

# Voyages of Body and Soul



Voyages of Body and Soul:  
Selected Female Icons of India and Beyond

Edited by

Ketu H. Katrak and Anita R. Ratnam

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Voyages of Body and Soul: Selected Female Icons of India and Beyond  
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## PREFACE

Our journey to this volume of essays and performance/choreographic notes has transpired over nearly three years, inspired by the Natya Darshan conferences and performances in December 2011 and 2012 (curated and convened by Anita R. Ratnam with Ketu H. Katrak as Academic Advisor) in Chennai, India under the auspices of Kartik Fine Arts, Arangham Trust, and the online dance portal [www.narthaki.com](http://www.narthaki.com). Our exploration of female icons of India and beyond brought together academics, artists, cultural commentators, historians, poets and writers, many of who are featured in this volume. In 2011, the theme of “Mad and Divine Women: Mystic Saint-poets of India and Beyond” took us into the minds and hearts of women such as Andaal, Akka Mahadevi, Janabai, Lalleswari and others who yearned for the divine via creative expression. In 2012, we delved into the theme of “Epic Women” from India and beyond. Participants, scholars and artists brought new illuminations to well-known figures such as Sita and Draupadi from India’s epics, others created performances on Greek female figures such as Penelope, and Eleni. We also included inspirational artistes like Frida Kahlo and contemporary women of epic courage living in our midst such as Ang San Suu Kyi (of Myanmar), as well as “dark” women with passions of epic proportions.

We developed the parameters of the notion of the “mad and divine” to imagine the lives and works of India’s unique female mystic saint-poets whose lives were dedicated to seeking the divine. Hence, they were ostracized from patriarchal society, even considered “mad.” We probed this unique kind of “madness” that passionately craves the divine. Is such “madness” necessary to reach the divine? Why is it that when men express such feelings that they are called “realized” and women are branded as “mad”? In a patriarchal society, are women quicker to endorse these archetypes? Are such phenomena still visible in our midst? Our feminist approach is attentive to historical and geographical realities that were the contexts for these women’s lives in male-dominated societies.

This volume of essays and choreographic notes on performances aims to humanize both the female mystic saint-poets misunderstood during their lifetimes, and women of Indian epics such as Sita and Draupadi whose common elevation to goddess status denies their many human dimensions. Our participants question the fixed, monolithic icons of ideal womanhood

that have problematically become part of India's collective unconscious. Hence, Sita as an ideal, self-sacrificing wife is upheld uncritically and used as a moral imperative to discipline young women even today. The contributors probe the troubling ways in which women, often to their own detriment, internalize patriarchal notions of manhood and womanhood. The layers of ideological constructions of gender are embedded in accretions of myth, history and legend, bringing together fact and fiction.

We recognize a curious reality, namely that mystic women poets yearned for male deities, perhaps subconsciously asserting a normative heterosexuality. One wonders why the most prominent of such figures do not desire female deities hence upholding a lesbian reality? Was such desire simply invisible? Would it indeed render these mystic saint poets, already marginalized in their patriarchal societies even further exiled from their human communities? A similar reality prevails with the women of the epics who are in visible heterosexual relationships such as Sita and Rama, or Draupadi with her five husbands. Again, in those patriarchal societies and even in contemporary times as we include women of epic courage, is the reality of same sex desire still invisible, or when visible, open to social discrimination, and even hostile legislation? The latter is evident in a recent, shocking ruling by India's Supreme Court recriminalizing homosexual relations by upholding the archaic Indian Penal Code 377. This ruling, ironically an 1860 relic of British colonialism, reasserted in December 2013 shocked and outraged Indians and indeed the world as a step backwards in a democratic society.

Female mystics from regions across the Indian sub-continent include figures such as Lalleshwari from Kashmir (in North India), and women saints from Maharashtra (in Western India), such as Janabai, some belonging to the lowest caste (*dalits*) who joined the sacred path to escape caste oppressions. Andaal, female mystic poet of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, from Tamil Nadu in Southern India, wrote poems where the body is central; she openly expressed erotic desire for Lord Vishnu. A different figure of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Meerabai, wrote ecstatic poems in adoration of Lord Krishna. Meera left a royal husband, and was judged insane, as she was totally immersed in thoughts of her beloved Lord Krishna. With her fierce faith, she drank the poison that her husband's family prepared and stayed alive. Such miraculous happenings on a physical level are entrancing in Indian lore. Another example comes from *The Mahabharata* when Lord Krishna rescues Draupadi from public humiliation since her five husbands are powerless to defend her. They lose Draupadi in a game of dice, and the evil Dushasana wishes to disrobe her as if executing a metaphoric rape on the woman's body as her five husbands look on. Draupadi, with no human

being to help her, prays to Lord Krishna who miraculously provides endless fabric to her saree until Dushasana collapses in exhaustion and Draupadi's honor is untouched.

This volume includes prominent scholarly voices such as Madhavi Narsalay's exposition of three female saint-poets from Maharashtra and their quest for the divine. Archana Venkatesan, an authority on the 8<sup>th</sup> century Tamil mystic saint-poet, Andaal presents a learned study of Andaal's passionate verses in adoration of her beloved Lord Vishnu. Legend has it that everyday, Andaal made a garland of fragrant flowers for the Lord's image, but she secretly wore it herself before it was taken to adorn the Lord. The garland was, for Andaal, a physical symbol of the passionate touch that she yearned from the One she believed to be wedded to. We have an essay by poet Priya Sarukkai Chabria, also on Andaal that presents Chabria's own "transcreations" as she terms her translations of Andaal's erotic poetry. In contrast, Fawzia Afzal-Khan's essay takes us into the melodious sounds and personal courage of three highly accomplished contemporary Pakistani female singers who challenge the sacred and secular divides.

A favorite and popular female saint-poet, India's Meerabai is discussed with a unique comparison to the Spanish saint Theresa of Avila, by Bharatanatyam dancer, Nirupama Vaidyanathan who draws upon St. Theresa's autobiography that provides much insight into her life and struggles. Both figures lived around the same time-period in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and faced similar obstacles from patriarchal systems.

The scholarly engagement with female saint poets is balanced by choreographic and performance notes by prominent artists, many of whom created new works for the Mad and Divine and Epic Women gatherings. These artists include Bharatanatyam dancer, Malavika Sarukkai whose new work entitled "*Darshan – Seeing*" explores Andaal's passion for the Lord. Kathak and Contemporary Indian dancer, Aditi Mangaldas presented her original choreography in "*Seeking the Beloved*", based on the poetry of Meerabai. Bharatanatyam dancer, Mythili Prakash, who grew up in California and now lives in Chennai (a return migration), created her own choreographic exploration entitled, "*Aikya – in the Voice of Akka Mahadevi*" that recreates the female saint-poet Akka Mahadevi's extraordinary passion and courage in attaining the Lord via her verses called *vachanas*. Mythili also performed for the "Epic Women" gathering in a multi-genre production based on Dr. Gowri Ramrayan's play, *Yashodhara*, the wife of Gautama Buddha, a single mother, deserted by her husband and her evolution from grief, loss, sorrow to transcendence. The performance uses Hindi, Pali, and English narration.

In “Soulful *Abhangs* and Thoughtful *Vaakhs* (sayings)”, bharatanatyam dancer Rama Vaidyanathan probes the life and teachings of 13<sup>th</sup> century saint Janabai, of Maharashtra, and 14<sup>th</sup> century saint Lalleswari, of Kashmir who fought social norms while fearlessly expressing their love for the supreme.

On the heels of the resounding success of the 2011 gathering attended by local and international audience members, the 2012 Natya Darshan focused on the theme of “Epic women” from India and beyond. We examine and expand the usual parameters of the “epic” and the types and qualities of “epic” women to include prominent women of India and the world who demonstrate courage and creativity of epic proportions. Women featured in India’s two epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* from 2000 years ago are re-interpreted for contemporary times. Scholarly presentations bring new illuminations to iconic figures like Sita with her many versions in folklore and myth. Veenapani Chawla analyzed the various locales that Sita traverses in the epic, such as the forest, the palace, and in captivity. Kapila Venu, master artist of the Kuttiyatam style of dance (from Kerala in Southern India), spoke on “The Abandonment of Sita” that she also performed in “Sitaparityagam.” The latter is based on Kalidasa’s *Raghuvamsa* portraying Sita abandoned in the forest by Rama, raising their two sons alone, and refusing Rama’s demand to prove her chastity yet again through a fire ordeal. Instead, Sita chooses to return to her mother, the Earth.

Our contributors include scholar and historian Prema Nandakumar who discusses what makes women “epic”. Swarnamalya Ganesh’s essay presents what she terms as “Womanity” exploring “selfhood and tenacity as keynotes of Sangam women” in South India. Ganesh analyzes the dynamic personalities of prominent female figures of this era such as Madhavi of the Tamil epic, *The Cilapaddikaram*.

Among epic women, we include legendary teachers of the classical dance style of bharatanatyam, rooted in Chennai. In this volume, students of these remarkable artist-teachers, indeed, “epic teachers” share personal memories. Nandini Ramani writes about her teacher T. Balasaraswati, whose *abhinaya* (gesture language) and expression of *bhakti* (devotion) are legendary. Katherine Kunhiraman describes Rukmini Devi’s life and work in the context in the 1920s and 1930s, Devi’s exposure to the Theosophical Society and her establishment of the prominent Bharatanatyam Dance Academy, Kalakshetra that continues today to train dancers and teachers, many of whom live across India and in the Indian diaspora world wide. Padmini Chettur writes about her teacher Chandralekha, the pioneering foremother of Contemporary Indian dance.

Sukhanya Rahman (US based), daughter of Indrani Rahman lovingly recalls her mother. Andre Grau (London based) presents an intellectual biography of Mrinalini Sarabhai, an early innovator of bharatanatyam and a courageous woman of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Ammu Joseph analyzes the paradox of epic women in politics in South Asia that boasts of female leaders presiding over nations whereas ordinary women's status remains low and oppressed. Kalpana Ram (Australia based) undertakes feminist evaluation of epic women by investigating the interactions between performance and human agency. Another essay (by co-editor Katrak) on the literary representations of "dark" women with passions of epic proportions explores what drives such women to act on dark passions, and what limits were placed on them as females in their patriarchal societies. Why are they judged negatively without understanding their contexts?

The performances on Epic Women creatively spanned geographical locations and historical time periods. New York based Rajika Puri, in her "danced story-telling" using bharatanatyam and odissi techniques presented "Eleni of Sparta: An Indo-Greek Re-telling" where she dances, sings and narrates the story of Eleni, Queen of Sparta, commonly known as Helen of Troy, heroine of Homer's epic poems *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, later deified. Rajika uses English and ancient Greek.

Several performances were inspired by women of incredible courage in the face of political oppression such as Myanmar's Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, performed by bharatanatyam and contemporary Indian Dancer, Anusha Subramaniam (London based). In "Golden Peacock", Subramaniam's creative choreography is inspired by Suu Kyi's writings in *Freedom from Fear*. Suu Kyi in captivity is like the peacock, a beautiful bird that cannot fly.

Chitra Sundaram (London based) performed "Stree-Dom: An Immaculate Conception" as a performative paper exploring two women – Arundhati, wife of the Vedic sage, Vashishtha, and Penelope, the wife of the Greek warrior Odysseus – celebrated for their chastity and fidelity. Chitra speaks and moves in this work that aims to challenge limiting cultural constructions of femininity via selected historical and mythical female figures in epic and romance.

Kalpana Raghuraman (Netherlands based), whose personal dance style is based on bharatanatyam, choreographically recreated Mexico's Frida Kahlo. "In the Spirit of Frida" portrays Frida, a woman of epic courage and creativity who painted from her bed while living in constant pain. Kahlo defied rules and became an icon of freedom and female

emancipation in the Mexican context and remains an inspiration to women artists worldwide.

Over the course of these two gatherings in 2011 and 2012 and in this volume of essays and choreographic notes we recognize outspoken mystic and epic women, poets and ordinary women with epic courage who fearlessly followed their chosen paths with devotion and energy that are models for women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We may be proficient today with social media phenomenon, media convergences and the bewildering speed of information exchange, but the distance between diverse cultures, languages, and artistic styles remains challenging to bridge. Through this volume, we honor exceptional women and others who remain nameless in history, and all those who speak truth to power, finding creative ways to survive with dignity in a world that needs art to oppose the forces of domination, and to inspire working towards a just and equitable human society.

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This volume of essays would not have been possible without the careful and efficient editorial and administrative assistance of Raksha Patel. We truly appreciate her dedicated work on several aspects of this project as it has journeyed from presentations and performances on stage to print.

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Anita R. Ratnam  
Ketu H. Katrak



**PART I**

**MAD AND DIVINE FEMALE SAINT-POETS  
OF INDIA AND BEYOND**

## CHAPTER ONE

# INSTITUTIONALIZING IDENTITY THROUGH DIVINITY: FEMALE SAINT POETS OF MAHARASHTRA

MADHAVI NARSALAY

The Medieval period in India (11<sup>th</sup> century CE to 17<sup>th</sup> century CE) witnessed a rise in devotional or *bhakti* literature in local language. Songs, philosophical contemplations, mythological stories woven in and around the *bhakti* movement indicate an evolution in the vision of God and the world. Maharashtra (in Western India) is no exception to this phenomenon. *Bhakti* movement has shown signs of change in the orthodox Brahmanical tradition of caste and gender sensitivity. Poet saints, both male and female from the deprived as well as privileged sections of the society have found place and positions in the movement. Such an egalitarian approach is an important feature of the *bhakti* movement in medieval India in general and Maharashtra in particular. This essay focuses on

- How do the saint poets' femaleness and femininity play a role in their divine aspiration?
- How are the bodies of female saint-poets subject to patriarchal and familial forms of control and how do the saint-poets resist such social strictures?
- How do the arts of the literary (words, poems) and the expressive (music, dance) facilitate access to the divine?

Female saints representing three sects, namely *Mahānubhāva*, *Vārakarī* and *Rāmadāsī* are discussed in a chronological order. I begin with *Mahadāsī* of the *Mahānubhāva* sect that flourished in 13<sup>th</sup> century CE i.e. in the regime of the Yadavas of Devagiri (Ajgaonkar 1939, 1). The

founder of the sect, Sarvajña Cakradhara preached non-violence, celibacy, asceticism and *bhakti*.

God i.e. Kṛṣṇa and his different incarnations are to be worshipped in name, form, activity, deeds, place, sayings (*śruti*), memories (*smṛti*) and the blessing of god incarnate. Cakradhara believed that any person irrespective of his caste and gender could attain God. Gender can never be an obstacle between the devotee and God, even to the extent that menstruation was not regarded as impurity, but rather, as a natural fluid equivalent to mucus.

Macadamias, also known as Macadamia was one of the leading disciples of Cakradhara. Her earlier original name was Rupāisā, but Cakradhara renamed her as Mahadāisā, because of her intellectual capacities and divine aspirations. Kesobāsa, a poet has referred to her as Mahadambā in his Sanskrit work *Ratnamālāstotra* (Kundup 2001, 1-2). As child widows, both her sister and she were subjected to atrocities. It is to be noted that Mahadāisā was attracted to the striking looks of Cakradhara who was Kṛsna incarnate for her. She bathed him, fed him, massaged his body and worshipped him. All these references in the *Līlācaritra*, Cakradhara's biography, do indicate a physical, sensual attraction of the female disciple towards her Guru. Much akin to the tradition of *bhakti*, especially referred to by Bhāgavata and other Vaisnavaite Purāṇas, this is *dāsya* (servitude) kind of *bhakti*. As woman of the house, Mahadāisā was serving the most respected person i.e. Cakradhara. Here, her femaleness was only restricted to the chores and responsibilities of woman, in other words the 'cult of domesticity.' The *Līlācaritra* of the Mahānubhava tradition mentions Mahadāisā as a human being resigned to the service of Cakradhara and his sect. Within the patriarchal social structure, her role as a woman follower was domestic and at times denounced by followers of Cakradhara, such as Nāgadeva who criticized her for forgetting her womanhood. However, in the *Līlācaritra*, Mahadāisā plays the role of the curious disciple keen to know more on the life cycle of Kṛṣṇa. Interestingly, *Śrīkṛṣṇacaritra* by Cakradhara is actually driven by Mahadāisā's questions.

After Cakradhara's death, the entire Mahānubhāva sect was in doldrums. Cakradhara had declared that Govindaprabhu would lead the sect and this was not acceptable to Cakradhara's followers. The *Smṛtisthala* mentions that Mahadāisā played a key role in convincing the followers to follow Cakradhara's orders and continued the tradition of the Mahānubhāva sect (Kundup, 7) that has given Mahadāisā an independent identity in this sect, an identity that went beyond the restrictive norms of

‘being a woman’ and transcended into being a “*dharma rakṣaka*”, one who keeps the tradition alive.

Be that as it may, she did not allow her femininity to be subdued on the altar of leadership. This is evident from her compositions such as *Dhavaḷe* – a composition of *Kṛṣṇarukmiṇīsvayamvara* (Irlekar 1999, 80-105). *Dhavaḷe*, as the name suggests means white, which is synonymous to flawlessness or untaintedness. *Dhavaḷes* reveal the delicate, but intense love of Rukmiṇī for Krishna. She is the *virahiṇī* longing for union with Kṛṣṇa whose physical charms attract Rukmini’s friends who even forget their own existence. The element of feminine sensuous consciousness is implicit in this composition where Rukmini’s friends narrate the incident:

We have not seen your lover completely,  
which ever limb we saw, our eyes kept gazing.

Mahadāisā sets aside the feminine sensuality immediately. She describes Rukmiṇī:

Steady became my wandering mind  
Enters the dark Kṛṣṇa in the heart-lotus  
Darling Rukmiṇī becomes like a Brahmavid-Yogī,  
[She] forgets the sensual, in her mind penetrates Go-pāla  
(lord of the senses)

Mahadāisā respects the feminine within the human body and at the same time her spirit overcomes the desire of sensual pleasures and proceeds towards the super sensuous. The *Mahānubhāva* narratives mention her as a groom’s maid, but the *Dhavaḷes* give a feeling that she is Rukmiṇī trying to propitiate and unite with Cakradhara, her God (Irlekar 1999, 33-35). Her union is not on the level of the feminine body, but rather, on the spiritual level with her God. On the corporeal plane, she vehemently manages the domestic cult of womanhood, but on the spiritual level the female body sheds off the feminine consciousness to be in communion with the divine.

**Janābāī**, born in the family of *Śūdras* was a maid in the house of saint Nāmadeva (13th-14<sup>th</sup> centuries CE). She became part and parcel as well as witness to the spiritual pursuits of Nāmadev, a proponent of the Vārkarī sect (Inamdar 2001, 40-43) that was founded by Dñyāneśvara, a contemporary of Nāmadeva. This sect believes in Viṭṭhala, i.e. God as the Ultimate Reality, and *bhakti* as the mode of worship to attain him.

It is to be noted that there is hardly any historical data regarding Janābāī and her relationship with Nāmadev and Viṭṭhala. The *abhaṅgas* (poetry in praise of Viṭṭhala) composed by her and legends are recorded in

*Bhaktivijay*, a source material followed by the Vārkarī tradition (Bhingarkar 1989, 19). Janabai felt that she owed her spiritual advancement to Nāmadev; therefore most of her *abhaṅgas* end with “thus says Jani of Nāmadev.” Janābāī, the maid would feel orphaned and lonely at times and would invoke Viṭṭhala:

Mother died and father is no more, O Viṭṭhala you are the sole [one]  
I am your tiny baby, please do not neglect me, I am alone.

She imagines a family of Viṭṭhala:

My Viṭṭhala is a family man along with the cowherd folks,  
*Nivr̥tti* on his shoulder, holding the hand of Sopāna,  
Dñyāneśvara walks ahead of him and the beautiful Muktaī behind,  
Gorā, the potter on his lap, Chokhā and Jivā along with him,  
Baṅkā on his waist and Nāma holding the little finger,  
Says Jani, O Viṭṭhala, I see the festival of devotees

(Irekar 2006, 81)

This imagery of Viṭṭhala’s family has Janābāī as an onlooker and not a family member.

Such poignant invocations achieved the desired effect and Viṭṭhala became easily accessible to her. This is very much akin to the philosophy propounded in the *Bhagavadgītā* as well as *Bhāgavata* that both recognize the Lord as the servant of those who nurture and nourish him with *bhakti*. One of the essential facets of Janābāī’s compositions is the natural expression of the woman’s mind.

The difficult domestic chores in Nāmadev’s house became simple and easy in the company of Viṭṭhala. Janabai felt his presence in each and every task she did. On one plane, we may call it an intense obsession for the desired object. On the other hand, if we regard the experiences of Janābāī as mystic, then the phenomenal world and transcendental reality become one and the same for her. It is also known as *bahir-avirābhāva* i.e. the external manifestation (Marfatia 1986, 42).

It is significant that Janābāī never experienced the state of communion or oneness with God. The existence of Viṭṭhala was *nitya* but outside her. Her Guru Nāmadev, a Dualist, was a believer in dualism. *Bhakta* and God can never become one; secondly, notions of impurity of the body for Janābāī were so strong that she could not imagine the presence of Viṭṭhala in the body of one such as herself of low-caste. Her emotional imagination pervaded over her experiential world. The uniqueness in the *dāsya* (devotee) type of *bhakti* of Janābāī is a very algebraic equation: she serves God and in return God serves her.

Janābāī's narrative does not leave its caste and gender centric flavor. It records her menial tasks like collecting cow dung, sweeping and scavenging. The *bhangs* have a corporeal framework that also has a mystic flavor. Within this framework, Viṭṭhala (also called *Vital*) is a witness and a participant in her life. The corporeal and mystic are expressed in the following lines:

Janabai was troubled because of her hair, Vital hurried to help.

He let loose her hair and hastily killed the lice.

Combed her hair and freed her, says Jana I became cleansed

(Irlekar 2006, 240)

Here the word 'cleansed' i.e. *nirmala* is open-ended – it may imply overcoming physical as well as spiritual impurity.

Janābāī also mentions her indebtedness to Nāmadev, though nowhere does Nāmadev mention her unflinching devotion. Most of her compositions are replete with references to household work. Though her feminine attributes like beauty and sensuality have not been manifested in the Vārakarī tradition, the domestic cult of womanhood is seen to be dominant.

Janābāī's death is a touching example of how social forces belonging to the privileged sections can subject someone from the weaker section to false accusations and even a death sentence. Not tolerating Janābāī's proximity to Viṭṭhala, she was accused of stealing jewellery adorning the Lord Viṭṭhala and was sentenced to death. Witnessing death in front of her eyes, she composed *abhangas* urging Viṭṭhala to save her. The miracle that is narrated is that hearing her repeated pleas Viṭṭhala's affection for her melted the iron pole erected for her execution. This established her innocence and she was released.

Works of Janābāī indicate her ardent and unflinching love for Viṭṭhala. She followed the strict code of conduct pertaining to gender and caste. In spite of facing odds, she traversed the path taken by her spiritual Guru and fulfilled her divine aspirations.

**Veṇābāī** was the disciple of Saint Rāmadāsa, a contemporary of Sivaji (17th CE). Her life history is recorded in *Samarthapratapa* that indicates her position as one of the main disciples of Rāmadāsa, who reached the position of Maṭhādhipati of the Miraj Math (Kuber 2010, 10). It is to be noted that Rāmadāsa's tradition addresses Veṇābāī as Veṇasvāmī. She is the only Marathi female to have composed an entire narrative named *Sītāsvayamvara*. She was a Brahmin child-widow, hence, she had to lead a life of strict austerities and celibacy. For Veṇābāī, this calamity was a turning point in her life. She was introduced to reading and therefore had

access to many works of saints. Her inner voice indicated that following the path laid down by Saint Rāmadāsa was the only way of fulfilling her divine aspirations. Her increasing inclination towards Saint Rāmadāsa raised many eyebrows in her society but Veṅābāi remained undaunted and continued her spiritual pursuits guided by Rāmadāsa. Her parents tried to dissuade her, but her answer indicates the spiritual control over her female body:

My mind and my body are taken away by my Guru,  
 Following his path with the knowledge symbol in his hand  
 Name of God in the ears, *agocarīmudrā* on the face,  
 With ears split we have become yogis and have come for the  
*darshan* of saints  
 This is the divine vision of Veṅāsvāmī, away goes the illusion  
 (Ajgaonkar 1939, 191)

Veṅābāi sets aside her femaleness and her mind is eager to seek higher spiritual pursuits. The relation between Veṅābāi and Rāmadāsa was that of father and daughter. The Rāmadāsī tradition clearly mentions that Veṅābāi was his daughter (*kanyā*). This incident had a deep impact on Veṅābāi who left her house and joined the order of the disciples of Rāmadāsa.

The *Sītāsvayamvara* composed by Veṅābāi does not have Sita as its centre point but Rāma, the supreme Lord of the Rāmadāsī tradition as its focus. So, the frame of reference remains patriarchal. As far as poetic quality is considered, Veṅābāi dwells upon gross descriptive details rather than subtle mental feelings of Rama and Sita. Veṅābāi's descriptive details of Rama do not indicate her feminine gaze towards her 'masculine' divine aspiration. Her descriptions are glorifications of his regal splendor, charming face and ornaments. Sītā is attracted towards Rāma and mentally weds him. The work taken in the contextual framework of the author indicates that Veṅābāi's feminine grace had become inert and she looks at the entire episode with neutrality. She remarks that poetic creativity was a divine intention:

O God, please take away the afflictions and give me rest,  
 As long as the mortal frame exists so long be my devotion  
 O God, give your divine signal, to Veṅāsvāmī,  
 So say Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa 'write this one'  
 (Ajgaonkar 1939, 188)

Early widowhood, strict control of passions by reading spiritual texts, celibacy, social reprimand regarding her relationship with Rāmadāsa are

the reasons which can be accounted for a plain narrative of *Sītāsvayamvara*.

In conclusion, after analyzing the female saint poets' biographies and contributions, I note certain points in common:

a) The medieval *bhakti* movement in Maharashtra was essentially patriarchal. The female saints were the disciples of male saints. They were not independent proponents of sects, but took male guidance for achieving spiritual advancement. To earn a place in the male-centric world of devotion, they had to strive hard to have independent identities with the sectarian framework.

b) Social norms were instrumental in shaping the personalities of the saints. Widowhood was a boon in disguise for Mahadāisā and Veṅābāī. While leading a life of celibacy, they focused their time and energy on divine pursuits while staying in the company of their Gurus. But they did not hesitate to break the norms of societal control over their femininity. Janābāī was submissive and accepted her state as a servant. But the question remains: did she choose to stay as a servant only to get access to the devotional pursuits of Nāmadev? Besides, for Janābāī, emotional imagination of the presence of Viṭṭhala came to her assistance in her loneliness, physical pain and also during trying times. I would also like to underline that Mahadāisā and Veṅābāī were Brahmin widows and naturally belonged to the privileged sections of the society. This was not the case for Janābāī; she had fewer chances to revolt against social order.

c) It is a paradox that Mahadāisā and Veṅābāī were widows, but they wrote on *svayamvara* (Rukmiṇī and Sītā respectively). This shows the hidden and curbed passions of these women. The difference between Mahadāisā and Veṅābāī is that Mahadāisā eulogized Kṛṣṇa, but with an eye on Rukmiṇī, which was not so in the case of Veṅābāī. For her, glorification of Rāma was the only purpose of the narrative, wherein Sītā was reduced to a tool. *Līlācaritra* makes it evident that Mahadāisā was attracted to Cakradhara's physical charms. The sect believed in the charismatic and enchanting capacity of Cakradhara's looks that increased the number of followers. Unlike this, the Rāmadāsī sect regarded physical charms as an obstacle to the path of God. These sectarian restrictions have played a key role in influencing the literary quality of Veṅābāī's work.

d) Female saint poets of Maharashtra have not resorted to frenzied behaviour or holy madness as their Gurus strictly guided their divine pursuits. They were over-shadowed by the towering personalities of their Gurus. Unconventional and unexpected expressions are not evident in their literary forms; neither have they tried to explore some different mode of literary or artistic expression. Originality, innovation or mere deviation



from the prescribed norms of society or even thinking and behavior were not permitted in medieval times.

Sociologically, disruption in the social structure and stricture is essential for initiating a new way of thinking. The founders of the sects themselves undertook such disruptions. The personalities of female saint poets were stuck within male-driven sectarian frameworks. It became more challenging for the women to establish their individual identity in such a scenario; however, facts reveal that they succeeded. Mahadāisā's role of nurturing the Mahānubhāv sect, Janābā's unflinching love for Viṭṭhala and Veṇābā's as the head of a Maṭha clearly stand testimony to the facts that they did not restrict themselves within female and feminine parameters. In their journey of life, they carved out their identity crossing the boundaries of gender in their pursuit of the Divine.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### ĀṆṬĀL OF A THOUSAND NAMES: VIṢṆU'S BELOVED MEDIATOR

ARCHANA VENKATESAN

Most Śrīvaiṣṇavas know Āṇṭāl through her fantastical legend, savoring its drama of unrequited love, and stubborn, unwavering willfulness to win Viṣṇu as her husband. In the narrative's denouement she is either absorbed into his body through a variety of creative resolutions or (re) emerges as a potent divine force unto herself.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of five centuries, a period that spans the foundational stages in Śrīvaiṣṇavism's emergence as a distinct sect, the ninth century poet Kōtai is identified as *Ālvār and Avatāra*, twin roles that enable her to act as both the exemplary devotee and exemplary wife. In her latter identity she is variously characterized as manifestations (*amśa*) of the goddesses, Śrī, Bhū or Nīlā (who is identified with the Tamil goddess, Nappiṇṇai), while as an Ālvār, her two beautiful compositions, the *Tiruppāvai* and *Nācciyār Tirumoli*, are exalted as distilling the essence of the *Upaniṣads*. In this brief essay, I discuss Āṇṭāl's function as the ideal mediator or *puruṣakāra*, proposing that this fundamental and capacious Śrīvaiṣṇava theological construct skillfully accommodates her many identities as poet, saint, and goddess.

#### **Mediating Effort: The Śrīvaiṣṇava Concept of the *Puruṣakāra***

Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators and theologians recognize the notion of the *puruṣakāra* in the poetry of the *Ālvārs*. Although these early Tamil poets did not employ the Sanskrit term *puruṣakāra* or its Tamil equivalent, they often resort to Śrī either as an object of refuge, or as a merciful intermediary.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Āṇṭāl in the *Tiruppāvai* appeals to Kṛṣṇa's dear cowherd wife, Nappiṇṇai to intervene on behalf of the *gopīs*' Mārkaḷi quest.<sup>3</sup> In the two centuries following the Ālvār poets, the important Śrīvaiṣṇava teachers Yāmuna (c. 10<sup>th</sup> century) and Rāmānuja's disciple

and scribe Kūrattāḷvaṅ (c.11-12<sup>th</sup> century) both composed hymns to Śrī surrendering to her. While Śrī's mediating role is implicit in the writings of Parāśara Bhaṭṭar (c.12<sup>th</sup> century), his contemporary Piḷḷāṅ unambiguously, and perhaps for the first time, referred to Śrī as a *puruṣakāra* in his commentaries on the *Tiruvāymoli*.<sup>4</sup> These scholars articulated a range of positions vis-à-vis Śrī's relationship to Viṣṇu. For instance, whereas Yāmuna and Rāmānuja regarded her as inseparable from Viṣṇu, Piḷḷāṅ and Bhaṭṭar viewed her as the receptacle of his compassion. Eventually the question of Śrī's (relative) independence from Viṣṇu found expression in the writings of the opposing positions of Vedānta Deśika (1268-1369) and Piḷḷai Lokācārya (1213-1323), resulting in an irreversible schism of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition into its southern (Tenkalai) and northern (Vāṭakalai) branches. The debate arose specifically with regard to Śrī's ability to release devotees from *samsāra*. Is she merely the intercessor or can she also act as the *upāya* (the means) and the goal (*upeya*), characteristics identified almost exclusively with Viṣṇu? For Deśika, Śrī is inseparable from Viṣṇu, an attribute who shares equally in his accessibility (*saṁlabhya*) and transcendence (*paratva*). For Deśika, as they are one, both Viṣṇu and Śrī are to be understood as the *upāya*. Their indivisibility thus affirms her ability to grant mercy and accept the devotees' petitions and surrender.<sup>5</sup> Piḷḷai Lokācārya posits that as Viṣṇu is the only *upāya* (means) and *upeya* (goal), Śrī can only function as a mediator and not the agent of salvation. Lokācārya uses Sītā's three separations from Rāma to suggest that she influences Viṣṇu when united with him and draws souls (*jīva*) to him when in separation.<sup>6</sup>

As Lokācārya's writings already suggest, Śrī was not the only *puruṣakāra* available to aid the helpless devotee. Sītā is also often held up as the exemplary *puruṣakāra* because of three defining qualities: her *krpā* (compassion), her *pāratantrya* (dependence on Viṣṇu) and her *anhāryarhatva* (state of being undeserved by anyone but her lord).<sup>7</sup> Several episodes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* are chosen to demonstrate Sītā's qualities: Sītā waits for Rāma in Lanka to rescue her, illustrating her dependence on him, while she saves the crow that tortured her from Rāma's wrath. Sītā's dual nature of dependence on her lord and qualified independence that enable her to influence his actions is explored in depth by commentators like Periyavāccāṅ Piḷḷai (13<sup>th</sup> century) who see her as the soul (*jīva*) and the divine mediator.<sup>8</sup> As Sītā's case so beautifully portrays, for the intermediary to be successful she must neither be fully god, nor fully mortal, but somewhere in between, straddling two worlds and two personalities.<sup>9</sup>

## Mediating Desire: Āṅṭāl as the Puruṣakāra

O goddess  
 Mukunda is quick to compassion  
 to people like us, despite our many transgressions  
 though we are long ordained in vows.  
 This is certain for he is bound  
 by the garland that touched your hair,  
 by the abundance of your words  
 which are as sweet as the music  
 from the *vīṇa*'s strings

*Godā Stuti* 5<sup>10</sup>

In Vedānta Deśika's *Godā Stuti* (Praise to Godā), a panegyric to Āṅṭāl in 29 verses, she is cast in the role of the *puruṣakāra*.<sup>11</sup> By Vedānta Deśika's time, Āṅṭāl's apotheosis is complete, and her task as a Śrī/Sītā-like *puruṣakāra* is appropriate to her new status as Viṣṇu's beloved wife. The irony of course is that the historical ninth century woman Kōtai, the author of two poems, the *Tiruppavai* and *Nacciayar Tirunamali*, ceaselessly appealed to various messengers and mediators, pleading to be united with Viṣṇu.<sup>12</sup> Paradoxically, she also claimed for her own words a special efficacy in ensuring the success of the devotee's quest. For instance in *Nācciyār Tirumoli* 3.10, she extolled her words as capable of securing entry into Vaikuṅṭha to reside forever beside Mādhava.<sup>13</sup> The *taniyans* (praise poems) that accompany both the *Tiruppāvai* and *Nācciyār Tirumoli* make the same point celebrating Āṅṭāl as the author of powerful words that can mediate on the devotee's behalf. Uyyakoṅṭār's tenth century Tamil *taniyan* lauds her glorious *Tiruppāvai* verses and ends with the plea that they may never be forgotten. Two centuries later, reflecting evolving ideas about the *puruṣakāra*'s nature and Āṅṭāl's divinity, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's famous Sanskrit *Tiruppāvai-taniyan* evokes the inseparability of Viṣṇu and his consort (Nīlā/Nappinṇai), while casting Āṅṭāl as the one who must remind him of duties revealed in a hundred *śrutis*. By the thirteenth century, commentators on the *Tiruppāvai* like Periyavaccan Pillai interpret Āṅṭāl as the ideal guide who leads both the *gopīs* and other devotees on their quest for Kṛṣṇa.<sup>14</sup>

It is largely on account of the unique value of her poems and her singular ability to act as a mediator and guide that Āṅṭāl is included as one of twelve Ālvār poets, and her *Tiruppāvai* and *Nācciyār Tirumoli* comprise a part of the *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham* (Divine Collection of Four Thousand). As the *Divya Prabandham* is seen as constituting the Tamil branch of the Śrīvaiṣṇava system of *Ubhaya Vedānta* or dual

Vedānta, it is acknowledged as a legitimate source for the development of theological doctrine.<sup>15</sup> Āṅṭāl's inclusion as an *Ālvār* emphasizes the revelatory nature of her two poems in keeping with Śrītvaiṣṇavas' self descriptions of their *sampradāya* as Ubhaya Vedānta. Within this rubric, Āṅṭāl's *Tiruppāvai* and *Nācciyār Tirumoli* (and especially the *Tiruppāvai*) are termed *Upaniṣad-sāramas* since they distill the substance of the *Upaniṣhads*. In turn, the poet Kōtai is inducted into the fold as a pioneering taboo-breaking saint (*Ālvār*) and is gradually transformed into a goddess. In the former role, her beautiful and moving poems are the primary mediators, but as a goddess she herself is the intermediary, able to coax and cajole Viṣṇu towards mercy. Let us recall that in his *tanīyan*, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar praised Āṅṭāl as the one to remind Viṣṇu of his duties revealed in the Vedas, deftly invoking the power of the divinely inspired, divine poet-wife's eloquence that empowers her to mediate on behalf of those who neither have the words nor the ability to approach Viṣṇu themselves.

## Mediating Desire: Āṅṭāl and Rāmānuja in Srivilliputtur

For the lord  
of the sweet fragrant groves of Maliruñcōlai,  
I offered a hundred pots of butter  
and yet another hundred brimming with sweet rice.  
Will the beautiful lord who rides on Garuḍa  
Not come to claim my offering?

*Nācciyār Tirumoli* 9.6<sup>16</sup>

One day Rāmānuja (1017-1137 CE) was moved to worship Āṅṭāl in Srivilliputtur. But before arriving at his final destination, he stopped at the Tirumaliruncolai temple to offer a hundred pots of sweet rice on Āṅṭāl's behalf, finally fulfilling a long ago pledge. When the venerable Śrītvaiṣṇava *ācārya* reached Srivilliputtur and entered Āṅṭāl's temple, she immediately manifested from the *garbha grha* and ran towards him, calling him “Aṅṅā” (brother). From that day forward, in addition to carrying the epithet *Tiruppāvai Jīyar* on account of his great love for that poem, Rāmānuja was known as Kōyil Aṅṅaṅ, to honor the relationship that Āṅṭāl had acknowledged.<sup>17</sup> To mark the occasion of Rāmānuja and Āṅṭāl's spectacular meeting, the *utsava mūrtis* of Āṅṭāl, Raṅgamaṅṅār and Garuḍa are set forward to occupy a permanent place at the center of the wide foyer of the *garbha grha*, and stand as a reflection of the tall main images nestled into the depths of the Srivilliputtur Āṅṭāl temple's sanctum.

This apocryphal Āṅṅāl-Rāmānuja story is a favorite of the Srivilliputtur temple priests, and is often narrated to first time visitors as a way of explicating the special significance of the *utsava* images in the *garbha grha*'s foyer. On the most fundamental level, the story of Āṅṅāl and Rāmānuja gestures towards the intimate relationship that engages Āṅṅāl with predominantly male Brahmanical sectarian authority, embodied in the figure of Rāmānuja. Her relationship with this world is cast as a familial one. She is not just the paradigmatic devotee, the Ālvār, or Viṣṇu's consort that the tradition must worship. In addressing Rāmānuja as brother, she brings herself into a kinship relationship not only with him but also with the entire tradition that he represents. And today, she is served by her many priests, custodians of Śrīvaiṣṇava ritual praxis consolidated by Rāmānuja in the late eleventh century.

The Rāmānuja-Āṅṅāl story also of course, exemplifies the concept of the *puruṣakāra* and delineates Āṅṅāl's enthusiastic embrace of her new role and identity.<sup>18</sup> In running out to greet Rāmānuja, Āṅṅāl now fully a goddess, is the mediator par-excellence, the *puruṣakāra*. She is accessibility itself (*saulabhya*), the very crucible of Viṣṇu's mercy, running out to draw the devotee to her, and by extension, to Viṣṇu. The *puruṣakāra*'s compassion is so potent that the devotee needs to exert only the slightest effort – offer some pots of butter, perhaps – to engage her attention. Śrī as the primary consort is regarded as the ideal, most efficacious mediator.<sup>19</sup> But in Srivilliputtur, Āṅṅāl as Viṣṇu's beloved assumes the mediator's role and actively seeks to provide grace.<sup>20</sup> As Viṣṇu's consort, she is mother to the whole world, but as Rāmānuja's younger sister she is an intimate part of the entire tradition. The creative placement of the images of Āṅṅāl, Raṅgamāṅṅār and Garuḍa in the *garbha grha*'s foyer, and the even more creative story elucidating it, remind the devotee of the Rāmānuja-Āṅṅāl story and creatively conjoins narrative and architectural space to embody the abstract concept of the *puruṣakāra*.

### Concluding Thoughts: A Mother to All

The Āṅṅāl image particularly in Srivilliputtur tells a story and recounts a genealogy that marks her gradual apotheosis from the poet Kōtai to the goddess Āṅṅāl. Upon the body of the goddess is encoded a complex commentary – both theological and historical. It articulates the philosophical development of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas and encodes the debate over the importance of the goddess with regard to salvation. The Āṅṅāl-Rāmānuja story begins in the *Nācciyār Tirumoli*, a poem of almost unrelieved longing for Viṣṇu, but it concludes by asserting Āṅṅāl's identity