third incarnation of Viṣṇu mentioned in Mirabai’s verse is the following: “You protected the elephant king by bringing him out of water” (Subramanian 2005, 31). He protected the elephant king from being eaten by a crocodile by pulling him out of the water, and here the word “protect” implies “compassion.” Subramanian translates both the word *badhāyo cīr* (in the Draupadi line) and the word *bāhar nīr* (in the elephant king line) as “protect” but this isn’t quite correct. *Badhāyo* is to “enhance,” so Viṣṇu “enhanced” Draupadī’s life out of compassion. *Bāhar* means “shoot” or “plow,” things a king does, so he would “protect” the elephant king, himself being a king, out of compassion.

A long list of incarnations of Viùòu is given by Mirabai (Subramanian 2005, 41):

1. “These feet measured the universe, through the incarnation of Vāmana the dwarf.” The emphasis is on the omnipotence of Viṣṇu who could take the size of a dwarf and increase to the size to encompass heaven and earth. It also emphasizes Viṣṇu’s omnipotence, for Viṣṇu knew what the demon king would ask and prepared himself accordingly.
2. “These feet, by their touch, saved Ahalya, the spouse of sage Gautama.” Ahalyā was cursed by her husband to be a stone because of an indiscretion. When Rāma’s foot touched her he brought her back to life.
3. Again, it is not the story of Rāma destroying Lanka, it is a story of a powerful being, who, out of compassion, brought this unfortunate soul back to life.
4. “When Krishna sported as the cowherd.” This is an aspect of Kṛṣṇa that neither Mirabai nor Āntāl emphasized—the sporting play between the *gopīs* and Kṛṣṇa that delights people today.

In addition, Verse 6 called Kṛṣṇa, “the lord that destroys sorrow,” an epithet that both infers Kṛṣṇa’s omniscience and his compassion. He is the “protector of the afflicted” in Verse 28 which implies omniscience and compassion. And Verse 28 also calls him the Universal Teacher, “the support of the supportless,” a stronger statement of his powers; a teacher shows compassion to his students and has the knowledge with which to aid them in their vocation.

As teacher, Kṛṣṇa’s truth calmed Mirabai. “The good teacher has placed his hand on my head like a goad and stilled my mind” (S.23). When she stilled her mind, under the grace of Kṛṣṇa, she relaxed and eliminated those negative traits mentioned above. She further praises Kṛṣṇa and his role of teacher in getting her to *mokṣa*, liberation, from the life within *samsāra*.

My good teacher gave me an invaluable thing and I have made it my own.  
The boat is truth, the good teacher is the boatman  
I have come to cross the ocean of samsara. (S.10)

The importance of Truth to her comes from the Upaniṣads<sup>79</sup> and its importance in Hinduism continues from its heritage to Mohandas Gandhi's emphasis on *satyagraha* (the force of truth) in the twentieth century.

In one poem, Mirabai sees Viṣṇu as holding the conch, discus, and mace in one poem, which his visual iconography supports. She gives a beautiful description of him, as detailed as a Mughal painting, in his glory.

Every since I set my eyes on the son of Nanda,  
Krishna, dear friends! Nothing in this or [the] other world seems  
attractive to me.  
He wears the peacock feather on his crown, like a crescent moon.  
The Kesar mark on his forehead charms the three worlds!  
The reflection of his ear-rings on his cheeks gives the impression that  
The crocodiles have come to meet the fish in the pond!  
The curved eyebrows and the piercing eyes resemble the  
Wagtail birds, bees and fish!  
His nose is very beautiful  
And on his holy neck there are three lucky lines!  
My Lord, the expert dancer puts on a specially dazzling form!  
His lips are crimson red and he has a sweet smile!  
His teeth sparkle!  
The ornaments adorning his body are dazzling!  
The tiny bells produce an attractive sound!  
Meera has become an object of sacrifice to every limb of the Lord's body.  
(Subramanian 2005, 45)

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79. Truth is discussed a number of times in the Upaniṣads. One verse says: "This Truth is the honey of all beings, and all beings are the honey of this Truth. The radiant and immortal person in Truth and, in the case of the body, the radiant and immortal person devoted to Truth—they are both one's self. It is the immortal; it is Brahman; it is the Whole" (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.5.12 in Olivelle 1998, 32). Truth is the important point in the *Rāmāyāna*. When Daśaratha, Rāma's father, told his wife Kaikayī that he would give her two boons, she held him to his word and requested that Rāma not be king and that he be exiled.

A deity is often very beautiful because deities have the omnipotence to cause themselves to appear in any image desired, and Mirabai used her visions to fulfill that image of beauty, with a peacock feather, ear-rings, curved eyebrows and all. He is the ultimate dancer dressed magnificently. As dancer he moves, causing the whole image of the jewelry, the curls, the costume, to glint and glitter, reflecting the light of the sun. The movement causes the bells to ring sweetly. The textual image she evokes is better than most visual images of Kṛṣṇa, because one can readily imagine the movement and hear the bells. Like the flute, the sound of the bells entices the viewer to join Kṛṣṇa in his dance as dancer as well.

Subramanian's collection of her verses ends with a very positive note:

Let it rain!  
Today, my Lord Ramaiya is with me  
At my residence!  
With tiny drops, let the clouds shower rain  
And fill up the dried up lakes!  
I have got my Beloved after so many days!  
I am afraid he may leave and go!  
Meera says; we are united in strong love  
He was my husband in previous births!! (S.100)

Evoking the romantic monsoon images of the rain exploding on the dry, wasted earth, like an ejaculation of sperm, she fertilized new hope for herself, for whom her Beloved has finally returned. He was always her support in everything she did, as shown in this, to me, most beautiful of her songs:

Beloved! You may break away from me, I will not!  
Krishna! If our relationship is broken,  
With whom can I unite?  
You are the tree! I am the bird!  
You are the lake! I am the fish!  
You are the mountain! I am the peacock!  
You are the moon! I am the chakora bird!  
You are the pearl! I am the string!

You are gold! I am the cleansing powder!  
Meera says: O Lord, who reside in Brindavan!  
You are my Master! I am your servant! (S.28)

### Conclusion

It is easy to see the beauty of the songs that Mirabai sang and that have been handed down to the present generation. Though the collection of verses studied was the same length as the poetry collections of the other saints, Mirabai received less discussion in my dissertation, despite her popularity, partly because her work is more repetitious—beautifully repetitious, I would say. She doesn't have the variety of images, analogies, and metaphors the other women used in their work which gives a broader scope to their literature. She paints with words an image of Kṛṣṇa that is beautiful, the dancer; she develops his compassion and his abilities as a teacher, but most important to her is her longing for him.

Of the three chief forms of love in Sanskrit poetry, love forbidden, love in separation, and love in union (Ramanujan 2004, 70), the singer Āntāl chose love in union, and the singer Mirabai chose love in separation. Both, however, eventually merged into the stone of the images, not dying, but disappearing into their Lord, a final union.



## CHAPTER EIGHT: BAHINĀ BAI—WIFE

Bahinā Bai (1625-1700) is a renowned woman author and saint of the Vaiṣṇavite tradition from the seventeenth century, who lived in Maharashtra. She composed spiritual songs and wrote her own autobiography. She is the first woman for whom an autobiographical text is available, instead of hagiographies. Her autobiography reflects herself as subject for the first time among these six Hindu women saints whom I have chosen to discuss in this dissertation. The autobiography demarcates the aspects of Bahinā Bai's life she considered to be important to her listeners and demonstrates her process as a spiritual woman. She considered herself first and foremost to be a wife, yet she took a leadership position in her community, composing her poems, in which she demonstrates a fine sense of knowledge about the philosophies of Vedānta and Sāṃkhya. She wrote in the vernacular of the region, Marathi.

The only text I found of her writings in English was by Justin E. Abbott, *Bahinā Bai: A Translation of her Autobiography and Verses* (1929), which is not a complete translation of her verses but is complete in regards to her autobiography. It is an extensive translation. The Marathi is a part of the text so one may compare Marathi language passages to Abbott's translations.

### Autobiography

Bahinā Bai is considered a Maharashtrian saint. She struggled with the identity of being a wife throughout almost her entire life, from when she married at age six or seven until her death. Bahinā Bai's husband, who, when she married

him, was thirty, was probably close to the age of her father. Bahinā Bai's father got himself into some sort of trouble, which Bahinā Bai does not define, and the family had to flee, walking over three hundred kilometers until they felt themselves safe. Despite young married girls customarily not living with their husbands until the time of puberty, Bahinā Bai's husband traveled with them. Both Bahinā Bai husband and her father were Brahmins, who did small ceremonies for people in the neighborhood.

In her autobiography, Bahinā Bai expresses her honest sentiments about her husband:

But I was in constant terror of my husband. I had heard of the anger of Jamadagni.<sup>80</sup> My husband showed the same characteristic in his dealings with people. Says Bahinī, "I was now eleven years of age, but I had not had one moment's joy." (58.2-4)<sup>81</sup>

Bahinā Bai's husband beat and abused her and, because of her education in the Vedas she felt it was *her* fault that he treated her wrongly. "He seized me by the braids of my hair, and beat me to his heart's content. . . . In what duty to my husband had I failed?" (15.12).

Bahinā Bai also was having spiritual feelings that she wanted to develop, "I was now eleven years of age, and felt a strong desire to be associated with the saints. I wanted to listen to the stories that were heard in the reading of the Purāns

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80. In the legend, Jamadagni was married to a very dutiful wife. One day she went to the river and saw a couple engaged in intercourse. He noted this, and angrily said she had fallen from perfection. He ordered his sons, one by one, to kill her. The youngest one did, so he granted the son a boon. The son asked that the mother be brought back to life.

81. Abbot (1929) has numbered each paragraph and each sentence within the paragraph in her autobiography and her text and the numbers in quotations refer to the paragraph and the sentences.

and I delighted in the worship of Brāhman. But Fate pulled us away from there” (12:10-11).

Through dreams, Bahinā Bai pursued her religious path: “I had a vision of a Brahmin coming before me and saying to me: ‘Awake! Bai! Begin to think! Let your mind awake!!’” (19.9-10). The dream continued with a vision of God and of the saint Tukārām, who was already well known in the community, and her desire to meet this holy man intensified. Tukārām (1608-1650) is another well-known Maharastrian saint who was a lower caste *śūdra* and who sang *bhakti* songs about the Lord Vitobhā.

Bahinā Bai had another dream of Tukārām in which he told her a mantra for reciting the names of Rāma—Kṛṣṇa—Hari. She wrote about this: “My heart rejoiced. It fixed itself on Brahma[n], Pure Intelligence. I sat up astonished” (25.10). Even though Bahinā Bai had never met him, she began meditating on Tukārām’s image.

People came to see Bahinā Bai at her meditations, which made her husband very jealous. “My husband, seeing them, gave me much bodily suffering.... He exclaimed ‘It would be well if this woman were dead’” (31.2, 4).

Bahinā Bai, upset by her husband’s angry abuse, thought,

What am I to do with my Fate? I must bear whatever comes to my lot. I am not one who is possessed. . . . Therefore, holding to my own special duties, I will give my mind to listening to the Scriptures, and the winning of God. My duty is to serve my husband, for he is God to me. My husband himself is the Supreme Brahma[n]. The water in which my husband’s feet are washed has the value of all the sacred waters put together. . . . The Vedas in fact say that it is the husband who has the authority in the matter of religious duties, earthly possessions, desires, and salvation. This is

then the determination, and the desire of my heart. I want my thought concentrated on my husband. (35.1-8)

One time Bahinā Bai's husband became very ill for a month; he was unable to eat; and he felt in excruciating pain. On death's bed, he was chastised by a Brahmin, who said that if you know in your heart your wife had committed no wrong, then accept her. If she hasn't done her duties well, then abandon her. Bahinā Bai continues, "He did not speak at all to his wife, but with all his heart he pleaded with Hari for help. He then arose and bowed to the Brahmin. The twice-born responded, 'You will be blessed'" (40.10-11). Bahinā Bai's husband recovered, and, in recompense, he moved them to Dehu, where Tukārām was living and singing, and life became better.

Bahinā Bai summarized her life at the end of the autobiography, ending with three major points. First she was born a woman, with all that entails. Second, she served her husband well: "Out of respect for the Vedas, I stood ready to serve" (59.3). Third, Bahinā Bai told of two dreams, from which she received the inspiration for the rest of her actions in her life. Tukārām came to her in both dreams.

With closed eyes, both in sleep and in waking state, I saw the form of Tukārām. He placed his hand on my head, and in spoken words gave me the promise of poetic power. Says, Bahinī, "I do not know whether this was in a dream or in my waking state, but my senses ceased their action." (75.6-8)

Without even having met Tukārām, Bahinā Bai was initiated by Tukārām as her *sadguru*, or guru of the truth. It was the major turning point in her

spirituality, and Bahinā Bai followed Tukārām's ideas and poetry all the rest of her life.

The next dream established Bahinā Bai as a poet.

suddenly I felt inspirited to be a poetess. I made a namaskār there to Tukārām, and quickly came back to where we lodged, and quickly came back to where we lodged. Says Bahinā Bai, "This inspiration to poesy came like the tide of the ocean, or like the worlds of the Gods [sic] of Thunder [Indra] in the sky of my heart." (78.4-5)

After this dream, Bahinā Bai felt the necessity to write her own *kīrtans*, which expressed her own religion experience. She wasn't content to blithely sing the *kīrtans* of others.

Bahinā Bai's autobiography focused on her relationship with her husband, prior to her commitment with Tukārām as *sadguru*, a relationship which she continued to work on for the rest of her married life. Unlike Lalla Ded and Mira Bai, who had no children and left behind unwelcome marriages, she felt the necessity to stay within her marriage and raise her children. Though her parents lived with Bahinā Bai and her husband at first, they did not intervene with her husband over her mistreatment.

Bahinā Bai's tug-of-war with her husband also reflected a tug-of-war between Brahmanic values and *bhakti* values. Because Bahinā Bai's father and husband were both Brahmins, she was raised in the world of the Brahmins, memorizing verses while a child, and viewing the relationship of the Brahmins to society, seeing that they were, despite personal shortcomings (her father having to leave his home suddenly from perhaps an illegal deal, her husband's temper), the religious leaders of the community, binding the community within its major

religious tenets. Bahinā Bai saw a value in that community, which she continued to return to in her life in periods of deep introspection. Bahinā Bai accepted all aspects of the Vedic teachings as she discovered them, and attempted to work with her role as a Brahmin woman, from marriage at age seven to an abusive husband, and she encouraged other women in their duties to their marriages.

Bahinā Bai's guru Tukārām was a of the *sūdra* caste, which was a major concern for Bahinā Bai's Brahmin husband. Bahinā Bai herself however appears to have seen the binding power that Tukārām and his style of *bhakti* had for society. Whereas Brahmanical religion provided for the orderly observance of life cycle rites, in contrast, the songs, dances and poetry of *bhakti* united individual people into ecstatic groups in their praise of God. These provided personal joy, community, and entertainment to the people who practiced them.

Even before Bahinā Bai met Tukārām, she had heard about him, had meditated on him, and was so inspired by his story that Bahinā Bai dreamt that he had initiated her. Bahinā Bai chose the *bhakti* path, because it allowed her, as a woman, to take a leadership role, and it allowed her own spiritual thoughts and practices, which Brahmanism didn't.

Having had to change residences early in her life quite suddenly, and having been on the road for a long period as her family fled from undesirable circumstances, Bahinā Bai's personal life was quite disrupted. Marrying and beginning to spend time with her husband, who had no patience with her and expressed himself violently, was another blow to her sense of worth.

A story is told in the autobiography of a calf Bahinā Bai was given to raise, when she was eight or nine, that died, and her extreme grief at its passing. Bahinā Bai's grief at losing her natal community, and her grief relating to her marriage was transformed at the death of this calf, she says, turning her into a reconciler rather than a rebel. Bahinā Bai added "straightforward human affection, sensuous excitement and the need for some emotional shelter" to her *bhakti* (Hardy, 1980, 176). She valued community the rest of her life and attempted, through her poetry, to connect the community members to each other and to manifest stability within her social relations.

#### The Vaiṣṇava Philosophy of Her Time

Bahinā Bai recorded her guru lineage at the beginning of her autobiography, stating that her *sadguru* was Tukārām, whose *sadguru* was Caitanya. Caitanya (c. 1486-1533) was a Bengali Vaiṣṇavite *bhakti* poet, from the other side of India, but his reputation had developed in Maharashtra as well two hundred years later.

Tukārām (1608-1650?) was a bit older than Bahinā Bai (1608-1650?). Much of what is known about him comes from her textual references to him. In 1629 (when Bahinā Bai would have been five) a great famine and epidemic took away many of Tukārām's family, a crisis which set him on the ascetic path. Bahinā Bai does not mention this catastrophe, so either it did not affect her

because she lived in a different town in Maharashtra, or it didn't affect her because she was a Brahmin.

This period was a bad time for the state of Maharashtra politically and economically, which Bahinā Bai does not mention, unless this period of shifting alliances caused her father's necessity to move his family surreptitiously in the middle of the night. The great Hindu warrior and hero Shivaji (1627-1680), who freed Maharashtra from Mughal rule, was born two years after her birth, so his revolutionary activities, and the split in 1674 of Maharashtra from Aurangzeb's (1618-1707) government in Delhi occurred within her life time. Despite the importance of these events to the people of Maharashtra, Bahinā Bai mentioned nothing about these major political changes. Since Shivaji led a Hindu renaissance against the Muslim crown, she could not but be aware of it. Famine, starvation and disease follow revolutionary movements, not to mention economic downturn, so again she could not help but be aware of it.

Rāmdās (1608-1671) was another *bhakti* poet of this same time period, who revered Rāma and was known as Shivaji's guru.

Bahinā Bai's spiritual dreaming echoes that of Tukārām, who himself had dreamed that Namdeo (also Namdev, 1270-1350), an earlier Marathi saint, came to him in a dream to instruct him that he should become a poet, singing in praise of Vithobā, a local incarnation of Viṣṇu. Vithobā's temple in Dehu was where Bahinā Bai and Tukārām finally met. Tukārām also had a dream that a holy man blessed Caitanya as Tukārām's *sadguru*, and gave him a mantra to chant (Rāma—Kṛṣṇa—Hari), which he also gave to Bahinā Bai, affirming that he was in the



lineage of Caitanya, the Bengali Vaisnavite *bhakti* poet. Caitanya was considered an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa and his brother was considered an incarnation of Balarāma, Kṛṣṇa's brother. Caitanya's verses are based on the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Bhāvagata Purāṇa*.

### *Ethics*

Bahinā Bai felt that as a woman she carried negative *karma*, according to the teaching in the Vedas, and so she needed to be especially careful in her behavior to be virtuous, and in her worship to be praiseworthy to God.

The Vedas cry aloud, and the Purāns shout that no good comes of a woman. Now I in the natural way have a woman's body. What means then have I to acquire supreme spiritual riches (*paramārtha*)? The characteristics (of a woman) are foolishness, selfishness, seductiveness, and deception. All connection with a woman is disastrous. (Such is their opinion. Says Bahinī, "If a woman's body brings disaster, what chance is there for her to acquire in this life the supreme spiritual riches?" (63.1-4)

Bahinā Bai looked at women in very negative terms in this verse, and wondered how she, as a woman, who was possessed of all those negative traits, could develop herself spiritually, a question that women have asked themselves in all patriarchal cultures for millennia.

Does this mean that Hinduism was not organized for women's roles, but for the patriarchal structure inherent in this society? Does it mean that religion in general supports the denigration of women in each society? Is individual spirituality separate from institutionalized religion? And what is women's spirituality? These twenty-first century questions surface when studying Bahinā Bai's seventeenth century work as they do in the study of each of the women

saints visited in this dissertation. To what extent, we might ask, was the spiritual path of each one an adaptation to the negative impact of patriarchal realities of marriage on their lives?

Bahinā Bai was able to develop herself spiritually, despite her fears, and despite the abuses of her husband, and developed herself without any assistance from the institutionalized Brahmanical religious structure, through her own spirituality, which was recognized by the people who were her devotees. Bahinā Bai never held an institutionalized position within the Hindu religion in Maharashtra, but her poems were revered by the people via their own informal hearing of her texts.

Bahinā Bai saw religion from both a Brahmanical and a Vedāntic point of view. In Brahmanical thought, a man took care of the household until he reached the point of seeing his first grandchild, then he could leave to become an ascetic. His wife had the option to join him (Manu 6:2 in Olivelle 2004, 98). Becoming an ascetic was to be valued as the ultimate means of reaching enlightenment. However Bahinā Bai wrote that: “Possessing a woman’s body, and myself being subject to others, I was not able to carry out my desire to discard all worldly things (*vairāgya*)” (60.1).

Let’s look more clearly at what Bahinā Bai did not feel she was able to forsake. *Vairāgya* (above) comes from *vi*, “out from,” and *rāga*, “feeling or passion,” so it is translated as “absence of world passion,” “freedom from desires,” and it is most easily achieved through asceticism. However, Bahinā Bai felt asceticism was not allowed to her.

If she could not practice asceticism, then, knowledge, *vidya* was of next importance to her as a Brahmin's daughter and wife, but she felt she could not utilize that path either. "[As a woman] I have no right to listen to the reading of the Vedas (64.3) I am told I must not pronounce the sacred word 'OM.' I must not listen to philosophical ideas. I must not speak to anyone about them" (64.3-5). This is a stringent restriction, which is not supported by sacred texts, and, as will be shown, Bahinā Bai had comprehended a number of forbidden philosophical ideas while doing her wifely duties. Nonetheless, Bahinā Bai vowed, "I will not leave the worship of God, even if it should mean the losing of my life" (67.2).

If she could not be an ascetic or learn sacred knowledge, then Bahinā Bai could turn to *bhakti*, but even that was problematical.

I did not know the proper mantras to repeat, nor the proper rites to perform. I did not know the right austerities, nor how to arrange the seat appropriate to meditation...But I had before me the stone image of Vithobā for my contemplation and in my heart God. (75. 1, 3)

Without the proper tools to worship, what should one do? She should use her own self-reliance. Bahinā Bai taught: "What other tīrtha is there equal to self-knowledge? The wise come to know this through the good deeds done in the former birth" (86.1).

Bahinā Bai came to the same conclusion that all profound religious Asian thinkers came to, that *from within* is where knowledge will be found. One can be an ascetic for one's entire life, one can read all the religious texts, but if what one is doing does not eventually reside in one's own heart, then it does not aid the

seeker. Therefore, the place that one must start ethically, is from one's own soul, the love of God that resides in one's own heart.

After choosing a path of bhakti and the inner development of spirituality, next in importance comes the *sadguru*. Bahinā Bai traced her lineage at the beginning of her autobiography according to custom to give herself validity. “Chaitanya is the all-pervading sadguru. He has manifested himself to me in the form of Tukārām the merciful” (183.3). The importance of the guru is as the one who has already achieved enlightenment. That guru then can initiate the seeker, from her or his perspective, as the *guru* has become all-knowing, including the knowledge of what the seeker needs to know in order to achieve enlightenment. The guru also gives the seeker power, in the sense of a psychic talisman, which will aid the person on his or her journey.

The term *sat* here changed by Sanskrit *sandhi*<sup>82</sup> to *sad* reflects that sense of change which the guru is to impart. *Sat* means “being, existing, occurring, happening” from the root word *as*, which means to “be, live, exist, happen.” So the *sadguru* can be one who lives as a guru or one who causes being or existence as a guru. The second meaning is the accepted one in Hinduism and its daughter religions.

The lineage of a guru did not have to be confined to this time and space, due to their being categories of *māyā*, so Bahinā Bai's tapping by Tukārām, and Tukārām's tapping by Namdeo by means of dreams is within comprehension.

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82. A *sandhi* is a Sanskrit feature. When two letters are pronounced quickly together, one letter or the other will blend with the second, which may change the pronunciation of the word. The writing of Sanskrit reflects this linguistic blending of two letters.

“There are Shāstras and the Vedas and many great systems of philosophy, but a *sadguru* is superior to them all” (118.3), Bahinā Bai taught.

Bahinā Bai taught that the Śāstras and Vedas were composed for all Hindus, and, as such, one can study them for decades until one comes to an “Aha!” moment. The *sadguru* can take one directly there. She says later, “One does not need the reading of the Vedas or Shāstras. . . . Go as a suppliant to your *sadguru*” (179.1, 2).

Bahinā Bai thought that a person should spend as much time as possible with saints and especially with one’s *sadguru*. She emphasized that: “Association with the saints leads to the purification of the heart (220.1),” and she used the following proverb as an analogy:

A tree that comes in contact with a sandalwood tree becomes exactly like it. So if one comes in contact with a saint, one naturally becomes a saint. (223.1)

Bahinā Bai tried to live close to those on her same religious quest.

“Always there were three things before my eyes, Tukāram, the saints and the kīrtans. I could not make him a namaskār, for fear of my husband. But my mind was ever at his feet” (73.4-5).

The knowledge one gets from one’s *sadguru* Bahinā Bai terms Right-Knowledge, or *viveka*, from the Sanskrit root *vivic*, which means to separate, as through winnowing grain. It is a Vedānta term, meaning “the power of separating the invisible Spirit from the visible world (or spirit from matter, truth from untruth, reality from mere semblance or illusion)” (Monier-Williams 1976, 987).

Bahinā Bai spoke about this form of discerning knowledge she received from her *sadguru*. “By the power of Right-thinking (*viveka*), I have acquired indifference to worldly things (*vairāgya*)” (126.1). This power of Right-thinking spiraled her back to her desire to become an ascetic, and *bhakti* became the solution to her problem of how to become an ascetic. If one is mired in household cares and children, which she was, she could not become an actual ascetic, but she could be a virtual ascetic through her heightened spirit and through *bhakti*. “If Right-thinking is joined with indifference to worldly things, *bhakti* becomes the servant of Right thinking (132.3). The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* concurs:

The path of Devotion is conducive to the attainment of Liberation in the case of a person who by a lucky chance has come to cherish a devout faith in my stories (and in the efficacy of my name) etc. and who is neither disgusted with nor deeply attached to the performance of (prescribed religious) acts. (Tagare 1978, 2036)

Bahinā Bai fit this definition well, being filled with faith in her Lord, and someone who wasn't deeply attached to the performance of prescribed religious acts, like those in which women were not allowed to participate.

Bahinā Bai defined *bhakti* in the following manner: “He who is ever singing the praises of God and repeating His names and attributes, is the one whom I would describe as a man of *bhakti*” (154.1). But just singing praises and repeating names have no meaning unless the soul of the person and the understanding of the mind are behind it.

He whose trust is firm in the teachings of the saints, his *bhakti*, forsooth, will have a new form. He who lets his heart listen to their instruction, will indeed arrive at final peace. The teachings of the saints are on the authority of the scriptures . . . Says Bahinī, “He whose longing is for the feet of the saints is to be recognized as on the *bhakti* path.” (153.1-4)

One needs to have trust or faith in the teachings of the saints. Trust is a stronger word than faith, for faith has been described in Hindu thought as a “finger pointing the way,” which implies one doesn’t know the way, or perhaps one does not even know what one is finally seeking for. Trust is an understanding that what one understands is indeed correct. The “teachings of the saints” refers to the *sadguru*, whose teachings by Bahinā Bai’s definition have the authority of scriptures. She continued:

Where the heart’s trust is, there bhakti is found. Where there is bhakti, there is knowledge; and by that knowledge the heart has peace, for you naturally acquire the power of contemplation when the heart humbles itself in the presence of the divine names.  
(396.1.2)

Bahinā Bai ended her discussion on *bhakti* saying that through its knowledge, *viveka*, through its renunciation of material things, *vairāgya*, through one’s *sadguru*, teacher of Truth, one achieves purity of heart (157.1)

Then Bahinā Bai addressed women. As Bahinā Bai’s major concern was how she as a woman could actualize her spiritual leanings, and as she struggled with this her whole life, one would expect her to develop some strong means of achieving this and impart it. Unfortunately she didn’t. This thought by Bahinā Bai on the duties of a wife is quoted at length:

Listen, my dear ones, to the law regarding the duties of a wife.  
Blessed is the home-keeper of noble deeds! By merely listening to this, one’s soul will gain the final release.

Without a husband one does not keep God in mind.

Blessed is she who knows herself as a dutiful wife. She carries along at the same time her household duties, and her religious duties. Such a one bears the heavens in her hands, she who understanding that duties performed are Brahma[n], and that Brahma[n] is the performer of duties. And she whose mind

constantly contemplates God; she is recognized in the three worlds as the dutiful wife.

She who holds no anger or hatred in her heart, she who has no pride of learning, she who does not associate herself with evil, she, who obedient to law, puts aside all sensual appetites, and in whom is not seen the selfish spirit, she who is ready to serve saints and *sādhus*, and fulfils her husband's commands, she indeed is a blessed dutiful wife.

She who keeps the peace, who is forgiving and kindly, and compassionate towards all creatures, keeping in mind her husband's character, she to whom her husband's words are like nectar, blessed is her birth, blessed her mother and father!

Says Bahinī "Such a one has gained victory over this worldly life and made a place for herself in heaven." (467.1-11)

These are all adages that Bahinā Bai had learned to hold as important in her own life as a Brahmin woman, as a Hindu woman. Bahinā Bai was married because young girls were told that they would marry and who they would marry and they were not given any choice in the matter. The lone woman was a woman subject to temptation, both as temptee and tempter. She was assumed to have feelings from material world, assumed to lust for that which she was missing. She was not assumed to desire the metaphysical world.

The dutiful wife was always Bahinā's goal, but she was constantly frustrated by her husband's accusations of her. Bahinā Bai had learned to control her emotions, her anger and hate. Yet in her autobiography, written late in her life, she still related in detail the actions of her abusive husband. Bahinā Bai tried so hard all her life to keep the peace in order to achieve the reward she promises, but,



for her, it was, at best, a compromise between societal standards and her personal spirituality.

### *Self*

Bahinā Bai was very aware that her body was female. Of the six female Hindu saints studied in this dissertation, Bahinā Bai discourses most thoroughly on Sāmkhyan philosophical principles regarding the body.

The negativity of a female body was taught by Bahinā Bai as a function of *karma*: “In this family I received my body through birth in order that I might live the life of a woman” (55.2). From what we have seen from what Bahinā Bai has said about ethical behavior, we know that she felt that the female body was a negative rebirth, one that led to negative emotions, but Bahinā Bai felt that it was necessary for her to live through it, in order to better understand the lessons that *karma* could teach the seeker.

“My body is responsible for my joys and woes. It is necessary that I suffer them. But if this suffering means the putting far away of sin, I count it as a welcome good” (71.1-2). As Bahinā Bai lived in her body in this existence it was the cause of her joys and woes, which were not a part of her soul, *ātman*.

Bahinā Bai recommended standing separate from one’s body to view what is happening to the body and how it is responding: “Identify your body with the universe, but stand aloof from it as Witnesser. Become yourself the All, and yet be apart from the all” (182.1). As the witnesser one becomes God and looks at the

world through God's eyes. The Witnesser for Bahinā Bai was the true seat of the Self.

Within her community Bahinā Bai saw people doing *yoga*, which has been shown to utilize the body as one's tool with which to reach enlightenment. By understanding the use of the *āsanas*, and by using *prāṇāyāmas* to work with the internal channels of energy called *nāḍīs*, and through meditation to still the mind, *manas*, and the ego, *ahamkāra*, one can work towards enlightenment in a physical manner. But Bahinā Bai did not see people gaining that enlightenment goal they were after, mainly she thought because they weren't focused on the goal itself, but more focused on the steps with which to attain it. Her critical view of yogis is shown in this verse:

Because of you, Oh heart, many forms of yoga practices have been adopted. Mines-of-austerities [yogis] make use of these means, but, Oh heart, you are not controlled. What else can I say?

Some by closing the apertures of the body send the vital airs [*prāna* and *apana*] up through the orifice in the crown of the head.

Some unclothed, with bare heads, or with matted hair, and in rags wander about as mutes. Some have themselves buried in the earth alive. Others wander in the forests without food.

<sup>83</sup>Says Bahinī “On account of you, Oh Mana, men with various practices wander about in their indifference to worldly things.” (144.1-6)

“*Mana*” means “mind” in Marathi, from the Sanskrit word, *manas*. On account of people attempting to train their minds away from the accouterments of life, people attempt yogic practices. Now Bahinā Bai had wanted to be an ascetic herself, so she saw these practices as positive, but only if one had the proper heart.

Without understanding based in the heart, the practices in themselves do not lead one to enlightenment.

Bahinā Bai's knowledge of Sāmkhyān philosophical categories was great. The *Sāmkhyakārikā* lists the five sense capacities, *buddhindriya*, (hearing, touching, seeing, tasting, and smelling) and the five action capacities, *karmindriyas* (speaking, grasping, walking, excreting, and procreating) (*Sāmkhyakārikā*.3 in Larson and Bhattacharya 1987: 152). Bahinā Bai says in her indifference to things of this world she has controlled the *indriyas* (103.1), and that, in subduing them, she has obtained right-thinking, *viveka*, which has led to her understanding of oneness with her *ātman* (131.1). Bahinā Bai's understanding of the ten *indriyas* is that they are not to be minded, they should all be given to Hari's feet (134.1), after which one will achieve right-thinking (135.3).

Bahinā Bai writes about her understanding of the Sāmkhyān view of the body, which sees it as made up of five elements from each of which are made five derivatives or extensions:

Earth, water, light, air, and ether are the natural elements in this universe. By taking portions of each He made substances with them of special names, in order to save men in this earthly life, for their good.

Bones, flesh, skin, veins and hair are the special quintuple from the element earth. Saliva, urine, perspiration, semen and blood are the quintuple He composed from the element water.

Hunger, thirst, sleep, laziness and sexual intercourse are the distinguishing characteristics of the quintuple borrowed from the element light.

Moving, turning, contracting, stopping and extending are, be it noted, from the element air.

Anger, hatred, fear, shame and temptation are without doubt qualities inherent in these quintuples. Thus the

characteristics of the quintuples, making twenty-five in all. (198.1-8)

Bahinā Bai was also familiar with the Sāmkhyān view of the three *guṇas*, *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, as being the qualities of the five elements that pervade the Universe. These ideas are named in the *Bhāgavata*

*Purāṇa*:

For what is called the body is created out of the (three) *guṇas* of (the *Māyā* of) Lord Purusottama and the *samsāra* (the cycle of birth and deaths) is the consequence of the false identification of the Soul with the body. It is only through the real knowledge of the (distinctness between the body and the) *Ātmān* that this misapprehension of *samsāra* is removed. (Tagare 1978, 1959)

Clarity, light, and goodness are part of the *sattva guṇa*. Bahinā Bai taught: “The pure *guṇa* of Goodness will drive away the three *ahamkārs* [*buddhi*, *chit* and *mana*]” (131.5). The *ahamkāras* (Sanskrit) include our knowledge, our consciousness and our mind, which has been mentioned previously. Bahinā Bai recommended, “In order to bring you, Oh *Mana*, under control there is but one essential condition, and that is that many good deeds must be contained in the bundle of deeds one carries” (145.1).

*The Bhāgavata Purāṇa* develops further:

The mind of a person who is disgusted with the world (due to pondering over the evolution and involution given in the Sāmkhyā philosophy) and becomes renunciated and contemplates repeatedly the teaching of his preceptor, becomes free from all evil thoughts (such as identification of the body with the Self). (Tagare 1978, 2039)

The materiality of the phenomenal world, the five elements, the three *guṇas*, and the *indriyas* are not to be confused with the soul, according to Bahinā Bai. The soul, *ātman*, that which is a part of Brahman, is separate from all of that.

Bahinā Bai uses a beautiful analogy of the sun on the water to explain it, “The sun in the heavens is reflected in the water; does that mean that the sun has sunk into the depths of the water? So the Ātman is untouched by the body, although essentially one with the senses” (Abbott, 1929, 210.1).

According to Sāmkhyā philosophy, the soul is surrounded by five sheaths, three classes of afflictions, and human passions, which accounts for one’s inability to perceive the soul and to work with it. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* gives a similar message:

The master of the body—the *jīva* enjoyed the objects of senses by means of sense-organs illuminated (by the knowledge or activated) by the Inner Controller. He misapprehends this created body as himself and gets attached to it. (This is due to *Māyā*.) (Tagare 1978, 1904)

The sheaths, the affliction, and the passions are not a part of one’s soul but are apart of one’s body which exists in *māyā*. Sentient beings are born again and again, and Bahinā Bai again described thirteen of her past lives in her autobiography (90-98). One’s *karma* (the good deeds Bahinā Bai mentioned earlier) from previous lives causes one’s rebirth time after time.

Bahinā Bai wrote that she was not afraid of death, however, using another beautiful analogy to help her listener welcome the inevitable, she wrote: “But the wise man is not afraid of death. He is not afraid of death. It is like the bubble on the ocean. It disappears by the very force of the wind that brings it (to the shore)” (240.1). Poof.

### *View of Phenomenal World and Metaphysical World*

Bahinā Bai's views are a combination of Vedānta, which was a part of the Brahmanical tradition and Vaiṣṇavite views of the next life in the Vaikuṅṭha heaven. She understood the universe to be the creation of Brahman, of which *ātman* is the same, so Bahinā Bai was *advaitic*. Her philosophy was Vedāntic, in fact, she mentioned Vedānta at different points in her discourse, but she didn't hold with Rāmānuja's *viśiṣṭhādvaita*, or qualified non-dualism.

Place and material objects were the province of *māyā*, illusion. *Māyā*'s reality is destroyed by knowledge, *viveka*. Says Bahinī: "When thus viewed through Right-thinking one sees unity of *māyā* in Brahma[n]" (164.6). The gods as perceived by humans are also part of *māyā*, according to Bahinā Bai: "Now a *sadguru* through the certainties of right-thinking, clears away all confusing doubts. Brahmadeva, Vishnu and Shiva are the three gunas of *māyā*" (162.5, 6). Though other philosophers consider *māyā* to be illusion and thus unreal, Bahinā Bai saw it as real. "If one says the *Māyā* is unreal, [one is in error, because] everything that is seen is directly due to *Māyā*" (165.1).

In her understanding the passage of time, time is unreal, however, as evidenced by granting discipleship on Tukārām by Vandeo, who had died three hundred years previously. Bahinā Bai taught about time in the following manner:

Oh heart, it is you who are responsible for actions in a former birth, and for those in this birth because of which I have to experience joy and sorrow. Eternity, Time, Hours, Minutes and Seconds, all these have you as their cause. Where there is no Eternity, there is no Time. You, Oh heart, are the cause of these unreal appearances. (141.1-2)

To Bahinā Bai Brahman is not even bound to the time-related characteristic of the eternal, because Brahman is beyond time, and further beyond space.

Māyā burdens the soul. The only method of eliminating this burden is knowledge. “When the jīva realizes the transitory nature and futility of the three forms of Māyā, he desists to work for trivial pleasures and becomes serene” (Tagare 1978, 1903). From the past, in the misty field of *māyā*, some people have knowledge of their previous births. Bahinā Bai described thirteen of her past lives herself. According to the *Yogasūtra*, this is a *siddhi*, or special power, that one shouldn’t go searching for, and that one shouldn’t spend one’s time reminiscing about. Bahinā Bai’s descriptions were didactic, to teach others about the value of that knowledge, not idle boasts of past activities. Bahinā Bai herself remarked, “My body has shared all the fortunes that deeds in previous births have made necessary. My soul has passed through all these stages conscious of my true self” (102.3).

Bahinā Bai’s awareness of *karma* and its importance to the rebirthing process is demonstrated by this verse:

He who in this bodily life performs his deeds with the wish to enjoy the fruit of those deeds, and who holds the delusion of duality, he, be it known, will possess this earthly life again. (201.1)

Negative actions leading to rebirth include pride, anger, desire for much sleep, wearing a garland of allurements-of-sensual-objects, sinfulness, and hard-heartedness.

In this view, the Universe is separate from God, who caused the Universe and who maintains the universe and who eventually will destroy the Universe. *Guṇas* are a part of *māyā*. “Of the *Guṇas* the *sattva guṇa* brings about the knowledge (of Brahma[n]) which enables the mind to become fixed in the form of the Ātmā (Brahma[n])” (173.1).

Some people are able to foresee the future, and Bahinā Bai gave knowledge to her son of her approaching death in verses 99-115. At death, one can eliminate the cycle of birth and rebirth by “reaching a positive state of existence of the individual soul in a supramundane realm” (Chari 1997, 144).

One can achieve liberation through understanding of these principles. According to Bahinā Bai “He whose soul is not pure within him, and who is ever engrossed in things of sense, he can never acquire true knowledge. And how can there be final deliverance [moksa] without that knowledge?” (137.1). One does that through *bhakti*. Bahinā Bai states: “Bhakti is the very highest means of salvation. Through it heaven [Vaikuṅṭha] is at once in one’s grasp” (152.1).

### *Theology*

The main deity Bahinā Bai was devoted to was Viṣṇu in his local incarnation as Vithobā. Above and beyond that henotheistic deity was the Vedāntic monistic conception of Brahman.



Bahinā Bai's theology embraced both the phenomenal realm and the metaphysical realm. Though worshipping at the Vithobā Temple, reflecting an incarnation of Viṣṇu, Bahinā Bai declared that Brahma, Viṣṇu, and Śiva were manifestations of *māyā*.

Bahinā Bai loved the tales of Kṛṣṇa and put them into her poems but with a more metaphysical slant the words suggest. "From Knowledge as Nanda (father of Kṛṣṇa) and Intellect as Yashoda (mother of Kṛṣṇa) at Gokul, there was one born into the community of the cowherds" (209.1).

For Bahinā Bai the male/female dichotomy in procreation and birth was used to set up a knowledge/intellect dichotomy as a teaching tool for her listeners. One cannot have knowledge without an intellect within which to hold it, nor can one have an intellect without *some* knowledge. Both are necessary to sentient beings. She used the analogy of Viṣṇu's reincarnations to teach about the Compassion in the universe. "If you will think deeply, you will see that God undergoes life in the womb for his bhaktas" (401.1).

Most of all Bahinā Bai spoke about Brahman and from an *advaitic* perspective. She said, "Through Right-thinking I will give attention to the Vedānta philosophy. I will acquire the non-dualistic experience of oneness with Brahma[n]" (133.1). Another verse of Bahinā Bai states, "Brahma is non-dual. This is on the authority of the Vedas" (164.1). In her work, Bahinā Bai named Brahman as pure intelligence. She also used the thought of Brahman as a method of getting through life. Bahinā Bai imagined her husband as Brāhman and imagined her managerial duties within the household as Brāhman.

Despite her *bhakti* training, Bahinā Bai was promoting a very philosophical form of Hinduism, based on the Vedas and commentated on by Śankara's Vedāntic philosophy. Ever the conservative, Bahinā Bai demonstrated her respect for Vedic philosophy and her respect for Hindu social conventions. "He who violates the prescribed rules, who does not respect the Vedas" (202.1). She fosters both social conventional systems of behavior and their source in the old Vedas.

Bahinā Bai taught that one learns about God, in its many forms through *bhakti*: "He whose nature glows with love unbroken, will sing aloud God's names ever and ever. That alone can be truly called *bhakti*; this the wise understand by experience" (393.1). This is more autonomous. She promotes the values she herself has set up and that work in her life: respect for social conventions and their ancient roots, but the responsibility to work within these restrictions for a viable personal spiritual field for one's own life.

### Conclusion

Bahinā Bai is a devotee of Viṣṇu, within the tradition of *bhakti* saints in Maharastra, and a teacher of Vedic thought and Vedāntic philosophy. She is the first of the women saints we have considered to write her own autobiography. I see her significance, beyond these, in her role as an exemplary Brahmin wife.

Without a doubt Bahinā Bai appears as the most conservative of the women studied in this paper. Āntāl too was conservative, did not want to rebel in her actions, wanted to conform to Vaisnavism as she saw it in her time with the

one exception of marrying Visnu. Almost one thousand years after Āntāl, Bahinā Bai drew her community together with her return to religious values. Islamic rule had prevailed for several hundred years in north India, and people were converting to Islam for better trade connections, better social standing, and out of personal desire, so Hinduism was on the downswing, not on the upswing as during Āntāl's time.

Were those who remained Hindus during this era then more conservative people, which was reflected in Bahinā Bai's philosophy? Or did the catastrophic events of her lifetime cause her, and cause those who followed her, to remain more conservative, and safe within the old values? In my reading of her life, I find her the most difficult of the women studied to understand. I don't see the aura of hope that was present in the other women even under their worst circumstances. But is it I who am the rebel and thus call her life difficult? Or had cultural mores changed to the extent that Bahinā Bai felt she couldn't wander about freely, and that she had to remain married, through the infusion of Islamic values, and the introduction of European ones? Or did she prefer being the wife of a Brahmin to being an ascetic?

I feel that her position as wife was the platform she chose from which to launch her teachings. She adhered ethically, and in regards to her self, and in regards to her understanding of metaphysical reality, to the older Vedic standards which prescribed that a woman was to be a wife. She taught from the Sāmkhyan philosophical tradition her understanding of the body and from Vedāntic tradition her understanding of the phenomenal and metaphysical worlds. I believe she felt

that her entrance to those philosophical traditions was because she was a wife, especially a Brahmin wife. She used the role of wife to her own advantage, though I think she would never admit that herself. Within a patriarchal tradition a woman who considers herself successful, usually does not consider herself a rebel, but a catalyst, who pulls from the traditions around her the materials she needs to actualize her life.

## CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION

In summation, first, I will compile the findings from my study of each of the six individual Hindu women saints. They split theologically quite definitively between, on the one hand, the dualists, Kāraikkāl Ammayār, Āntāl, and Mirabai, and, on the other hand, the nondualists, Akka Mahādevī, Lalla Ded, and Bahinā Bai. Philosophically I see the two most important contributions of these women saints to the Hindu traditions rest in their inclusion of the body in their view of the self and in their views on how to live. Linguistically these six female Hindu saints develop the vernacular traditions in each linguistic area through their poetry and songs.

### How to Live

Western philosophy encompasses the topic “How to Live” within the field of ethics. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the great ethicist, in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, argued for an ethical system based, in the first place, on his assertion that nothing was good within the human person without qualification but a good will (Paton 1959, 61). Intelligence, sensations, wealth, or reasoning can all be used negatively as well as positively. One needs to act from duty Kant said, which is the necessity to act out of accordance with a law (65, 68); and the law that one should act from is to act in such a manner than one’s actions could become a universal law (Paton 1959, 70).

Some feminist philosophers in the twentieth century and the present day have felt that male generated laws, like the categorical imperative of Kant,

claimed a universality for humans which did not fit well with women's experience and ways of making moral choices. Following the work of Carol Gilligan (1936-), *In a Different Voice* (1982), feminist moral theorists developed a woman inspired set of ethics called "Care Ethics." Annette Baier (1929-), a proponent of care ethics, defines "care" as "a felt concern for the good of others and for community with them" (Baier 1994, 19). She argues against Kant, David Hume (1711-1776), and John Rawls (1921-) saying that traditional liberal morality developed through these great Western philosophers has had a dubious track record; it doesn't address social inequalities; it exaggerates the amount of choice an individual has in decision-making; and it is rational, not addressing emotional virtues (Baier 1994, 29-31).

Hindu ethics can be studied from the ethics taught by Kṛṣṇa on the Kurukṣetra battlefield in the great war climaxing the *Mahābhārata* epic. The *Bhagavad Gītā*, which elucidates Kṛṣṇa's teaching, begins, like Kant, with an ethics based on a sense of duty, to act according to one's *dharma*, in this case, *kṣatriya*, or warrior, duty to go to battle. "Further, having regard for thine own duty, thou shouldst not falter, there exists no greater good for a Ksatriya than a battle enjoined by duty" (*Bhagavad Gītā* II.31 in Radhakrishnan 1948, 112). Kṛṣṇa went farther in his exposition on how to live, by discoursing on the value of right knowledge:

Knowledge as a sacrifice is greater than any material sacrifice, O scourge of the foe (Arjuna), for all works without any exception culminate in wisdom.

Learn that by humble reverence, by inquiry and by service. The men of wisdom who have seen the truth will instruct them in knowledge. (*Bhagavad Gītā* IV: 33, 34 in Radhakrishnan 1993, 169)

But by far, the greatest teaching of Kṛṣṇa to Hindus was devotion to him as a duty as well.

The great-souled, O Pārtha (Arjuna), who abide in the divine nature knowing (me as) the imperishable source of all beings, worship Me with an undistracted mind.

Always glorifying Me, strenuous and steadfast in vows, bowing down to Me with devotion, they worship Me, ever disciplined. (*Bhagavad Gītā* IX: 13, 14 in Radhakrishnan 1993, 244-245)

Religious wisdom and devotion to the Lord is not considered a part of Western ethics, but, as Kṛṣṇa developed his idea of devotion in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, it became an important teaching for the Hindu way of life. It was included in their religious philosophy. Kṛṣṇa did not develop *how* to worship Him as Lord, though he did prescribe that worship as necessary to a great soul. Kāraikkāl Ammayār, Āntāl, and Mirabai all drew upon the concept of duty from the *Bhagavad Gītā* and they dutifully developed the methods they used for the external rites of devotion to their Lord.

Kāraikkāl Ammayār, Āntāl, and Mirabai all mention first the external characteristics of the Lord, the many iconographic details that represent His ideals and attributes. This enumeration of characteristics was a teaching method by Kāraikkāl Ammayār, Āntāl, and Mirabai in the same manner that sculptural representations on the walls of a temple are a teaching method to aid in the remembrance and retention of their Lord's characteristics. This aural representation, as well as visual representation, allows for different learning styles

for the listener and the viewer of the divine attributes portrayed through sculpture and singing.

Next, these philosophical women emphasized the importance of closeness to the deity, in particular being at the feet of the deity. Kāraikkāl Ammayār spent several of her songs relating the pleasure of sitting at the feet of Śiva as he danced the dance of life in the cremation grounds. Āntāl and Mirabai illustrated how to worship Kṛṣṇa in very different manners. Āntāl in the fourteen chapters of her *Nācciyār Tirumoli* set up fourteen different rituals her listeners can emulate themselves in their worship of Kṛṣṇa. To Āntāl, Kṛṣṇa was not the transcendent magnificent incomprehensible Lord of Light that the *Bhagavad Gītā* represents in the following verse: “If the light of a thousand suns were to blaze forth all at once in the sky, that might resemble the splendour of that exalted Being” (*Bhagavad Gītā* XI: 12 in Radhakrishnan 1993, 273). He was much more immanent in her representations of him, not awe-inspiring, but a friend to her listeners and one who exhibited the qualities of a king. She brought him down to real life, real activities in the lives of her listeners from building sandcastles to wedding ceremonies. In her eyes, Kṛṣṇa was teasing and playful. She emphasizes the importance of worship she emphasizes in keeping Kṛṣṇa close to one’s individual self.

Mirabai, influenced by previous male *bhakti* poets, like the twelfth century Jayadeva who wrote the *Gītā Govinda, Song of the Cowherd*, wrote for people who do not feel the immanence of Lord Kṛṣṇa but his transcendence. The mood is one of separation from one’s Lord and the necessity of drawing closer to him. In



the verses Subramanian translated, Mirabai emphasized the view of Kṛṣṇa as represented in the *Gīta Govinda*, with herself as the longing Rādhā desolate without her lover. As the *Gīta Govinda* continues eventually Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa will be united, and, as is painted in the *rāgamāla* tradition (see Dehejia 1990a, 113, for an example), the trees will bloom, the birds will sing gloriously, even the fish in the river will joyously enter into the ecstasy of union with the Lord. This union is Mirabai's goal.

For Akka Mahādevī, Lalla Ded, and Bahinā Bai, their religious devotions included more focus on ethics, in the sense of living relationships in conjunction with other human beings, classically developed within standard philosophical treatises. However, none of them set up universal laws of behavior, like Kant. Their teachings would be closer to some essential ideas in care ethics, an awareness of the subjectivity of ethics and a concern for emotion as well as rationality. Akka Mahādevī was the most concerned with social justice, an ethic that is important to feminists today. She and other Vīraśaivas actively promoted better social understanding of women and regarding the caste system. Lalla Ded taught others to use one's inner sense in establishing right and wrong, and she felt it was important to do good for others. Bahinā Bai, however, set down a list of patriarchal rules for women to follow, of subservience to their husbands, in order for them to improve their *karma*.

Akka Mahādevī, and Lalla Ded talked against the Vedas as authority and promoted using one's own autonomy as the criteria for decisions on the religious

quest. Lalla Ded and Bahinā Bai both spoke of the importance of a guru to one's religious quest.

### The Self

Miranda Shaw states that “Western concepts of selfhood allow a process of objectivitions or commodification that turns the ‘self’ into a ‘thing,’ ‘object,’ or ‘commodity’ that can be ‘used’ by another person as a means to an end” (Shaw 1994, 10). On the other hand, Shaw explains that Tantric Buddhism professes “embodiment” which is “a multilayered mind-body continuum of corporeality, affectivity, cognitivity and spirituality whose layers are subtly interwoven and mutually interactive” (11).

From the material studied in this dissertation, I will state that a similar claim for this embodiment can be made within Hinduism. Buddhism bases its claim on the five *skandhas* (body, sensation, perception, consciousness, and will), and Hinduism based it on Sāṅkhyan enumerations considering the body. From these Sāṅkhyan enumerations are developed the understanding of the *nāḍīs* in *kuṇḍalinā* yoga, and the practices to develop the body as a tool for spiritual development.

And so, I include in my discussion of self for each of the women saints, a discussion of their understanding of the role of the body in her religious practice and beliefs. These six Hindu women saints varied widely in how they perceived their bodies; however, they understood their bodies as a necessary means to be utilized to fulfill their spiritual goals. My discussion of the body does not pertain

to physical female functions, but to the use of the body for spiritual purposes. Kāraikkāl Ammayār changed her body from her original beautiful essence into the hideous form of a demonic spirit to prevent herself from falling prey, because of that beauty to the male eye. Just as in a present-day anorexic who changes her body to unhealthy thinness, the male gaze caused Kāraikkāl Ammayār to feel so negative about her physical attributes that she changed her appearance to a grotesque caricature of a woman. She even went so far as to enjoy singing while Śiva danced at the cremation field, a place where one is made aware of the impermanence of the body and the ghostly paleness of death the body emotes, when it is a rotting corpse. To her the body is impermanent, always changing, as situations in life change. She did not think society valued the women's bodies or that society valued women and so she focused on the body's impermanence in her life story and in the poems she composed.

On the other hand, Āntāl enjoyed her body, decorating it with the garland that was supposed to be used for Viṣṇu each day. When her stepfather, Viṣṇucitta, took her to be married in a bridal party, she must have been bedecked with henna, kohl, painting, jewelry, and a wedding sari as all brides are elaborately decorated. She saw both her own body and that of Viṣṇu as beautiful, and she used her body to attract him to her as bride attracts the bridegroom.

Akka Mahādevī saw her body as her own and didn't allow anyone else's gaze to stop her from doing as she pleased, including walking around naked. Her body was her vehicle for the development of her spirituality. She spoke in several verses about the importance of body, mind, and breath, and used *kundalinī*

exercises as a part of her practice. She didn't distinguish between male and female, masculine and feminine, because, to her, those were categories established by humans and they limited what each person could accomplish. The most important use to her, of her neither-masculine-nor- feminine body, was as a means to reach enlightenment.

Lalla Ded spoke the most about yogic practices utilizing the body as the most important tool in spiritual development. Her philosophy began with the basic elements of the material world and the parts and functions of the body laid out by Sāmkhya, then she turned to Kashmir Śaivism to teach her followers about the importance of *prāṇa*, and *kuṇḍalinī* as the major forces in preparing for meditation upon the supreme consciousness. She considered the mind and heart especially significant parts of the body, again for their functionality in the enlightenment process more than for their own sake.

Mirabai said that her body was nothing to her as her focus was on Kṛṣṇa. Bahinā Bai saw her body the result of her *karma*, and as a result of it being feminine, she condemned it along with everything that “feminine” meant to her. She railed against femininity as defined by her understanding of the Vedas.

We see then that for these six Hindu female saints the body was a major part of their teachings, whether positively or negatively. This can be seen as a strong contrast to many male saints who are not as consciously aware of their bodies and who do not include it as a major topic in their teachings. Because of these women's awareness that the surrounding community always has the

women's body in a collective vision, the body is used as a metaphor in their teachings.

### Views of the Phenomenal World and Metaphysical World

These six Hindu female saints agree on basic Hindu tenets concerning the phenomenal and metaphysical realms. They agree that we live in an illusory world, *māyā*, and that another world which is more real exists, where the deity lives, or which is a part of the deity. They agree that we come through many births, and that enlightenment is the ultimate goal. What they disagreed on is their emphasis.

Kāraikkāl Ammayār taught that there were two separate worlds, one in which she existed and the other which Śiva inhabits. Āntāl and Mirabai felt the world was illusion and their major concern was returning to Viṣṇu who inhabits the Vikunṭha heaven

Akka Mahādevī, Lalla Ded and Bahinā Bai knew some of their past lives and used that knowledge to aid in promoting their concerns about the baseness of this world so one needs to let go of it and work towards understanding of the underlying metaphysical principles of creation

### Theology

Again, the six Hindu women saints are split into two groups: *dvaitists*—Kāraikkāl Ammayār, Āntāl, and Mirabai; and *advaitists*: Akka Mahādevī, Lalla Ded, and Bahinā Bai. The later mystical bent of the women saints appears to

follow the spread of Vedāntic ideas throughout Hindu philosophy after Sankara in the eighth century. Bahinā Bai in particular speaks of the value of Vedānta to her teaching.

That Mirabai remained *dvaitist* is derived from a separate tradition crossing India from Bengal, from a mindset in the twelfth century that created Jayadeva's *Gītā Govinda* which would culminate with Chaitanya's songs in the sixteenth.

The two early Tamil saints, Kāraikkāl Ammayār and Āntāl, both referred to their respective Lords in the sense of glorified kingship, a person who stood outside the phenomenal world and ruled both the metaphysical and phenomenal worlds. However, as time flowed past, to the later female Hindu saints, the deity became increasingly less anthropomorphized and increasingly powerfully magnificent in a *nirguṇa* sense. Again the lone dissenter to this trend was Mirabai who emphasized the compassion of Kṛṣṇa. Lalla Ded brought forth the Śiva/Śakti complements most thoroughly in her poems. The monistic female presented in Lalla Ded and the Kashmir Śaivites is a subject that deserves much further study and analysis.

The conclusion I have come to from this study is that these six Hindu women saints make their greatest contributions in their discussions from the "How To Live" category and in their discussion of the body as a religious tool.

These two categories were of most importance to these six Hindu women saints as teachers.

How to live one's religion is a topic for the preacher who works with individuals to interpret accepted philosophical principles and to establish ritual patterns that can be helpful to their listeners. It requires a thorough grasp of those philosophical principles the person wishes to promote. Then the person needs to grasp the needs of the listener; and finally, the preacher needs an autonomous creative ability to compose effective poems that have meaning for the listener and that inspire the listener to develop a most effective practice for her or himself.

The emphasis on the body as a tool for enlightenment appears to be the strongest development by these women. It speaks of an awareness of one's self as female, and, therefore, different from the Brahmanical norm. The teachings on the body as spiritual tool, however, generally reflect positively on the women's self image. I believe this is due to the "multilayered mind-body continuum of corporeality, affectivity, cognitivity, and spirituality" of which Shaw spoke. Bahinā Bai lost that attachment to spirituality, and, as the most recent of the six female Hindu saints studied, the next question is why she lost that. Did other developments in Hinduism lead to her change or was it a personal change created out of her reaction to her environment, or something else? This is another topic for further research.

However, some further summary generalization about these six female Hindu saints can be crystallized from this study.

## Bhakti

*Bhakti* is the term used in Hinduism for the devotional path of its traditions. Two kinds of *bhakti* have been distinguished by Molly Daniels-Ramanujan: *nirguṇa bhakti* and *sagūṇa bhakti*. *Nirguṇa bhakti* is personal devotion to an impersonal attributeless godhead, which includes the Lalla Ded and the Kashmir Śaivites, and Akka Mahādevī and the Vīrasaivas. *Sagūṇa bhakti* is devotion towards a personal god with attributes, like that of Āntāl, Karaikkāl Ammayār, and Mirabai (Daniels-Ramanujan 2004, 12). V. H. Date understands *sagūṇa bhakti* as personal devotion, where there is a direct, personal relationship between the devotee and the deity worshipped, including among their many practices, temple worship, worship of icons in the home or at pilgrimage sites, and the construction of mental images. *Nirguṇa bhakti* is more impersonal. It involves meditating on the name of the deity and having spontaneous visions of the deity (Date 1973, 31).

These definitions attempt to describe the wide expanse of activity *bhakti* encompasses. Both types of *bhakti* express images from the soul of real persons that are spoken of on an experiential level. Daniels-Ramanujan (2004) says, “In terms of deeply felt personal relations [they] describe a devotee’s state directly and god only by implication” (25). As such they give the experience of religion, rather than theory about religion. To return to the discussion of *bhakti* provided in the introduction to the dissertation, *bhakti* is an individual response and experience, not an institutional one, and, as such, allows the individual autonomy within the religion.



However, I would not say that Mahādevī Akka, Lalla Ded, or Bahinā Bai were primarily *bhaktas*. The poetry of Āntāl, Kāraikkāl Ammayā, and Mirabai is very devotional, and underlying that devotion one can pick out philosophical understandings, but Mahādevī Akka, Bahinā Bai, and Lalla Ded do not focus on devotion, they make philosophical knowledge the goal of their lives, which they transmit to their devotees. Yes, one must worship the deity but that is only part of it, the rest is what you do with your life and, in the case of Mahādevī Akka and Lalla Ded, the knowledge of their female spiritual body and the use of *kuṇḍalīnī* practices on their path. I think the definition of *bhakti* has been socially constructed to include all people who wrote religious poetry, and those who sing their songs in devotional manners.

Bhakti can however be much deeper than the writing of devotional poetry. The writer has a vision, rational or mystical, that the writer wants to pass on to her or his listeners. That vision can be philosophical and, if we explore it from this angle, it can lend the Western reader a vision from a different slant as to what Hindu philosophy encompasses. As Robert Solomon said, it is necessary to “accept metaphor, mythologizing, conscientious ambiguity, and ‘analogical thinking’ as legitimate modes of philosophizing” (Solomon 2001, 103). Because of the variance in time and place of these six female Hindu saints, a wide variance in their work is found as well, but from all of them, their philosophical principles can be teased out. Studies of more *bhakti* saints, both male and female, are needed in order to formulate the pattern of their philosophical thinking to ascertain its similarities and differences from the philosophical texts by male philosophers that

have been written down and studied by countless diligent students throughout time.

### Marriage

Katharine K. Young in her book about saints in religions around the world (2000) establishes a typology of four types of saints. The first are those who attempt to rescue people from the chaos of life. The second embodies virtues the religion wishes to hold fast to. The third belong to monastic orders. And the fourth shatter order to turn normative behavior upside-down (Young 2000: 28-29). She feels that female saints have more concern with marriage than male saints, both the ability and need to sustain it and how to avoid it.

With the exception of Bahinā Bai, all of these six female Hindu saints chose not to stay in marriages. In spite of what is usually considered a lack (being unmarried) they all achieved reverence from both people of their own tradition and throughout Hinduism. David Kinsley, who has written extensively on *bhakti*, addresses this issue in an essay “Devotion as an Alternative to Marriage in the Lives of Some Hindu Women Devotees.” He says that a tension exists between *bhakti* and *dharma*, with *bhakti* representing one’s “inherent duty” and *dharma* representing “inherited duty.” He says in a devotee’s inability to serve two masters, devotion to the divine is an alternative to marriage (Kinsley, 1980, 83).

I find the interpretations of Kinsley problematic for several reasons. First, he assumes that under *dharma*, one is not allowed to have individual spiritual experiences. He says it is “ultimately impossible to reconcile their traditional

marriages with their inherent urge to love the Lord” (Kinsley 1980, 83). As mentioned in the Introduction, the *Laws of Manu* proscribe men leaving the household to live in an ashram until the person sees one’s first grandchild, but historically, as evidenced in the *Mahābhārata*, many of the female protagonists of householder age live portions of their lives as ascetics. The continuation of the ascetic system, for instance, in Śankara’s ashrams, using Śankara himself as a model, throughout the whole of Indian history, demonstrates that people ignored *Manu* and went to the ashram out of a personal decision. That women did this as well as men is evident in the literature and painting of the middle ages.

Kinsley says that devotion to a deity made it impossible for a woman to “serve two masters, to be a faithful lover to two husbands” (Kinsley 1980, 83). His assumption that her devotion developed after her marriage, and as a result of her marriage, does not hold true to the results of this dissertation.

He first looks at Mahādevī Akka, writing that “Śiva has provided her with an alternative to a difficult marriage” (Kinsley, 1980, 85). In the hagiography used for this paper, Mahādevī Akka was a sincere devotee of Śiva long before her marriage, and she only married because her family was threatened by her royal husband-to-be. This is a very different situation than that which Kinsley has constructed.

Kinsley looks next at Lalla Ded and claims that she “contrasts the ideals of her spiritual life with those of life in the world. Ultimately service to her husband and in-laws is incompatible with her quest for union with Siva” (Kinsley 1980, 87). That is true, but Lalla Ded’s spiritual quest began long before her marriage.

Lalla Ded's hagiography states that she followed the guru Siddha Srikanta and that she was educated as a younger woman, so she demonstrates her spiritual pathway long before her marriage. Within her marriage, it wasn't her religious views which took her from the marriage; it was the abuse she suffered under her husband and mother-in-law.

Kinsley says Mirabai's "inability to reconcile her love for Krishna with love for her husband" was her major problem. However Mirabai's hagiography shows her devotion to Kṛṣṇa from the time she was a child, and the problem in her marriage was that she was a widow, a problematic status, especially for a childless woman, who is looked upon as a drain on the family resources.

Kinsley concludes that the tension between the world renouncer and the householder was facilitated for men by the *Laws of Manu* and by the establishment of the *ashrama* system within one's life. He continues that *bhakti* also provided a middle ground for women, by providing an alternative to marriage, by which he appears to mean that one can be a *bhakta* and not have to leave the family. This dissertation has constructed a very different narrative. Āntāl, a very strongly devoted girl throughout her brief life, refused to marry anyone but Viṣṇu. Her religious values made her choose autonomously to be married to Viṣṇu. Kāraikkāl Ammayār left her marriage in anger, when her husband deserted her. She had already been devoted to Śiva, and it was her religious superiority to that of her husband that caused problems. Akka Mahādevī, as just mentioned, didn't want to marry any more than Āntāl did; it was only through threats and blackmail that she married. Lalla Ded was abused by her in-

laws. Mirabai, as a widow, was also abused. The picture developing here is a different one where women are under extreme psychological tension within their abusive marriages, and abuse is the common factor among them. The abuse runs from threats to a girl's family if she wouldn't marry the man demanding her in marriage (Akka Mahādevī); abuse by the in-laws (Lalla Ded, Mirabai), abuse by the husband (Bahinā Bai), desertion (Kāraikkāl Ammayār), and abuse to the widow Mirabai, whose husband allegedly died in battle.

But, looking further at this evidence, Bahinā Bai was abused in her marriage too and she decided to stay. And many other Hindu women were in abusive situations in that patriarchal society, and they didn't leave their marriages and their homes. What is common to all these women was their sense of autonomy, which let them make a decision that was not only against their family standards, but also societal standards. These women seem to have been called to the religious life prior to marriage, which they continued to value within the marriage, with the exception of Kāraikkāl Ammayār who had a defining moment that turned her away from her marriage.

What gave these women this sense of autonomy? I am going to argue it was their religious beliefs and their calling to religion as a vocation. By religious vocation, I mean a way of life which is religiously numinous and extremely satisfying to the adherent. For all of them a moment(s) of choice occurred when they chose to go with their own inner being rather than with the organized religious standards for women set by society. For each of them, organized religion was helpful, as it included the wisdom of centuries of thinking, but each of them

chose to rely most strongly on their own intuitive feeling. It is that sacred will, *icchā*, that caused them to step aside from their worldly life as it was manifesting to them and turn to a spiritual path, setting an example for men and women after them.

Finally, we can conclude that these women were abused often because of their spiritual leanings. Kāraikkāl Ammayār was most obviously abused because her husband couldn't accept the male attention to her from Lord Śiva. That he was supported eventually in his decision to desert her illustrates that others considered him justified in his decision. When Śiva called Kāraikkāl Ammayār to him by giving her the mango, that numinous summons was not to be accepted by ordinary society. It is only through her literature that Kāraikkāl Ammayār received recognition from her family and neighbors.

One has to question whether the concern others have for these women's spiritual activities had to do with a perception of infidelity, the infidelity to their marriage and to their husbands. If so, it shows the narrowness of their husbands' and families' views about their lives. Indeed, women are the center of the household as they are the ones who prepare the daily food, who raise the children, and who keep the house comfortable for everyone. But many women feel a need for more than that in life, and that need is sanctioned by the Hindu religious compositions of these six Hindu saints.

The abuse that Kāraikkāl Ammayār, Mahādevī Akka, Lalla Ded, Mirabai, and Bahinā Bai suffered is a societal metaphor that warns women not to step beyond the bounds society has established for what was considered proper

spiritual behavior for a woman. However, their personal choices to move out of that constricting situation, illustrates that women could and did choose other paths in their lifetimes. These women represent the many women who experienced the ascetic path, just as Śankara and Ramānuja represent the men. None of them were supposed to tread down the ascetic path, according to *Manu*, yet all of them did. In the language of their legends one becomes aware of the tearing apart of their lives wrenched between their life that was prescribed by society in their marriages and their search for the means for the unleashing of their spiritual selves. By leaving their patriarchal marriage families, these women do not return to their natal families, but create for themselves an autonomous space where they are able to pursue their religious quest.

#### Women Saints as Philosophical Teachers

In the study of the environment surrounding these Hindu women saints in Chapter Two, worship of the sacred female brought forth in statues and temples to female deities like Parvatā and Durgā; in the development of images like the saptamatrikas, in the development of the divine female as monotheistic deity, and in Tantra. In comparing these female archetypes with those brought forth by these six Hindu female saints, with the exception of Lalla Ded, the women worshipped only male deities. There is not a mention of the Devā, Lakṣmī or Durgā, though it is evident from art historical evidence that these temples abounded during this millennium. Tantrism had developed which encouraged sexual spiritual

relationships between men and women, yet these six Hindu female saints write their poems of their singular, autonomous quest.

We must look at these six women Hindu saints as representing a further historical tradition, that has not been recognized previously—that of woman as philosopher. This tradition developed out of women writers of the Vedas and carried through the Upaniṣads with Gārgā and on through the epics. The textual evidence is not as readily available as the evidence for male philosophers, but it is there. Female philosophers, female goddesses, the representation of the female in *prakṛtī* are all a significant part of Hinduism.

This dissertation is a descriptive religious studies and women's studies essay in order to adjust Western scholarly learning to balance the experiences of the male with the female. It describes the experiences of six Hindu women saints and their philosophies, which had not been attempted previously. Much was learned by studying their philosophies, most importantly that these women were philosophers, not so much in the classic Western sense of a well laid out and integrated study of one philosophical system or issue, but according to Solomon's definition at the beginning of this dissertation, namely to accept metaphor, mythologizing, and analogical thinking as venues for philosophical thinking. One needs to realize that different cultures write their philosophy in varying manners, such as via proverbs and through poetry, which these women do. This study of their philosophy indicates the wide variety of thought amongst Hindus from this time period. Male philosophers have written profound tomes and texts which were commented on extensively, but female philosophers, these women in particular,



sang in concise short poems meant to be spoken before a group and commented on, I would imagine, much in the manner of a sermon today.

Secondly, this discourse has highlighted the experiential aspect of philosophy in all these women. They didn't write theories, they acted in a certain manner, became enlightened, and then came back to show both by their actions and their words the correctness of their understanding. Lalla Ded was especially good at doing this, in presenting the profound Kashmir Śaivite theories, which she had utilized in her practice, and making her listeners aware of the process of preparing the body for *kuṇḍalinī* exercises.

To go deeper, this work highlights the value of autonomy in religion in contrast to the value of textual religious traditions. Traditions are valuable in a certain sense, because they are the repository of centuries of religious thought, but when they hold a person back from their fulfillment, like the tradition of wives being religious, but not allowing women to choose religion as a vocation, then they may not be useful to that person, and the person must depend on one's own autonomy. Which, to return to religious studies, is perhaps the most important aspect to bring forward for more study, for women, the importance of their autonomous thoughts and practices.

From this study of six Hindu women saints of the seventh through the fourteenth centuries, the most striking supposition to be drawn is the evidence for a strong oral tradition within each of the linguistic areas of India. That strong oral tradition has been spoken about in regards to the promulgation of the Vedas, and here it is seen in regional languages as well. Each of the six Hindu women saints

has had verses attributed to her, saved, and sung by the people long before they were written down: Kāraikkāl Ammayār, three centuries; Āntāl, two centuries; Mahādevī Akka, eight centuries, Lalla Ded, seven centuries, and Mirabai, five centuries. Bahinā Bai's autobiography and verses were saved for three centuries through an vernacular oral tradition. Because their verses weren't written down and because these six female Hindu saints didn't form intentional or informal communities around them, how much of those verses are actually the work and inspiration of these women is not known. And what sort of corruption the verses underwent is also an unknown. Still they are accredited to these women for whom reverence remained strong for centuries. It is evident that regional languages as well as the Sanskrit language had significant oral traditions.

It is necessary to be aware that in the study of their hagiographies and alleged compositions, one is hearing dream stories, memories, or fantasies on the archetypal level that either appealed to the people of that community or were invented by those contemporaries and descendents of these six female Hindu saints. The importance of these teachings lay in their reflection on the values and preoccupations common to the public at large and in the widening circles of their influence that spread through society, which identifies a web of archetypal cultural manifestations.

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