Chapter Four
Intersemiotic Transformations in the Poetry of Akka Mahadevi and Andal

Glimpse into Semiotics

Semiotics is generally defined as study of signs. Signs can be words, images, sounds, gestures or objects i.e. 'everything that stands for something else' can be a sign. Signs are organised into specific structures to effect signification. All sign systems have their own codes or rules of organisation. All of us are exposed to sign-systems without understanding the codes that go into their organisation. Hence, we feel that the meanings conveyed to us are fixed, given and transparent. But semiotics helps us to understand that we can be active creators of meaning around us, if we are aware of the rules that govern the making of a semiotic system or a text. Semiotics provides us with a method of textual analysis to reveal peripheral layers of meaning and signification.

Semioticians and linguists after Saussure and Peirce have used this science to read sociocultural phenomena and the belief systems that go into shaping up of the ideological bases of specific cultural traditions. Saussure’s distinction of langue and parole in linguistic semiotics is now being used for other semiotic systems like media, film and cultural studies. Saussure uses the term langue for the system of language with its rules and conventions and the term parole for individual use of language as in speech. These terms have come to signify a general distinction between ‘system and usage, code and specific message, structure and specific event.’ While Saussure preferred langue over parole, contemporary theorists differ over whether the system determines and comes before the usage or the usage determines and comes before the system. While postmodernists go to the extreme view that no meaning exists beyond a text, Marxists propose that systems can not be studied in isolation, as the signs carry out ideological functions in a society and its culture. In other words, social reality which is understood through signs is influenced by hegemony and is not pregiven or prefixed.

To take the Marxist view a little further, I would like to say that hegemony in itself is a very problematic concept and has to be defined and redefined in a context. Construction
of hegemony is a complex phenomenon that needs to be studied. I personally believe that social realities are very volatile occurrences and changes in them are directed by many more factors than what can apparently be counted as a dominant ideology.

The Bhakti trend that began in Tamil Nadu and took over India from the sixth century onwards provides a fine paradigm to study how the social ideologies emerge and how they become dominant.

The example of Bhakti movements creates a counter argument which defies the accepted notion that reality is hegemonic. Most Bhakti movements arose from the periphery and were absorbed into the mainstream with a fervour that did not spare even the kings and the Brahmins who generally comprised the hegemonic classes.

The reason for discussing Semiotics and its use in studying a text or a social phenomenon is to understand the Bhakti phenomena in Medieval India in all its richness with particular reference to two women saint poets. At the same time, idea is to take the Bhakti phenomenon out of religious discourse and to put it in a framework which is accessible to the modern student of cultural studies.

As this study proposes to bring out the intersemiotic transformations in the poetry of Akka Mahadevi and Andal, it is important to see how these two medieval saints create poetry in which their Bhakti, their mysticism and their desire for Moksha find meaning in the socio-cultural context of their times and our own. It is important to see how they make use of the classical Bhakti discourse and mould it to suit their own individual experience thereby creating new social and even religious realities. Again to connect, we can say that if classical Bhakti discourse as found in the shastras and ancient Bhakti texts is the ‘Langue’ providing the model for exercise of Bhakti, Bhakti poetry itself is the ‘parole’ which reveals the individual usage of the system.

The term “Intersemiotic Transformations” appears to be apt and is chosen consciously to explore and understand the creative processes in the poetry of Akka and Andal. It is interesting how they draw upon various semiotic systems like classical Bhakti literature, Mythology, contemporary secular traditions, rituals and folk-lore. We shall then take a look at how their poetry became a source of inspiration for creative expression across genres in later periods.
We can say that this intersemiotic transformation is happening at two levels. First, where poets themselves are using images, metaphors, symbols and signs from varied discursive fields to give vent to their creativity-this constitutes intersemiotic transformations within the works of the poets in question. And the second type of transformation is happening when the poetry/life of these poets is re-written and re-interpreted by later generations to express their creative energy through various genres.

If we talk in terms of signs, signifiers and signified, then we see that these poets draw their signifiers from various sign systems mentioned above but use them in ways that constantly lead to creative formations of unique signifieds. However, as soon as we refer to the process of signification, we have to keep in mind that all the structuralist and many post structuralist theories of signification tend to arrive at the same idea, that all meaning is ideological and is predetermined by hegemony. In other words, meanings assumed to be natural are in fact arbitrary and enforced. However, the Bhakti phenomenon is a unique historical process which presents a different example altogether to the 'Sahrudayis' (partakers of the experience) as well as to the students of this literature.

Bhakti poets defy the ideological while using the signs from dominant discursive fields. For instance, ideology of the heroic age invested divine powers in the king. The king was held to be next to God and an agent of God on the earth, executing the Divine Will. Patronised by the king, even the greatest of our poets used God as a metaphor to signify the greatness of the king in their writings. In other words, in this age the poets and writers used God as a signifier, where actually the signified was always the king. Similarly, gender relations across all major cultures presupposed dominance of man over woman. This was reflected in all art forms where the woman was generally conceived as an object of desire or a threat to the integrity of a man.

Bhakti poets effect an inversion in this signification while using the signs from the same discursive fields. They use all the royal imagery but make the king the signifier and God becomes the signified. They invoke the God with all the royal virtues and embellishments. Similarly in gender relations the dominant position of the man- husband is substituted by the ever desirable God- lover. In fact, most Bhakti poets, regardless of
their gender, take upon the persona of a woman and call out to their chosen God as their lover.

In the period of Tamil Sangam, a poet named Kumatturkkkananar sings in praise of Cera king Imayavarampan Netunceralatan:

..having destroyed the enemy’s forts
and flushed with the glory of increasing might
you are filled with loftier aspiration.
This feat is like that
of the glorious,
ferocious
and victorious Lord Muruka
who, riding on his elephant,
cut into the vast space
of the dense dark sea...

(Ancient Indian Literature. Vol. III. Page.133.)

Here the poet is using God Murugan as a metaphor to sing the glories of his king. Every image, every sign derived from God Murugan’s attributes is tending to highlight the king’s Godly qualities.

In Bhakti poetry however, there is a reversal of these metaphors. While the signs are same, the signifiers and signifieds change places. For instance:

Glory be to your feet that spanned
The earth as Vamana. Glory be to
Your strength that destroyed Lanka as
Kodanda Rama. Glory be to your fame
That smote the bedeviled cart as Krishna
In the cradle. Glory be to your feet that
Threw and killed the demon-calf
Vatasura. Glory be to your merit that
Held that mountain Govardhana as an
Umbrella. Glory be to your spear that
Overcomes all evil. Praising you always
humbly we have come to you for boons.
Bestow your compassion on us.
[Srirama Bharti: 2000:100]

All the endearments used for the king are being used here for the God. Extraordinary strength, the weapons, the glory, the ability to protect his subjects were the virtues ascribed to a great king. The Bhakti poets used these adjectives to narrate the glories of their chosen God. Another example can be a poem by Nammalvar which is quoted by A.K. Ramanujan:

First the discus
rose to view,
then the conch,
the long bow,
the mace,

and the sword;
with blessings
from the eight quarters,
he broke through
the egg-shell of heaven,
making the waters bubble;
giant head and giant feet
growing away from each other,
time itself rose to view:
how the lord
paced and measured
all three worlds!
[Ramanujan: 1981: 108]
In the same context, Ramanujan says that “the (early *Bhakti*) poems blend the erotic, the heroic, and the sacred as later *Bhakti* poems do.” Here again the idea is, that all the signifiers drawn from these discursive fields which earlier helped to innumerate the qualities of the kings now were turned towards service to God through *Bhakti* poetry.

To say the least, *Bhakti* works, in fact, draw upon the collective unconscious of a whole race and contain innumerable frames of references belonging to innumerable semiotic fields thereby generating innumerable layers of meanings, which are then conveyed across to different time and space zones.

### Intersemiotic Transformations

Translation across languages and forms constitutes an important part of medieval art and literature in India. The attainment of literary status on the part of different literary languages, it has been observed, resulted from the translations from Sanskrit /Prakrit into various regional languages. However, the translation endeavour of the medieval period was much more than merely translations of influential texts like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and other Jain and Buddhist texts from Sanskrit and Prakrit. The exchange through translation during this period involves the exchange of forms and styles not only between languages but also across genres. We have to contend here with a great deal of translations across languages (interlingual translations) and within the languages (intralingual translations). Beyond this, we enter the domain of what Roman Jacobson designated by the term ‘Inersemiotic Translation’. The Sanskrit *Ramayana* was not only translated into regional languages like Tamil and Braj, for instance, but such literary texts were transformed into the genres of theatre as in the case of *Ramalila* of the North and *Kathakkali* of the South, which was originally called *Ramanattam*, The *Rama* Play. These theatrical translations of sacred stories were again subjected to reenactment through non-human forms of theatre like string and shadow puppet plays.

The *Bhakti* traditions of the medieval period were, except in Bengal, for the most part inspired by either Shaivism or Vaishnavism. The literary and aesthetic expression of these movements bears a special relation to the sacred narratives of these traditions. The *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Ramayana* became the storehouses of episodes, characters,
symbols and metaphors in the aesthetic expressions of Vaishanava schools of Bhakti. Similarly, symbols and metaphors of the sacred stories of Shiva are reenacted in Shaivite Bhakti expressions. The compositions of Alvars of Tamil Nadu retell the key episodes of Krishna/Vishnu/ Rama stories from the Vishnu Puranas and Ramayana. This in itself can be seen as an act of Intersemiotic Translation, as the sacred narratives are translated into compositions of devotional lyricism. The Tamil Shaivite compositions of Thevaram time and again allude to the central episodes of Shiva Purana.

The translation exchange in pre-modern India was of a different nature than it is understood to be today. The genre of translation of the period was closer in meaning to what we now consider adaptation. The source text was only a spring board for a free and imaginative reconstruction in a new language or form. Fidelity to the original was not at all necessary, at least not in terms of textual fidelity.

To get a glimpse into a pre-modern translation which always coalesces into creative expression, we can consider briefly Andal’s Tirupavvai. Here translation also happens between two cultures and landscapes. In Stanza IV, which is a hymn to Lord Vishnu, who is extolled as the source and symbol of fertility, one finds the vedic concept of the rain bearing God Indra and the fertility God of the Tamil Land coalescing into each other:

O Dark-rain-cloud! Dear as Krishna!
pray reveal yourself in full measure. Enter the deep ocean,
gorge yourself, roar and ascend high: darken like the hue of
the primaeval lord Padmanabha, Strike like the resplendent
discus on his mighty shoulder, roar with thunder like the
great conch in his hand, come pouring down on us like
arrows cast from his Saranga bow, that we too may live, and
enjoy the bath festival of Margali.
[Srirama Bharti: 2000:94]

Also the whole poem rivets on the interesting transformation of a pre- Vaishnavite fertility ritual, ‘Pavai’ into an expression of Vaishnavaite devotional rite.
In the Vaishnavite tradition, the stanza quoted above is further translated into a ritualistic act because this is the stanza recited in Srivaishnava temples when the sacred idol is given ‘Abhishekam’. This clearly shows that Bhakti texts inhabit spaces of transformations across languages, cultures and genres.

The indebtedness of Bhakti expressions to the heritage of the sacred lore is no doubt vital for Bhakti movements where the Saguna(form with attributes) element is dominant. But to say that this is true of all Bhakti movements is an oversimplification. “Does the Shiva temple made of ice have a cupola of sunlight?” asks Allama, the twelth century Kannada saint poet. The two processes of imagination involved in Saguna and Nirguna types of Bhakti are concisely expressed in a paradox oft quoted in Veerashaiva texts of Karnataka: “The Bhakta makes a temple out of void whereas the jnani makes void out of the temple”. In other words, Saguna Bhakti emphasizing the dualistic nature of the devotee and the deity and in a way ‘imagines’ the deity whereas Nirguna Bhakti ‘de-imagines’ the same phenomenon. This paradox is most gnomically expressed in a couplet of Saint Kabir’s:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Jal mein Kumbh Kumbh mein Jal Hai,} \\
\text{Bahar Bhitar Pani.} \\
\text{Phuta Kumbh Jal Jal hi Samana,} \\
\text{Yeh Tath Kaho Jnani.} \\
\text{[Mukund Dwivedi: 1981:237.]} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(Earthen pot is in the water, water is in the earthen pot
Water is inside as well as outside
Pot breaks and water merges with water
The wise have said this truth.)

Though the conflicts between form and formlessness are recognized in Bhakti traditions, the embodied and the imagined is not considered despicable as in Judaic traditions. Again as Allama says in one of his vachanas:

Both Form and Formless
Are abstractions
One is invocation and the other dissolution
One is involvement, the other non-involvement
Beyond both these means
“Is Goggeswara”
[Translation by H.S. Shivaprakash]

Allama recognizes that Saguna and Nirguna, the concrete and the abstract, the embodied and the un-embodied are both imperfect translations of the ultimate formless reality to which he too paradoxically gives a local appellation, ‘Goggeswara’.

Elsewhere he also talks about how one has to transcend the ‘symbol’ (‘Kuruhu’) with ‘awareness’ (‘Aruhu’). Viewed in this light, the Bhakti imagination involves a translation between ‘image’ (Prati) and non-image (Aprati). “They are making Images for the non-Image which has no image” (“Pratiyilladapratige pratiya maduvarayya”)

In this sense, the Bhakti traditions are keenly aware of the playful and tentative nature of the verbal and the nonverbal expression situated in a web of translations. The recognition, that translation and creativity, the concrete and the abstract, form and formless, the speakable and the unspeakable are interdependent and interfluent, is the very basis of the poetics and aesthetics built into the work of Bhakti poets. Even when concepts, images and the materials are taken from an earlier source, they are translated into the individual context of Bhakti experience and expression. Even deities are translated. Thus the primal God Shiva is translated in Tevaram into the heart enchanting locales of temples of Tamil country. However the same Shiva is translated into diverse manifestations of this principle in the ‘Ankita-s’ i.e. the signature lines of Veershaiva poets of Karnataka. For the cowherd saint Ramanna, Shiva is the cosmic cowherd. For Akka Mahadevi, He is sometimes paramour, sometimes husband, sometimes father, sometimes guru and sometimes God. Both the inevitability and the futility of the endless chain of translations is inscribed into vachana texts. In Andal’s poems also many roles that Vishnu as Krishna takes up in the mythology are translated into a personal understanding of Krishna’s love for His Bhaktas. In a way, Andal explores not only her own relationship with Krishna but also how Krishna relates to her in all His dynamism. When she becomes the simple gopika, she belongs to the entire community and seeks Krishna’s compassion; but as a
bride, she would not be contented with anything less than her sole right over Him as her husband.

Inter-Semiotic Transformation in Andal’s Nachiar Tirumoli and Tiruppavai

Nachiar Tirumoli: Celebrating the Desire through Transformation of Classical Love Elements into Bhakti Sentiment.

The fourteen ‘pasurams’ of Nachiar Tirumoli offer a glimpse of various possibilities of Bhakta’s love for God in ‘Madhurya bhava’, specifically ‘bridal mysticism’. If removed from their context, these poems can be read as intense love poems complete with carnal passion. However, as soon as they are put in their original composition context, they become ecstatic songs of extreme longing for the God. These songs are a celebration of human desire, which becomes sacred when directed towards the chosen One. The passion for God presupposes Vairagya (detachment), which is absent in common man-woman relationship. In Bhakti dynamics ‘vairagya’ and sense of desire and passion go hand in hand. While the ‘vairagya’ manifests itself for the objects of the material world, passionate desire manifests for the chosen God. In Bhakti, the equation between ‘vairagya’ and the ‘passion for God’ is directly proportional, more ‘vairagya’ means more intimate desire for the God. Less ‘vairagya’ means less intimacy with the God. That is why, in Bhakti, passion is a sacred sentiment, as the object of passion is the Creator Himself.

Andal frankly sings about her desires as a young woman craving for the union with her lover. But she places these desires in a higher context, where the object of the desire is transcendental and therefore the desire also loses its limiting carnal aspiration. Andal creates this intense Bhakti sentiment in Nachiar Tirumoli by drawing her images from Vishnu mythology and her form from the classical ‘aham’ poetry in Tamil. Besides frank expression of passion, two other significant features of the classical Tamil love poetry that Andal makes use of are: making the nature an important character in the poems and using the dialogic form (every poem in Nachiar Tirumoli is an address to someone or something). Consider for instance the following poem from ‘aham’ tradition:
What She Said
Like milk
not drunk by the calf,
not held in a pail,

a good cow's sweet milk
spilled on the ground,

it is of no use to me,
unused by my man:

my mound of love,
my beauty
dark as mango leaf,

just waiting
to be devoured
by pallor.

Kuruntokai 27 [Ramanujan: 1985:Page.69.]

and the following one from the thirteenth ‘pasuram’ of Nachiar Tirumoli:

I weep and pray; the fellow does not even show his face to say,
“Fear not”, nor ever comes to caress, embrace, roll and leave.
Grazing cows in the dense forest, he plays his flute endlessly.
Go bring the trickle from its hole and wipe the fever from my brow.

[“Last Wishes”, Nachiar Tirumoli. 13: 5. from Nalayira
Divyaprabandham Srirama Bharti: 2000:125]

This passion gets heightened in the 8th verse of the same (13th) hymn where she says:

The lord of Govardhan my lover is a terrible highway bandit. While I pine away,
he does not care to inquire if I am living or dead. If ever I see that rogue, I shall
tear these worthless breasts of mine by their roots, and fling them on his
beautiful chest, then settle my score with him. ["Last Wishes" Nachiar Tirumoli. 13.8 from Nalayira Divyaprabandham. Srirama Bharti: 2000: 126.]

All the poems quoted above are similar in their expression of desire as well in making use of the dialogue as a poetic tool. However, in last two verses, which are by Andal, the context is Bhakti.

Nature is another intimate component in Ancient Tamil poetic form, which is used by Andal extensively in her compositions. Alexander M. Dubianski discusses the characteristics of all the five love ‘tinai-s’ (themes) in the Tamil love poetry in detail. Each theme be it pre-marital clandestine love, separation in love or union in love is associated with plants or flowers characteristic of the respective landscapes. Therefore kurinchi, mullai, palai, marutam and naytal are themes as well as landscapes in various geographical regions in the Tamil Land. Andal makes use of nature in a way very different but not entirely independent of Tamil classical resources. Andal, like other Bhakti poets, does not express her love directly in the love conventions which use natural landscape as a stage where drama of love unfolds in the ‘Aham’ poetry but some of the conventions naturally sieve down into her expression, which are then transformed by her in her own way. For instance, the idea of addressing the female friend and sharing with her the agonies of love and betrayal by the beloved, can be traced back to the Kurinchi theme which focuses on premarital love, which should be kept ‘hidden’ (‘Kalavu’). In this theme, the love is not to be revealed. It is kept a secret and can be revealed only to a lover’s close friend or heroine’s close friend or confidante. Andal uses this convention in both her works but refines it according to her need. In Tiruppavai, this convention comes only as a formal device but in Nachiar Tirumoli she makes a very expansive use of this device to express her feelings for her chosen Lord. She makes every perceived

38 Vidya Dehejia in a small note on “Antal and Tamil Cankam Poetry” confirms this point. She talks about Nachiar Tirumoli poems in this section and says that: Antal speaks of the tenral (southern breeze) and tinkal (Moon) adding to the sorrows of love(Nachiar Tirumoli, hymn 5,verse 10)-an age-old theme of Tamil love poetry. She refers to the concept of peruntinai or excessive love which breaks the rules of social decorum. when she speaks of word getting round that she left her home and family and went to her beloved (Nachiar Tirumoli hymn 12, verse 3). She displays an intensive awareness of nature, which is a hallmark of Cankam poetry as is evident from A.K.Ramanujan’s very choice of title for his translations of those classical poems – “The Interior Landscape”[Dehejia:1990: 23.]
object in nature her confidante and addresses living or non-living beings with equal urgency and urges them to take her message to her beloved or find a way of union with Him.

In fact, the Nachiar Tirumoli song sequence uses aspects of nature and interweaves these images with the mythology and classical form of Tamil love poems. This leads to an excessively intense expression of bridal mysticism. Andal sees the entire world with all its creatures in the light of her relation with the God. Kamdeva, the God of love is worshipped, koel bird is chided; ocean, rainclouds, kaya flowers, white conch, peacock, friends, relatives all are invoked in a Bhakti context, where they all remind her of her beloved. The simplicity of the verses arises from the use of very common images from nature and from Krishna myths. Andal cleverly sings praises of her ‘Kannan’ while expressing her deep desire to become one with Him and no one else.

The lord took water from Bali’s palms; in one stride,
He took the earth as well. Living among good people
in Arangam, he plans to plunder us poor folk now.
[From 11th Pasuram. “A Delirious State”.
Nachiarr Tirumoli, Nalayira Divyaprabandham.
Srirama Bharti: 2000:121]

And

Take a look at these breasts of mine,
They are blindfolded by a red-corset. Seeking the conch-wielding lord alone, they shun the sight of petty mortals. Since they will not enter another household, end this life of mine here, and take me to the banks of Jamuna.
[Srirama Bharti: 2000:123]
In Nachiar Tirumoli, Andal is seen as making use of devices of Tamil ‘Aham’ poetry. At the same time these images create a fit framework for the bridal-mystic Bhakti form.

**Tiruppavai: Bhakti Text as Many Layered Intersemiotic Transformations.**

As Andal is a Vishnu Bhakta, the frame of reference in her poetry is constructed from the whole gamut of Vishnu mythology as expounded in classical, folk, religious and literary sources. 39

However, the most important frame of reference for Andal’s poetry, especially in songs of Tiruppavai, is provided by the Krishna and Gopika-s episode in Gokul and Vrindavan. This episode occurs in all the three puranas that predate Andal viz. Harivansha, Brahma and Vishnu. With slight differences of tone, the intention appears to be the same in all the three narratives.Krishna is the incarnation of the Supreme Being conceived as Vishnu and therefore Gopikas’ love for Him leads to a mystical union with Him.

Andal was thoroughly familiar with the puranic material. How she gained access to this material remains debatable. One important clue in this regard is given by her foster father Vishnuchitta Alvar, who had been composing and singing songs of Krishna based on stories found in these Puranas. 40 It is interesting to note, that Vishnuchitta’s songs touch

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39 Upanishads, Puranas (Harivansha, Brahma and Vishnu).Sattasai, Tamil epics Cillapadikaram and Manimekhalai
40 We are referring here to Vishnu and Brahma purana and Harivansha as they are major puranas which narrate ‘Krishna Charita’ and Krishna and Gopika episode also. Bhagwat Purana which is the most celebrated text on Krishna’s life can not be taken into account as it postdates Andal. It is dated as a 10th century text, while other Puranas are placed before 5th century.

It should be noted here that Krishna and Gopika episode is found in a very elementary form in Harivansh Purana and it appears to be an adaptation of some folk performance or regional narrative. It is an erotic tale of love and longing. A brief summary of the episode is as follows:

On an autumn night of full moon, Krishna is inclined to participate in gopikas’ sports; he plays mesmerizing tune on his flute; all the Gopikas leave their household and are drawn to the Vrindavan; Krishna welcomes these love- lorn cowherdesses but soon disappears leaving them pining for him; imitating his acts and calling out to him; seeing them in such distress he manifests himself again and then follows the famous ‘raas-nritya’. After this night of longing and consummation, Krishna goes away with Balarama to Mathura leaving the gopikas back in Vrindavan.

In Brahma Purana, it appears in some of the text variations as an interpolation. In Vishnu Purana this episode is rendered more suitably as a part of a larger whole. In Vishnu Purana theological elements aredispersed in the tale:
upon all the aspects of viraha-bhakti. Many of Vishnuchitta’s songs refer to the effect of Krishna’s presence and His music on the gopikas:

When Govinda played his flute, he threw his weight on his left shoulder; his two hands came together; his eyebrows knitted, his belly rose, his mouth closed in. Deer-like and peacock-like maidens, their flowered coiffure loosening, their dress slipping, their Sarees held with one hand, stood shyly apart, running their collyrium-lined eyes over him. [“The Lord Plays His Flute” by Vishnuchitta Alvar]

[Srirama Bharti: 2000: 54]

In another pasuram:

The cowherd lord who lifted the mount and protected the cows has played his flute all day long to graze his calves. He comes back with his fellows, down the street. O Sister, come and see! I have never seen such a one before! My dress has loosened, my bangles do not stay, my young risen breasts are not in my control. [“Maidens on Seeing the Lord” by Vishnuchitta Alvar.]

[Srirama Bharti: 2000: 49]

One(Gopi), as she sallied forth, beheld some of the seniors of the family, and dared not venture, contenting herself with meditating on Krishna with closed eyes and entire devotion, by which immediately all acts of merit were effaced by rapture, and sin was expiated by regret at not beholding him: and others, again reflecting upon the cause of the world, in the form of supreme Brahama, obtained by their singing final emancipation.

(Vishnu Purana. Chapter 13. Page-424.)

and at the end of the chapter, further...

Thus the illimitable being, the benevolent remover of all imperfections, assumed the character of a youth amongst the females of the herdsmen of Vraja:
pervading their natures, and that of their lords by his own essence, all diffusive like the wind: for even as in all creatures the elements of ether, fire, earth, water, and air, are comprehended, so also is he everywhere present, and in all.

(Vishnu Purana Page 426.)

However it is only later in the Bhagwat Purana that a complete theological symbolism is added to the whole episode of what in this text is called as ‘Maharaas’. A critique of this episode is given by Friedhelm Hardy:
The version of the gopi story which we find in BrP, (Brahama Purana) and in a slightly longer form in ViP, (Vishnu Purana) is the first example of a full narrative treatment of the episode, and at the same time, of a religious interpretation in terms of normative ideology. The myth itself has become enriched by two major themes, the rasa dance and final viraha. The author has remained faithful to his source, the Hv, (Harivansha) by ignoring the figure of Radhika and the gopis’ jealousy, but by emphasizing viraha theme and sublimating gopis’ love as a form of Bhakti-yoga he has removed the earthiness of the original story and eliminated the primary importance of Krishna’s physical presence among the gopis’ and of their sensual perception of him. [Hardy:1983:104.]
Then there are songs in Vishnuchitta Alvar’s oeuvre which cover all the myths found in ‘Krishna Charita’ and also some about ‘Ram Charita’. The following song is a typical example of how myths about Krishna’s life are integrated in Alvars’ songs:

The lord who destroyed the sinister Arjuna trees, the angry elephant, the Asura Pralamba, the fierce horse Kesin, the cart that ran amuck, and mighty wrestlers, - as simply as the pots he broke to enjoy the sounds they made, - resides in Tiruarangam. He lifts devotees into the realms of the radiant Sun with a tall ladder -of -no -return, reveals himself and takes them into his service in Vaikunta. [“About the Temple in Srirangam” by Vishnuchitta Alvar]

[Srirama Bharti: 2000:80]

It can be fairly assumed, that since Andal was brought up in this household where songs about God’s life were routine, she had integrated these myths in her life and her philosophy of Bhakti. Later she herself sung some of the sweetest symphonies ever composed in Bhakti tradition, expressing her own desire to merge with the Divine. 41 Her evolution as a bhakta must have been influenced by the circumstances in which her life was spent. Andal’s childhood was spent in the house of Vishnuchitta or Perialvar, who was a temple priest when he found Godai as an infant in his garden. He was a great bhakta. Therefore, the atmosphere in which Andal was brought up, had the local temple of Srivelliputtur at the centre of its activities. This same temple was also probably the location of Vishnuchitta’s house, which might have been situated in one corner of the premises. She grew up seeing her father lovingly weaving flower garlands for the deity in the temple and adoring the God in various ways including singing His glories through his

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In order to understand Andal’s experience and her expression in her poetry from Bhakti perspective, one can make use of an analytical mode which can be applied to all endeavors that humans take up to achieve something. Let us first understand it through an analogy of feeling of hunger and its satiation. When one feels hungry, then this feeling becomes the stimulus for search for food involving perhaps gathering of raw food items. Then these food items would be subjected to the process of cooking or some other kind of processing. After the food has been cooked one eats it and experiences the fulfillment of having eaten. Now if we translate this analogy to Bhakti poetics, it can be said that the hungry person is the Bhakta or Sadhaka or more generally the seeker who is seeking fulfillment in life in order to satiate the deep seated hunger in his/h her soul. He/She takes help of some means (sadhans or instruments), by adopting these means he/she undergoes some Sanskara or processing and finally he/she attains the goal or Sadhya (which is realisation of god or fulfillment in case of Bhakti). This can be shown with the help of a figure as follows: Sadhaka(seeker) ----(takes up)---- Sadhana (spiritual practice) ----(through some)----- Sadhans (means) ----(Undergoes)---- Sanskara (rite de passage) ----(and attains)---- Sadhya (Goal).
songs. As her father loved the temple deity, it became very natural for the little girl to look up to the same deity as someone very important in her life and later as a grown up girl she wanted to experience the presence of this same God in a more manifest form.

Hence, to look at Andal's situation in the above perspective, Andal is the seeker or the sadhaka who wants to experience the reality of God as her personal God. She begins her search with the help of the means that were in ample in her living atmosphere- temple deity, myths about Him and songs sung in His praise.

These means were part of her cultural tradition as well as her parental heritage. These 'means' or 'sadhans' were none other than the path of Bhakti and ecstatic singing in praise of the Lord.

The path of Bhakti as related in the experience of bhaktas is the path, where the goal can be experienced while still being in the path itself and the seeker can enjoy the "anubhava" or God experience at any stage in his/her journey. The goal for the bhakta is to be eternally in the company of the loved One. Before this goal is finally achieved, there can be other desires which will shed off on their own in the path. Bhakta's steadfast approach will finally immerse him/her in the experience of loving union.

In Tiruppavai, Andal is moving with her friends to the house of the Lord. On this journey they set out with desires which they wish that the Lord would fulfill. Until they reach the house and come face to face with the Lord inside the 'Garbhagraha', Sanctum Sanctorum, they keep their wishes intact. Therefore Andal asks for the objects, which can be used to offer worship to the Lord and other worldly blessings like prosperity and "measureless wealth".

In stanza twenty-six, Andal clearly states what her group of cowherd girls wants:

   Now hear what we want: conches like your milk-white Panchajanya which reverberates through all creation with its booming sound, a big wide drum, and singers who sing Pallandu, a bright lamp, festoons and flags, --- O lord, --- grant us these boons.
However, after seeing the Lord, all the extraneous desires just drop off and she appeals to him to grant them nothing else but the boon of loving service to Him i.e. *Bhakti* in all their lives:

Know that these goods are not what we came for. Through seven lives and forever we would be close to you, and serve you alone. And if our desires be different, you must change them. (Stanza 29. *Tiruppavai.*)


Closeness to their God bestows such fulfillment on them that now they do not need any thing from this world and so cannot ask for any other boon but to be with Him in all their births. Union or Sakshatkar with God gives the *bhakta* such a sense of completeness and oneness with all creation that all desires disappear. It is this mystery about *Bhakti*, which makes it such a fascinating ideal.

Nevertheless, Andal’s *Tiruppavai* is not a simple song of Gopikas’ love (*Bhakti*) for Krishna. It is a very rich tapestry of wo/man’s relationship to Unmanifest Supreme. This poem touches so many psychological aspects of human psyche and those of religion, myth and culture, that it is ever pregnant with more than can ever be comprehended from a particular time/space zone. It moves in many time/space zones and many cultural/discursive fields.

*Tiruppavai: Transformations of Various Cultural and Folk Elements into Bhakti Signifieds*

At a more visible and grosser level, *Bhakti* involves some basic paraphernalia like a temple, its deity (*Sadhyā*), *Bhakta* (*Sadhaka*) and means of *Bhakti* (*Sadhans*). This paraphernalia is connected to and originates from a larger structure of community and its culture. Variants in this paraphernalia are provided by the community and its historical past and present. Sometimes *bhaktas* like Akka Mahadevi shed off all these props and

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42 It is this state, which is referred to as *Prema Bhakti*, and Narada says in his Sutra: “Yajñatva matto bhavati sathdho bhavatyatmaramo bhavati.” (By knowing which [wo] man becomes intoxicated (or overjoyed) peaceful and completely immersed in the enjoyment of the Bliss of Atman.) (Sutra six. *Narada Bhakti sutra.*) Swami Sivananda. *Narada Bhakti Sutras*. UP.Himalayas: The Divine Life Society.1957.

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create their own path to their Chosen one. While bhaktas like Andal use the same paraphernalia to transcend all paraphernalia.

Andal in her Tiruppavai uses this basic Bhakti paraphernalia and colours them with elements drawn from her community consciousness. Most of the traditional rituals are transformed into a unique kind of referent for the ideal of Bhakti.

Margali Bathing Ritual: Metaphor of Purification for Bhakti

The Tiruppavai begins with invitation to all the girls of Ayarpadi (a street like a street from classic Gokula) to join each other for ‘Margali’ bath- festival in the first stanza:

In the month of Margali of auspicious bright moon day, bejeweled girls who would join us for the bath!-come along. Graceful-girls- of- Ayarpadi cowherd clan, Sweet little ones! Narayana is son of Nandgopa renowned for his sharp spear and fierce deeds; he is the darling child, lion cub of beautiful-eyed Yashoda. Our dark-hued, lotus-eyed, radiant moon-faced lord alone will grant us our boons. Girls come assemble, and win the world’s praise.

(Tiruppavai, Stanza 1.) [Srirama Bharti: 2000:93]

However, it is the fourth stanza, which explains the real nature of the bath Andal intends to take with the other girls of her community. Water is a symbol of purification and cleansing. However, water of the river or a pond, which traditionally serves bathing purposes, seems to fall short of the purpose that Andal wants to accomplish i.e. to prepare herself and her mates for Krishna’s Bhakti. Waters needed for His Bhakti should have a semblance of His Form. Hence, in the fourth stanza, dark rain cloud, that is associated with Krishna is invoked. Being of the same colour as Krishna, it is dear as Him. Different aspects of the journey of the cloud in its cycle on the earth are identified with some aspect of Krishna’s personality. Then the cloud is lovingly asked to come pouring down

It is clear that Andal’s bathing (niratal) has a wealth of significance beyond the simple literal bathing suggested by the pavai vow. Krishna (the divine) is envisaged as a tirtha or sacred purifying waters, and the ‘diving deep’ is somewhat akin to that envisaged by the term “Alvar” as “one who dives deep (into the divine).” Only in this context does the absence, in the Tiruppavai, of any description of bathing in physical waters, be it pond, tank, or river, make logical sense. Only then may we understand Andal’s request that Krsna should “bathe us now in the waters,” to be understood as the divine waters of Krsna’s grace.
on them to soak them fully. The waters of the cloud rain down on them as Krishna’s grace and all of them are immersed in it:

O Dark-rain cloud! Dear as Krishna! Pray reveal yourself in full measure. Enter the deep ocean, gorge yourself, roar and ascend high; darken like the hue of primeval lord Padmanabha, strike like the resplendent discus on his mighty shoulder, roar with thunder like the great conch in his hand, come pouring down on us like arrows cast from his Saranga bow, that we too may live, and enjoy the bath festival of Margali.

(Tiruppavai.Stanza 4.)

[Srirama Bharti:2000:94]

Andal transforms above-mentioned ritual of bathing, which originates in the pre-Bhakti milieu in ancient Tamil culture, purely into a symbol of Bhakti. In fact, after the first stanza, actual bathing is nowhere mentioned in the whole poem. Andal is certainly speaking of metaphorical bathing in which the Bhakta dives deep into higher consciousness of God. Incidentally the name Alvar, given to this group of Tamil Vaishnava saints including Andal has the same meaning viz. “one who dives deep (into the divine)”

In fact, some religious readings of the poem suggest that Andal is actually calling out to other ten Alvars, waking them up into Krishna consciousness. This however can be refuted, as many of the Alvars were born after Andal. Also all of them were great bhaktas, inherently so drunk with Vishnu Bhakti, that there was apparently no need to wake them up into an awareness of Bhakti.

Concept of Pavai Nonbu (Vrata or Vow)

‘Pavai’ is the Tamil word for a young girl, a woman, an image, a doll and also for the vow of young woman or vow of pavai. (Hence, Tiruppavai may mean “sacred woman”and also “sacred vow of woman”). As a vow or vrata, pavai has been an ancient Tamil ritual, the popularity of which is established in literary works of Tamil Sangam
period and also later Jaina and Shaiva poetry. Ancient Tamil anthology Paripatal, belonging to Sangam period, refers to a verse on river ‘Vaikai’, where young maidens gather early in the morning and take bath in cold January waters and then pray for the gift of fine lovers and a number of children. Taking bath in a river or pond is the most significant part of this ritual, fasting etc. are variants. For instance keeping fast and worshipping the Goddess for a fine husband is a popular ancient Indian custom with women. There are references in Ramayana and Mahabharata about Sita and Rukmini, who perform this ritual of fast and worship the Goddess to get in boon their desired husbands, Rama and Krishna respectively.

In her Tiruppavai, Andal adapts this ancient Tamil ritual as one of the sadhans (means) to attain her goal of Krishna Bhakti. As other instruments for attaining the same, she does nothing less than recreating mythical ‘Gokula’ itself as a pastoral idyll, where simple cowherd folk live without vice in complete harmony with each other. Theirs is a well-knit community in which everyone shares the same fate. If nature is benevolent, all of them prosper, but if nature turns harsh, they suffer together. Andal superimposes the image of this mythical ‘Gokula’ (Ayarpadi) on her own town of Srivelliputtur, where the local Vishnu Temple “Vadaperumkoil” becomes the palace of Krishna’s foster father Nandgopa and the young girls of the community become the gopikas. Thus the space zone in Srivelliputtur is translated into the mythical space of ‘Gokula’. Andal is aware of the interconnectedness of all human fate and hence calls out to all her friends (Sakhis) to take up the ‘Nonbu’ (‘vrata’). Andal here changes the deity, who is the River Goddess or the supreme Goddess to her own Ishta Krishna. This vrata in her poem is transformed from a ritual for worldly achievement into a symbolic ritual for achievement of Krishna Bhakti.

44 Vidya Dahejia relates that: One assumes that it was from a variety of such sources belonging to the early Cankam (Sangam) anthologies, all of which reflect the popularity of the pavai ritual, generally in a secular context, that Antal found material for her Tiruppavai poems which she adapted to the worship of Krishna. Shaiva saint Manikavacakar probably drew on the same sources for his Tiruvempavai in which the god addressed is Siva. A Jain pavai song of early date, belonging perhaps to the eighth century and addressing the deity as Arivan, has survived as a single verse only, but it contains the essential components of the pavai theme. It provides a glimpse into the adaptation of the theme to a religion that stresses world renunciation, and it also highlights the great popularity of the pavai tradition in Tamil-speaking region of South India. [Dehijia: 1990: 17]

Later in Bhagwat Purana there is a reference to this kind of ritual. Once when the rains fail in Gokula, cowherds ask their young wives and daughters (Gopikas) to take up the vrata and worship so that the country gets rains in abundance. In the process of worshipping God they attain Krishna Himself.
After the symbolic purification of Margali bath, which is represented by soaking in the rain cloud and in a way affecting some kind of bodily cleansing, Andal calls out the girls of Ayarpadi to take more vrata to keep their minds from any kind of distractions:

O people of the world, pray hear about the vows we undertake. Singing the praise of the lord who sleeps in the Ocean of Milk, we shall abstain from milk, and Ghee, and bathe before dawn. We shall not line our eyes with collyrium, nor adorn our hair with flowers. Refraining from forbidden acts, avoiding evil tales we shall give alms and charity in full measure, and pray for the elevation of spirit. Let's rejoice.

(Tiruppavai. Stanza 2.)


Here we witness, what we have defined as Sanskara—a process of adding all that is desirable and removing all that is undesirable. Initially they take these vows in order to prepare themselves for Bhakti to bring prosperity and wealth to everyone in the community and to redeem it of any ill fate whatsoever, be it a natural calamity or an individual spiritual crisis. However, as the poem progresses these 'sanskaras' become a means to attain Krishna.

Rituals of Classical Navadha Bhakti Transformed into Modes of Poetic Narration

Amongst the nine aspects of ‘Navadha Bhakti’ or nine fold Bhakti—Shravan, Kirtan, Smaran, Padasevan, Archan, Vandan, Dasya, Sakhya, Atmanivedan—the first three aspects (Shravan, Kirtan, Smaran) relate to the ‘Name’ of the God; the second three (Padasevan, Archan, Vandan) relate to the ‘Form’ of the God and the last three (Dasya, Sakhya, Atmanivedan) are associated with the ‘Relation’ to the God. Andal makes use of these dimensions of traditional Bhakti by weaving them into the narrative of her poem Tiruppavai. In the earlier section, we discussed how Andal transforms a state of mind into a ritual i.e.the idea to become purified before meeting the God is transformed into a bathing ritual and taking up of some vows. However, in this context one can see how Andal effects a reversal and how a traditional Bhakti ritual is transformed into a linguistic mode to become a part of the song, which gives a different lease of life to the ritual itself.
Andal draws her *sakhis'* attention to the miracle of Krishna’s name, form and relation to them. In fact, singing and chanting the names of Krishna is one of the main themes of the poem:

If we come pure and strew fresh flowers, with songs on our lips and feelings in our hearts, and offer praise with joined hands to our Lord Damodara, then he will forgive our past misdeeds, and even what remains will disappear like cotton unto fire. So come let us praise him.

*(Tiruppavai. Stanza 5. Page 94.)*

The phrase “If we come pure and strew fresh flowers, with songs on our lips and feelings in our hearts and offer praise with joined hands...” involves all the characteristics of *Archan* and *Vandan*.

The first fifteen stanzas of *Tiruppavai* are a celebration of Krishna’s names and also of his various forms in different ‘*avatara*s’ especially Rama and Krishna ‘*avatara*’. Actually all the names of Krishna originate from the miraculous deeds that he performed during his human stay on the earth. Andal sings of many names and forms of her multifaceted Lord and by describing various facets of His magnificent being to her sakhis, draws everyone’s attention to His Supreme Godhead:

Narayana is the son of Nandgopa renowned for his sharp spear and fierce deeds; he is the darling child, lion-cub of beautiful-eyed Yashoda. Our dark hued, lotus eyed, radiant moonfaced lord alone will grant us our boons. Girls come assemble, and win the world’s praise.

*(Tiruppavai. Stanza 1. Page 93.)*

She is in a way describing Krishna’s names, which are associated closely with his Divine actions:
All the little ones have reached the place of worship singing the praises of the lord who killed the demon Ravana and ripped the beaks of the demon-bird Bakasura.

(Tiruppavai. Stanza 13. Page 97.)

These ways of shravan, manan and kirtan are entirely different from traditional chanting of God’s names. Andal in her own way sings the glories of the Lord’s deeds, which is in semblance of traditional modes of Bhakti. These modes of shravan, manan and kirtan and also those of padasevan, archan, and vandan, are transformed by Andal in her invocations. All these are happening indirectly while calling out and preparing the sakhis for an experience of Krishna’s Bhakti which leads to liberation.

Just as she transforms the way of talking about the ‘names’ and ‘forms’ of her Ishta, Krishna, Andal also transforms the usual relationship of Gopikas to Krishna as it is given in the Puranas and in myths about ‘Krishna Charita’. Puranas and myths talk about the relation of divine love between Gopikas and Krishna, which is described under the rubric of ‘madhurya bhava’ in classical Bhakti poetics. Though Andal uses the same frame of reference viz. Krishna and Gopika episode in Gokula, she brings a different kind of bearing to this relation. She changes this relation from one of Lover and beloved to that of Lord and vassal. She addresses Krishna in one of the songs as follows:

Like the great kings of the wide world, who came in hordes and stood humbly at your bedstead, we have come to you.

(Tiruppavai. Stanza 22. Page 100.)

And you who upset the despot king Kansa’s plans and kindled fire in his bowels,—you are our master. We have come to pay respects to you Grant us your favour of measureless wealth and blessed service, that we may end our sorrow and rejoice.

(Tiruppavai. Stanza 25. Page 101.)
Gopikas in Andal’s Tiruppavai stand in an aspect of humble self-surrender just as a vassal or a subject stands in front of his Lord and King. This change, effected by Andal in the usual frame of gopikas’ Bhakti attitude to Krishna, is very much in keeping with her design and goal in the context of this particular poem. As in this poem, Tiruppavai, it is not the individual salvation that is being sought but a kind of liberation for whole of the community. It is a search for bliss and harmony for all those, who are related to each other through community living. Andal makes sure in Tiruppavai that not a single friend of hers is left behind. Using various means of calling out – gentle chiding, making fun, inspiring through example, she wakes up all the gopikas. So the metaphor for waking up of the gopikas, which is traditionally interpreted by some as a waking up of the Alvars saints by Andal, can be further interpreted as a waking up of the entire community and extendedly the entire human race by her.

Keeping the interests of the community over those of the self was voluntarily taken up as a mission by all saints in Indian Bhakti history. All the saint poets, who became a part of all pervading Bhakti movement communicated the message of equality and fraternity of all human beings regardless of their caste, class, gender and religion. To bind people in love and harmony and to show them a higher path of love for God through love for fellow beings was taken up and accomplished by all saint poets.

**Transforming Time and Space**

Andal’s infusion of mythical Gokula onto her own landscape and her use of subtle associations lend Tiruppavai, the poem, a deep symbolic meaning. She constantly moves back and forth in time and space to allow for an experience of the three aspects of the Divine: Omnipresence, Omniscience and Omnipotence. Let us consider the following stanzas:

> Look, the birds have begun their morning song. Child arise! do you not hear the great booming sound of the snow-white conch in the temple of Vishnu, King of the birds? He who drained the ogress Putana’s poisoned breasts, and kicked the cart that ran amuck, lies reclining in the Milk Ocean, Sages and Yogis hold him
in their hearts and gently rise, uttering ‘Hari’, deep sound that enters our hearts and makes us rejoice!

(Stanza 6. Tiruppavai. N.L.D. Page.95.)

[Srirama Bharti: 2000:95]

It becomes clear, how Andal smoothly passes over to primeval time of creation from the present moment of being. She touches upon the myths about Vishnu and connects His various avatars to her own Ishta Madhava, Krishna. Hence, though Krishna has taken birth in a cowherd clan and fortunately lives in their community, Andal never looses the awareness of His Omnipresence. Andal here refers to ‘Ksheer Sagar’ or Milk Ocean, where Vishnu lies in reclining pose ever since and even before the creation happened. In the same sentence, she refers to child Krishna’s killing of ogress Putana. Now, this time zone is Krishna’s childhood. Then in the next sentence, she refers to Sages and Yogis, who generally live away from human habitations but Andal listens to their chanting of Hari’s (another name of God Vishnu) name. In the same moment is also audible the morning song of birds and the sound of ‘snow-white conch in the temple of Vishnu’.

Therefore, Milk Ocean of primeval times, ‘Gokula’ at the time of Krishna’s infancy, India of the time of sages and yogis (probably times of Upanishads), ‘Ayarpadi’ street of ‘Gokula’ of Krishna’s youth to which the maidens belong and this day in the life of Andal when birds are singing in the morning and conch is resounding in the Vishnu temple, all these come alive in one space of her awareness. And with these spaces come alive the respective times which belong to these spaces.

This is a general pattern, which is present in all stanzas of Tiruppavai. In effect, this pattern is followed in the poetry of all the eleven Alvars. For example, following stanza from Tirumangai Alvar’s Periya Tirumoli picked up randomly from Nalayira Divya Prabhandham also merges different times and spaces into a single space and moment:

The golden -walled city of Lanka’s king Ravana’s five-times two heads were scattered by the hot Brahma Astra arrows of our lord the bow -wielder He resides in the Alundur where bumble bees into golden Punna flowers, then go to arrow -sharp -eyed dames to enjoy the five qualities of their coiffured hair.
All the Alvars maintain this awareness of immanence as well as transcendence of God. He is present in all spaces and times.

**Sojourn to a Sacred Space: House or Temple**

Another structural pattern, that is seen in Andal’s poem *Tiruppavai*, is that of a journey taken up together by a group of girls of a cowherd community. The first five stanzas state the goal of the journey and the preparation necessary to achieve that goal. These stanzas talk about the nature of the ritual practice and the glory of the personal God whose ‘*Sakshatkara*’ (lit. appearing before the eye) is sought. Andal’s motto is to see Krishna face to face. This rendezvous, however, can happen if Andal and her friends are able to please Him by purifying themselves bodily as well as mentally. Purification of the body is primary and various *vratas* and rituals are taken up to achieve that purpose. Purification of the mind comes next and this can be done by focusing all attention on Krishna and by removing all the unnecessary thoughts from the mindscapes. Hence, Andal insists that all of them hear and sing praises of Krishna. This is not just to please Him but also to fill one’s mind with Him and Him only.

This is the course of *Bhakti* Yoga. Andal creates this course, which can be taken up by any individual to have a ‘*Sakshatkara*’ with Krishna, who is a manifestation of the Divine and is at the same time a symbol for higher awareness. *Tiruppavai* in this way is also about expansion of the awareness.

If *Bhakti* is considered as a kind of expression of a more expansive awareness, an awareness that has penetrated subtler levels of consciousness, then we can read Andal’s *Tiruppavai*, an intense *Bhakti* song, as a symbolic representation of a journey of individual awareness from grosser levels to subtler and psychic levels where divine light (enlightenment) is experienced.

We have talked about the content of the first five stanzas of the poem. After these five stanzas, the next ten stanzas are sharply dialogic in nature. They dramatize the gathering together of the girls as all of them wish to undertake the journey to meet Krishna with
each other (as it truly becomes the *gopikas*) and not alone. So hereafter they go to each house and call out all their friends as they seemed to have planned in advance. Just as in mythical ‘Gokula’ each *gopika* had to overcome some or the other hurdle in order to join Krishna in ‘Raas dance’ at the bank of Yamuna, these maidens from ‘Ayarpadi’ also have to overcome many physical and mental barriers which generally appear in the form of laziness, sleep, illusions etc.

However, these stanzas, though dialogic and conversational in nature, symbolically appear to be a call to reach out to deeper layers of one’s own consciousness. As the self begins to recognize these layers, it becomes aware of the possibility of seeing all-linking, underlying Universal Consciousness, which is very close to what has been explained as *Turiya* state of consciousness in the chapter on *Bhakti Experience*. Thus, though *Tiruppavai* appears to be a simple undertaking to see and meet the chosen deity, Krishna, who fortunately happens to be one of their own kins, it can also be understood as a journey of the individual self to the Cosmic Self, which can further be equated with full expansion of the individual consciousness.

**Intersemiotic Transformations of Andal’s Life and Works in Later Periods**

**Drama**

*Sri Krishnadeva Raya’s Amuktamalyada:*

Krishnadeva Raya was a famous sixteenth century Vijayanagara ruler who ruled between 1509 and 1530 A.D. He was a great connoisseur of arts and was a writer in his own strength. He wrote in Sanskrit and Telugu.

His *Amuktamalyada* is a famous verse drama based on the story of Sri Andal. *Amuktamalyada* is characterized as a *Prabandham*. *Prabandham* is the specific name given to a kind of writing in Telugu where the theme is focused on the main character; the main *rasa* is *Sringara rasa*; composed in ornamental style and is an original work.

Krishnadeva Raya did include major features of *Prabandham* in his writing but there are some clear deviations. One can see, that the name of the story is “My Giver of the Worn
Garland”, *Amuktamalyada*, mentioned at the end of all seven chapters within the body of the text. The principal character, according to the title, is Andal who wore and gave the garland to the Lord. However, it is strange, that Andal comes into picture only in the fifth and the seventh chapter. The rest of the work is a beautiful delineation of the character of the city of Sri Velliputtur; of the story of Vishnuchitta; of the decadence of Shaivism and that of the philosophy of Vaishnavism as the supreme religion.

This verse play opens with Krishnadeva Raya’s dream where he, sees Lord of Venkata (Vishnu) imploring him to write about the damsel who gave Him a worn garland and said to Him, “The marriage will be in Rangam” and the play ends with the marriage itself.

This play does not in any way deviate as far as the facts about Andal’s life are concerned. It is the same mythical story about Andal, that had been available through the myths and legends, that evolved around the lives of Alvar saints including herself. The play appears remarkable for its flowery language and elaborate imagery. For instance, thirty eight verse stanzas are dedicated to describe the beauty of Andal as a young maiden. To quote:

Her body, splendorous as gold  
Her face, bright as moon  
The redness of her lips  
By their wealth and their colour,  
Gave her not her name  
But he clear black shade of her hair  
With the arrogance of Beetles  
Gave her the name ‘Shyama’  
.....

Like a challenge to the Lord of Yadu, who posesses only one wheel in his strong shoulders, in the rabble with Manmatha, many curled hair locks befitted that young lady. (Translated from Telugu into English by Sujata Reddy)

In the seventh and last chapter the marriage between the Lord of Sri Rangam and Sri Andal is described in fine detail with the divine Bridegroom playfully participating in all the human rituals of marriage:
Going to Villiputuru, they stayed in the groom’s home that Vishvakarma built. There the groom had the turmeric smearing ceremony and unction, bathed in perfumed waters to the flow of melodious music by great musicians and Narada, with the flow of nectar. The Kaustubha shined in his conch-like neck. [He] wore fine bracelets above the burly jewels, smeared perfumes, wore gold-threaded silk clothes and tulasi and a variety of flowers. Lovely garlands dangled on his bosom.

And then, [he] formally entered happy Vishnucitta’s house.

In the ceremony, Sarvani, Vani and other Gods, sang the best songs of the history of Janaki’s marriage with Raghu

[Translated from Telugu by Sujata Reddy]

This play is significant not for what it says about the life of Andal but for how it says it.

Masti Venkatesh’s Bhattara Magalu:

Written in 1969, Bhattara Magalu is a verse play written by the Jnanapeeth award winning writer Masti Venkatesh Iyengar. This was published by Jeevana Karyalaya, Bangalore.

Though it is not directly based on Andal’s story, it is inspired by it. Says Masti in the introduction:

“They aware of Vaishnava Tradition believe that Vishnuchitta is the mother of baby Andal.

History says that Bhatta got a child. It also says, it was like Janaka finding Sita. When I was brooding on this ten years ago, the story of Attulai crystallized in my mind. As time went by, it became clear and took shape of the play.

It was born in my imagination and has no basis in the tradition.
If traditionalists feel, that accepting this story is a crime, let them not take the child of the story to be Andal. Even that great bhakta should forgive my audacity that made up this story inspired by history.”

The play tries to understand and depict the episode of Andal’s miraculous birth in human terms.

A young man called Mannar comes to the sage Bhatta to tell his story of woe. His dear wife Attulai, whom he married after many years of love, is reported dead. This false rumor is spread by those jealous of their love when Mannar is away travelling. He is at a loss and wants to take sanyasa. Bhatta asks him to wait and sends him on a pilgrimage. Sanyasa can wait, he says.

The next day Attulai and her mother come to Bhatta with their story of woe. The same mischievous rumor-mongers have told them that Mannar had died during his travel. Bhatta connects the two stories and asks them to tarry in his ashram till Mannar returns from his pilgrimage.

Mannar returns, but as a sanyasi. He has defied Bhatta by taking sanyasa in his anguish. He is shocked to find his wife alive. But it is too late. He cannot go back to married life. Attulai’s pleadings, that his decision was based on misinformation, has no effect on him. Distraught, Attulai attempts suicide by drowning. But Mannar rescues her. Seized by passion, she forces him into love making. Mannar feels he has violated the code of sanyasa and goes away for penance. Attulai becomes pregnant soon. She is in a dilemma. If she goes back home with the child, she has to face calumny from wicked villagers. At this point Bhatta finds a way out. He suggests that after the child birth Attulai should abandon the child in his garden and go home. He assures them that he will take care of the child telling people that she is the gift of God.

In the last scene, the baby daughter is seen at the root of the banyan tree covered in a saree. Says Bhatta:

‘You are rolled in a saree. Mother Ranganayaki has come to dwell on earth. Come into my hands O great mother.’
He then goes on to compare her with Sita. He also feels his dead mother has come back to be his daughter. He adds:

The father left you. The mother was afraid to call you her own. Still, I will not ask what you have come into the world for. From now on you are my child....Let your life be pure for ever. (Let your parents merits) walk you on path of virtue as if you are the avtara of Ranganayaki and place you in the front row of devotees. Come child, come. In world’s eyes, you are of immaculate birth, Lakshmi, Sita and Bhatta’s daughter. [Iyengar: 1969: 54-55]

Without disrespecting the tradition, this play humanizes Saint Andal’s story.

**Cinema**

**Tirumal Perumai by A.P. Nagarajan**

The genre of *Bhakti* films is a very important stream in modern Indian cinema, particularly in the South. Films like ‘Sant Tukaram’, ‘Sant Jnaneswar’ (Marathi), ‘Avvaiyar’, ‘Haridas’ (Tamil), ‘Vemana’, ‘Potana’ (Telugu), ‘Jagatjyothi Basaveshwara’, ‘Bedara Kannappa’, ‘Bhakta Kanakadasa’ (Kannada) have been some of the biggest box office hits in 20th century Indian cinema. Apart from testifying to the hold of *Bhakti* worldview in contemporary India, these movies have produced great character singers/actors like KP Sundarambal, M.S. Subbalakshmi, Tyagaraj Bhagawatar, V Nagiah, Dr Rajkumar, who specialised in the roles of devotional saints. However, it is strange that no full-fledged feature films have been done about neither on Andal nor Akka. A documentary films devoted to Akka has been discussed in the study.

We will now take a look at a fairly well-known Tamil film by a renowned director of the 1960’s and 70’s, A.P. Nagarajan. The title of the film is *Tirumal Perumai*, a sequence of four episodes centring around the lives of four Alvars. The first episode centres around the story of Vishnuchitta and Andal. These roles are played by Shivaji Ganeshan, who ruled Tamil cinema for nearly three decades, and KR Vijaya, a very famous heroine of the 1960’s and 70’s, respectively.

This film was part of the revival of *Bhakti* themes in cinema spearheaded by A. P. Nagarajan. He made a series of devotional films known for their spectacles and grandeur.
The first of the series was *Tiruvilaiyadal*, retelling the stories of Tamil *Shiva purana*, *Tiruviliyadalpuranam*. Following upon the phenomenal success of this motion picture, he followed it up with another Shivaji Ganeshan starrer, *Tiruvarutselvar*, a sequence of episodes about three Nayanmars. *Tirumal Perumai* was the next in this series.

The first scene retells the legend about Andal’s appearance in Vishnuchitta’s ‘*tulsi grove*’ (basil garden), her growing up into a great devotee of Vishnu and her final merger into deity of Srirangam. Apart from remarkable portrayals by the lead actors, the excellent music by K V Mahadevan is the chief source of the film’s strength. The songs used in the film include, apart from Andal’s own compositions, a devotional poem on Krishna by the famous 20th century Tamil poet Subahmanya Bharathiyar.

The next scene depicts with a song addressed to Krishna being sung by Vishnuchtta while collecting flowers for puja. At this point he discovers a baby-girl in the garden, which he accepts as Lord Vishnu’s gift. The next important scene is the one in which Andal is discovered wearing the garland to be offered to Lord. To Vishnuchittan, this is sacrilege. After knowing that Andal had ‘desecrated’ the garland before offering it to Lord, he throws it away only to discover it is back around the neck of Lord’s idol, a vindication that *Bhakti* is superior to ritualism. Vishnuchittan’s learned piety is thus humbled. Upon her coming of age, Vishnuchittan wants to fulfil his fatherly duties by marrying her. He sets about looking for a bridegroom in spite of Andal’s protests that she belongs only to Lord Vishnu. Her absorption in the Lord is depicted through the picturisation of the famous Krishna song by Bharathiyar, which opens with the line: *parkum idaiyalellam nandalala/ Un kariya niram tonrudada nadalala* (Wherever I turn my eyes O Nandalala, I see your dark color O Nandalala!)

The next song picturisation is that of the famous first stanza of *Tiruppavai*. Andal is depicted as performing the Margali rite singing the stanza with a group of young girls (*gopikas*). This is after Vishnuchittan becomes reconciled to Andal’s resolve to wed none other than the Lord.

The climax of the episode is the dramatisation of the legend of Andal’s merger with Lord Ranganatha in Srirangam. The episode emphasizes Andal’s unorthodox devotion and marriage as opposed to traditional religion and marriage. The spiritual power of Andal is
shown to be superior to that of her foster father and senior saint Vishnuchitta. In spite of having the superstar Shivaji in the lead role, it is K R Vijaya playing Andal who gets foregrounded in the episode.

A P Nagarajan’s treatment of the story emphasizes the feminine and the devotional as opposed to the masculine and the rational—one of the leitmotive of Bhakti expressions. The film projects the mythical framework that sets Andal’s life and at no point does it question this framework. This is in complete contrast to Madhushree Datta’s film on Akka Mahadevi which is included in this study.

Ritual Performance

Araiyyar Sevai: Ten Day Annual Performance of Alvar’s Songs in Tamil Srivaisnava Temples

Sri Nathmuni’s compilation of Alvar’s poetry is famous as Nalayira Divya Prabandham, which literally means ‘Sacred Book of Four Thousand’. Divya Prabandham is divided into four books, each of which contains one thousand hymns. These four books are: Mudalayiram, Periya Tirumoli, Iyarpa and Tiruvaimoli. Iyarpa, which is the third book, contains stanzas that are meant to be recited and while other books, that are collectively known as ‘Isaippa’, are musical stanzas that are meant to be sung on music.

In the beginning, it was Sri Nathmuni who first created the tradition of performance by performing Alvar songs before the ‘Archa’ (image of the deity set for the purpose of worshipping) form of the deity at Srirangam. He used simple song based tunes and talas which made them popular among the common people who could all sing according to their own capacity and talent. Later this art performance became a part of the ‘Shodasha Upachara’ worship of the Lord.

This tradition developed into a highly specialised theatrical performance called as ‘Araiyyar Sevai’ which is now an annual event in all major Srivaisnava Temples in Tamil region. It is a ten day festival that takes place in the month of Tai (January-February). The festival is preceded by a celebration of the marriage between Sri Selva Narayan and Sri Andal, who is established as Tayar or Sri Selva Nayaki. After this,
Kalyan Utsava works of all the Alvars are presented in a sequence as a part of the performance during the next ten days. Andal’s poetry generally is presented on the 5th or 6th day of the festival. To quote the famous Araiyar, Srirama Bharti:

Throughout the festival the Lord graces the northern Mandapam, and the Acharya graces the southern Mandapam directly opposite. The Araiyar stands by the Acharya, to his left members of the audience who also participate in various ways, are spread all around. The programme takes the listener through the various stages of artistic creativity beginning with simple songs, through dance and mime to total theatre and finally into the deeply spiritual experience of soul realisation. The festival ends with the auspicious ‘Tirumanjanam’ or ritual bath for the deities followed by distribution of food offerings.” [Srirama Bharti: 1999: 5]

Andal’s works, that fall right in the middle of the ten day festival, offer a great scope for a complete theatrical show with basic paraphernalia of music and accompaniments supplied by the Araiyar performers at the peak of Araiyar Sevai.

Andal’s Nachiar Tirumoli is a poem of 143 verses or 14 decads which centre around the theme of erotic love and longing. These decads are full of dramatic images drawn from nature which involve the wilderness and its habitants as the addressees of Andal’s dialogic rendering. During the Araiyar Sevai performance, all of the Tiruppavai scenario (“Andal Gosthi of Tiruppavai”) is interwoven with the various decads of the Nachiar Tirumoli which are then presented with dance, music and commentary. All the decads of Tirumoli have a dramatic situation, for instance in decad 4 and 5, Andal is sad and lonely and in her loneliness draws circles in the sand and also sends birds as messengers to Krishna. This allows for involvement of the audience, who take turns to draw circles with coloured sand with a blindfold on their eyes. [Bharti: 1999: 34]. Decad 6 where Andal tells her friend about her auspicious dream about marriage with the Lord Himself is performed as ‘Kummi’ i.e. as clap and step dance in a circle by six to eight members of the Araiyar group. During the performance various sets like the procession of the deity on a Kurundu tree with clothes hanging on the branches, pots of butter spread about, a parrot made up of betel leaf etc., are also used to create a dramatic touch.
In spite of all the dramatic appeal, **Divya Prabandham** texts and their performances actually move only in a sacred space and even if they move out of the temple space they remain associated with things that are considered sacred and auspicious in the Srivaishnava community. Hence, occasions like birth and marriage, which are part of the major **sanskaras** (*rites de passage*) in the journey of an individual on the earth call for rememberance, recitation and sometimes even performance of these sacred Alvar outpourings to invoke God for blessings and grace.

The **Araiya Sevai** performance in itself is an act of worship and **Bhakti**. It requires complete surrender of the self to the love of God. Describing this idea of **Bhakti** and surrender, Srirama Bharti says:

> The performance of **Araiya Sevai** requires immense concentration and inner control; perfect co-ordination of feeling, music and bodily movement is required and a total switching off of the rational mind to allow the creative mood to come into effect. The **Araiya** tradition prescribes fasting for a day and evacuation of the bowels with castor oil before a scheduled temple performance. The performer must observe a vow of silence and contemplate on the devotion of Lakshmana (who would carry out Rama’s command in spirit) and of Bharata (who would carry out Rama’s command in letter), to be true to the letter and the spirit of the Alvar’s works. There is no room for the capricious or personal interpretation of the Alvar by the performer. He must empty himself and allow the Alvar to occupy his being, as part of the Yoga or the total process, the artist must practice cheerfulness of mind through contemplation of Vishnu, firmness of mind through devotion to the Guru, alertness of memory through japa, tapa, dhyana and pranayama and contemplation of Hayagriva, and disinterestedness in the fruits of his labours through contemplation of Gita-Krishna. He must control his diet to maintain lightness of body and freedom from all bodily demands during performance. [Bharti: 1999:4]

**Andal’s Life and Works into Modern Poetry**

A very appropriate example of intersemiotic transformations of Andal’s life and work into modern poetry is a fairly long poetic piece written by K. Satchidanandan, the famous
Maliyalam poet. This poem has been translated into English by Shri A. J. Thomas. Thomas’s sensitive translation has successfully captured the complex images employed by K. Satchidanandan. “Andal Talks about Love” is a long poem based on life and legend of Andal and her love for Sriranganatha.

According to the legend, Andal was just fifteen years old when she was carried as a bride in a palanquin in a wedding procession to the temple of Srirangam. After having the darshan of the Lord, Andal is supposed to have merged into the deity lying on the serpent. Her love had been precocious. In her childhood itself she fell in love with the God and took a vow that none other than the Lord of Srirangam will be her husband.

Out of Andal’s two poems, her Nachiar Tirumoli is about personal human love. Nachiar Tirumoli reveals a young woman who is deeply in love and is pining with desire for union with her lover. As the object of desire is God, all the pining receives a touch of divine sanctity where the base emotion is transformed into a divine desire for the union with the God Himself. Though the discourse takes on the usual vocabulary of human desire, it is understood to be a transcendentual desire.

K. Satchidanandan’s poem is also a depiction of love, but here the poet is exercising the benefit of being an outsider who can enter into the persona and at the same time can see more objectively. Here, the poet is able to hint at the distinctions between what is purely human desire and what was the desire of this Alvar saint who had transcended human desire.

In the beginning of the poem Andal is depicted as if she is talking about the possibilities which could have opened to her different kinds of love in her evolution as a woman. Innocent and immature love of an adolescent, then a more mature beloved who is open to her lover, a bride who has to undergo the pain of separation as her husband goes to war, then again clandestine love of a woman well versed in the art of love making. Inspite of these possibilities that were open to Andal as an embodied human being, she choses a different kind of love which very few who tread this earth are capable of.

The poem clearly depicts various kinds of love and how Andal makes her own choice which is different from common choices. The first and the last stanzas are quoted here to hint at the contrast between what is possible and what is chosen. In the first stanza Andal
could have been a young girl just entering into adolescence, slowly becoming aware of her desires, yet still shy of expressing herself openly. She could have been one, who is not fully mature and is ignorant of what goes into a rendezvous:

Thinking that if she so much as utters a word,  
With the soft warmth of that word it may dissolve  
Like snow—without speaking to him, and  
Containing it within herself, stifled, like  
The goblin that lives under water on the riverbed;  
With the discomfiture of an ant whose tiny legs  
Got stuck in honey; to see in the sea-eye,  
Him sprouting a golden feather on the fourteenth-day moon,  
Leaning the dark-rosewood-body on the blossomed cassia tree  
And sniffing it and caressing it softly, hiding it from her mother;  
Deeming the bed as soft as the body of a hare, as a thorny murikku Tree and feeling her body smarting; and turning into a karaveera plant  
That strains its ears for a little breeze to throw down a flower on him;  
And, disentangling her hair at dawn, confused that it is a bunch of tender leaves,  
Heaving a deep sigh and like a mad woman whose mind does not settle down,  
The long eyes smarting with pain, sitting with her chin on her palm—  
This is one kind of love.

Andal doesn’t own this kind of love she seems to understand this as a natural development of a woman’s earthly journey. The last stanza depicts Andal’s kind of love which is intense desire for the God and where there is a movement through the body to a state where she goes beyond the body:

Turning body into an infinitely sacred temple  
With nine doors, having sculpted Him with the chisel of meditation  
On the soft stone of dream, washing Him with my tears  
And installing Him in the sanctum of my heart with
Eight kisses, and daily waving the aarati of my flaming eyes
And offering the soft petals of my lips
And adorning Him with the deep-blue silk cloth
Of my tresses washed in the breeze from Kaveri
And smearing the sandal paste of marrow from my bosom
Where only love blossoms; like the anklet
That strains its ears for the tunes of the flute
Like the hoods that rise in the Yamuna, yearning
For the flowery-feet dancing on them,
Turning the entire body into ears, with palms folded,
Holding my breath, thinking that each fish is He,
He, the turtles, tigers, boars, the dwarfs that pass
Through the street, He the hill-tribes wearing bows and arrows,
Labourers who go with hoes and axes slung across their shoulders,
He, the cowherd blowing on his reed-pipe,
He, the soldier wearing the sword—
Seeing the Purusha who took ten incarnations in
Each being thus, and paying Him obeisance,
And untouched by thirst, hunger, lust,
Unaware of rain or shine or mist
Unmindful of hairs turning gray, and
Body aging, sitting at the base of
The ancient kadamba tree and
Doing penance—
This is my kind of love.
[Translated from Malyalam by A.J. Thomas]

What connects the poem to Andal and her Bhakti in these stanzas is the imagery that is drawn from nature and the green landscape which we witness in Andal’s own poetry more particularly in Nachiar Tirumoli. This poem as a dialogue with Andal’s life and her poetry reflects on the persona of the saint as it is revealed in Nachiar Tirumoli,
where the desire for the chosen One takes form in the images that form the repertoire of human expressions in love.

**Andal in Classical Dance and Karnatic Classical Music**

**Dance**

Many Bharatnatyam classical dancers these days take up Andal’s songs into their performances. In fact, just as Kabir and Meera are popular with Indian classical singers, verses from Andal’s *Tiruppavai* and *Nachiar Tirumali* have become a part of dancers’ choice compositions. In Chennai, many famous dancer’s like Rukmini Devi Arundale, Padma Subramaniam and Anita Ratnam have choreographed performances that focused entirely on Andal.

Famous theatre and dance critic, Sunil Kothari in his essay on “Impact of Vaishnavism on the Indian Art with Particular Reference to the Classical Indian Dance and Dance Drama Traditions” reports:

> In recent times Rukmini Devi has choreographed a dance-drama on the life of Andal in Bharat Natyam with the help of the musician Papanasam Sivan and her troupe of *Kalakshetra* artists. It also forms a part of the repertoire in a solo presentation where brief sequences with a few songs are presented. These songs underline the desire of the devotee to merge with the Lord. [Parimoo: 1987:431]

Famous film actress, Bharatnatyam dancer and politician Dr. Vaijanthi Mala Bali reported in a leading Indian daily, The Hindu, that being a Vaishnavite she liked to perform Dance dramas on Andal’s works and that she was one of the first dancers to perform Andal’s *Tiruppavai*.

Another Bharatnatyam stalwart Padma Subramaniam did a complete dance ballet, “*Pavai Nonbu*” at Vani Mahal, Chennai on 31st December, 2005.

In July 2006, Malathi Iyengar choreographed *Kodhai’s Dream* under the aegis of Rangoli Dance Company which was presented at Barnsdall Gallery Theatre in Hollywood.
Anita Ratnam who is the guiding force behind Arangam Dance Theatre in Chennai has released a DVD on Bharatnatyam which has compositions like “Andal Kauthuvam” based on Andal’s life and compositions.

Many other dancers like Rama Vaidyanathan from Delhi have used song compositions of Andal in their dance.

**Music**

Singing of Lord’s name and his glory in delight is one of the chief characteristics of Bhakti and therefore Andal was not only the composer of the hymns but probably was also the first singer of her own verses. Though the singing of Tiruppavai and Nachiar Tirumoli is as old as Andal herself, in present times Andal’s songs have become a regular part of classical singing in the South. Contemporary singers of carnatic classical music in South India, especially in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, have been fascinated by Andal as much as by the other Alvar and Nayanmar saints. All the major Srivaishnava singers like M.L. Vasanta Kumari and R. Vedavalli have been singing Andal’s songs in their concerts. These days, it is very common to find singers who begin their concerts with pasurams from Tiruppavai or Nachiar Tirumoli as a mark of auspiciousness. To quote Dr. V.S. Sampathkumaracharya in this context:

> It may be noted that one of the greatest Karnatic musicians Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar set to music the thirty songs of Tiruppavai and used to sing one or two in every one of his concerts and popularised them. Another famous musician T.K. Rangacharya set to music several pasurams and popularised them. The Tiruppavai songs are being sung by the late M.L. Vasanta Kumari and other famous vocalists. Another well known musician R. Vedavalli has also set several pasurams to music and has been popularising them.

[V.S. Sampathkumaracharya: 2006:29]
Besides, Srivaishnavites like M.A. Jaishree, a Sanskrit scholar and musician from Mysore, has been working on Tiruppavai songs for a long time to make them accessible to the younger generation. She takes up the form of singing that involves ‘shruti’ tradition of olden times. Srivaishnavas maintain a strong connection with what they call “tradition” and learning and singing Andal’s verses is one of the means to that effect.

Andal as a Part of Contemporary Tamil Culture

Andal literally means ‘one who rules’. Andal’s real name was ‘Godai’. She ruled the heart of Krishna, so she is given the name of ‘Andal’. Now she rules the heart of people and has become a part of everyday living culture in South of India especially in Tamil Land. Andal touches people’s lives in many ways. Verses from her songs have been indoctrinated by Sri Ramanujacharya in the ‘Shodashoopchar Puja’ course. They form a part of everyday ritual worship in Srivaishnava families. In the month of Margali (Dec-Jan) the whole of Tiruppavai is sung everyday in the morning at homes as well as in the Temples. Special religious congregations are held during this month all over Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and parts of Andhra Pradesh, where besides singing, chanting and recitation of Andal’s works, commentaries by scholars and priests on these works are also organized.

Andal’s Temple in Srivelliputtur is supposed to be the second biggest Gopuram in Tamil Nadu. Its structure and carving are so clear and symmetrical that Tamil Nadu Government has adopted this structure as its emblem.

Andal serves as a model of beauty and purity for young girls and women. When a girl attains puberty in Vaishnava Brahmin families, she is dressed up as Andal and is taken to the temple on one of the days during her first menstrual cycle. It is common to see little girls dressed up as Andal in fancy dress competitions. It is Andal’s typical hairdo that is put up as a big bun to the left side and her garland that mark her distinction.

One can see cosmetics named after Andal in and around Srivelliputtur region. Sindooram, Turmeric powder etc. are named after her. People keep the names of their daughters after the names of Andal. Common among them are: Paavai, Andal, Soodikkoduthal, Nachiar.

45 See Appendix.
Soodikodutha Nachiar, Kothai and Poongothai. It is common to see lines from Andal’s songs printed on marriage invitation cards. The famous decad “Varnamayiram” of Nachiar Tirumoli, about the auspicious dream of Andal, is sung in all Srivaishnava weddings. According to Srirama Bharti:

Decad 6, in which Andal tells her friend of her auspicious dream is recited in sing-song by priests shortly after weddings; it is called ‘Seerpadi’, and is intended to invoke Andal’s blessings over the couple for prosperity and for progeny. [Srirama Bharti: 1999:34]

Thus, we see that while on one hand, this saint poetess has attained the status of a goddess in Srivaishnava religion, she has made great forays into the everyday living culture of all layers of society in South of India. However, now limiting her to Southern region will be like stating a half truth, as scholars, dancers, performers and artists all over the world are engaging themselves with Andal and her life more and more with every passing day.

Intersemiotic Translations in the Poetry of Akka Mahadevi

Transforming a Social Reality: The Gender

Akka Mahadevi, the saint from Karnataka, took the Veershaiva path that was very different from the path of Andal. Andal lived a kind of protected life in the household of her foster parents. Akka was exposed to the harsh realities of the male dominant society when she chose to walk out of the marital house.

Being a woman ascetic and wanderer, that too naked and young in the eyes of the world, Akka had to face immense problems in the external world, while the internal problems that anyone on the spiritual path faces also remained equally strong for her. First and biggest problem was that of the physical body. She fought the battles for the body at external as well as internal levels.

She walked out of the protected walls of her earthly husband, king Kaushika’s palace to follow her own way of being. Did she chose to be naked or was she stripped of her clothes when she showed her determination to leave the householder’s life? Probably she
had no choice in the beginning when she walked out of king's palace and then she chose to be as she was.

Clothes are/were the first symbols of feminine modesty. "Noola mariyalihooda kandu/Naachuvudu lokavella voo" (While looking at what is hidden behind the yarn, though (the) whole world shies away from it). But what could be the value of outward modesty if the mind is full of vile desire? Akka believed in the purity of mind and not in mere signs of external modesty. Walking naked, which might have been forced on her initially by the circumstances, could later be integrated into her self by Akka through her spiritual understanding of the body:

The hand that earned wealth can be taxed.
But can the beauty of the body be taxed?
You can snatch my dress and ornaments.
But can you snatch away
the Peace that wraps me round?
Does one who, being clad in
The light of Chennamallikarjuna,
Has shed all shame,
Need clothes and ornaments,
O fool?
[Yaravintellimath: 2006:141]

Body and gender are important issues raised often in her vachanas:

If the cloth that covers them slips,
Men and women become shy,
If you, lord of life,
Envelop the whole world,
What is there to be shy of?
If Chennamallikarjuna, Jasmin tender
Sees the whole world as Eyes,
What shall you cover and hide, O man?
[Chaitaya: 2005:93.]
Men see her as a woman and in spite of her ascetic bearings they don’t spare her easily. She had to confront them and deal with them to keep them away by using various means like persuasion, dialogue or even rebuke:

Don’t hold me. Don’t
Stop me. Let go
Of my hand, the hem
Of my sari. Don’t
You know of the worst hell
For those that break
The promise made in black and white?
You shall be doomed
If you touch the woman
Married to Chennamallikarjuna.
[Translated by H.S. Shivaprakash]

Men do not let her alone as one would leave alone a naked male sadhu passing by to some unknown destination in his own glory. Halegeyadeva, second compiler of the vachanas in the Shoonya Sampadane narrates that Akka had to pass a virginity test by Kinnari Bommayya. The encounter is mystified but for a modern reader it appears to be nothing short of a rape. Kinnari Bommaya, according to the text, puts a staff into Akka’s vagina from where only the ‘bhasma’ (sacred ashes associated with Shiva) fall off. Akka had immense courage:

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 Chennamallikarjuna, Jasmine-tender
These dangers of physical rape along with other kinds of struggles that Akka had to face in the society were purely due to her womanhood. For the men heading towards the spiritual or ascetic goals, the journey begins from a different mark lined much ahead of the point where a woman starts. Prof. H.S. Shivaprakash in his essay, 'Vachanas of Akkamahadevi' says:

A lonely woman, beautiful and walking nude, she encountered many obstacles... Time and again she had to fight, plead and argue herself out of male traps. [Sen and Kaushal: 2004:33]

Akka had to fight with men at least at three levels. She had to struggle to be free first from the man-husband and the shackles of a patriarchal household. She never wanted to associate with Kaushika but was forced into a marriage with him. Then she had to struggle against the men in the outside world who seemed ready to devour her like wolves. When she escapes one kind of rape in the household, she undergoes another kind of rape in the external world. This was the price a woman must pay if she wants to be herself. Her struggle did not end here, she had to prove the purity of her intent in front of men saints also. It is said that like Basavanna, Allama Prabhu also knew Akka’s spiritual status but still he put her to a very crude and harsh investigation. He directs her in no uncertain terms to either prove her chastity or be gone! But Akka Mahadevi showed Herculean valor in all her fights and came out victorious.

Allama Prabhu puts his conditions in front of Akka Mahadevi before he allows her entry into ‘Anubhava Mantapa’:

Why come you hither, pray,
O woman in the lusty bloom of youth?
At the word woman our saranas
See red! If you can tell
Your husband’s identity, come sit;
Else pray, be gone!
If you desire the joy of fellowship
With our Guheshwara's saranas,
Tell who your husband be,
O Mother!
[Bhoosnurmath and Menezes: 1970:293 Vol. IV.]

Allama again questions her as to why, if she has shed off all modesty, does she cover herself with her long tresses:

What does it mean:
That God loves you, and you love God?
Shedding your garment when your spirit is pure,
Why do you cloak yourself in hair?
This shame that lurks within your heart
Thus shows outside: it will not please
Guheshvarlinga!

Akka gives an answer that makes the sharnas including Allama Prabhu understand that here is no ordinary woman they are dealing with. In one of her vachanas quoted as an answer to Allama Prabhu in Shoonya Sampadane, Akka says:

Unless the fruit is ripe within,
The outer peel will never lose
Its gloss.....I covered myself
With this intent:
Lest sight of seals of love
Should do you hurt (your sensibilities)
Is any harm in this?
Pray do not tease me who am
In Chennamallikarjuna, God of Gods.
One important point in her journey is that her rejection of men is not negative. She rejects only those men who come in her way of Bhakti. She seeks and celebrates the company of those men whom she deems special due to their ‘sarana’ status. She fondly remembers her guru in her vachanas. In one of her vachanas, she talks about being initiated by the Guru early in her life:

I got Linga by Guru’s grace
And Jangama by Guru’s grace.
I got Padodaka by Guru’s grace.
And Prasada by Guru’s grace.
I conversed with gentle devotees by Guru’s grace.
Because no sooner was I born
Than the holy Guru smeared
The sacred ash on my brow,
And put Linga on my body,
I was blessed,
O Chennamallikarjuna!
[Yaraventelimath: 2006: 146]

As pointed out earlier, she seeks and loves the company of other sarnas and seekers. “Thanks to the companionship of your Sharnas/ I am filled with the joy of Anubhava spiritual experience” she says and more:

Playing, singing, telling, hearing,
Walking and speaking with devotees
Has been a happy conference.
As long as I live by your grace
I will spend my days with those
Who are happy in the company of Linga,
O Chennamallikarjunayya!
[Yaravintelimitath: 2006:105]
There are innumerable *vachanas* where Akka celebrates the virtues of her ‘*sarana*’ brothers like Basavanna, Allama Prabhu, Siddharamayya etc.:

- Because I was Basavanna’s household daughter,
  He gave me piety as his grace.
- Because I was Chaenna Basavanna’s handmaid’s daughter,
  What was left as his grace.
- Because I was the daughter of Prabhudeva’s handmaid’s maid,
  he gave me knowledge as his grace.
- Because I was the infant daughter of Siddharammayya,
  He gave me soul as his achieved grace.
- Because I was Madivala’s own daughter
  He gave me a spotless grace with conviction.
- Because all these innumerable ones
  Stroked my head, regarding me as their favoured child,
  I became fit for the holy feet of Cennamallikarjuna!

[Yaraventelimath: 2006: 175]

Her journey to Kalyana also actually is taken up purely to live in the company of other spiritual seekers with whom she could share her experiences and ideas. Only when she establishes herself as a respectable Sharne that she is left alone to pursue her own path.

**Transforming Personal Reality: The Consciousness**

After confronting the body question as a social reality at external level with the outside world, Akka now had to confront this body at yet another level - personal level of senses which keep on drawing the body and mind towards the material plane. Her movement through and beyond the senses is very authentically portrayed in her *vachanas*.

- My mind always thinks of belly.
- I cannot see you.
- I cannot penetrate you.
I am entangled in this world of illusion (Maya).
Pray, make me unite with you,
O my Lord Chennamallikarjuna!

[Yaravintelimath: 2006:110]

In another vachana, Akka talks about the need to become free from fruits of Karma, action in order to go beyond limitations of the consciousness created by desire, anger, greed, pride, jealousy etc. and to achieve true knowledge about the absolute reality for her Chennamallikarjuna:

So long as one is engaged
In reaping the harvest of virtue and vice,
One is a body of desire,
An abode of anger,
A den of greed,
A temple of infatuation,
A cover of pride,
And a cloak of jealousy,
Unless this sense ceases,
There is no scope for knowing
Chennamallikarjuna,
Mark, O brothers.

[Yaravintelimath: 2006: 144]

Through various yogic practices, most basic bodily desires are made silent by conquering the senses through control over the mind. The distractions caused by the senses are described as the ‘Maya’ and the cause and effect of these distractions is the external world or ‘Samsara’. Akka describes the difficulty of withdrawing the senses away from the external world. She holds constant dialogue with her Chennamallikarjuna to save her from the ‘Maya’ which is laid down by Him to keep his ‘Lila’ (cosmic play)going:

Maye haunts the body like shadow
Maye haunts the life force as mind
Maye haunts the mind as memory
Maye haunts memory as perception
Maye haunts perception as forgetfulness
Maye haunts the hoards of worldlings
With its shepherd’s stick lifted up
O Chennamallikarjuna
Nobody can conquer ‘Maye’  
Spread out by you.
[Translated by H.S. Shivaprakash]

In another vachana, she prays that Shiva by his own grace should make her go beyond His Maya:

Maye swallowed up Hari
Maye swallowed up Aja (Brahama)
Maye swallowed up Indra
Maye swallowed up the moon
Maye swallowed up the big ones,
Who claimed to know
Maye swallowed up the ignorant
Who claimed not to know
Maye has pervaded all the fourteen worlds  
O Chennamallikarjuna, O Master,
O Compassionate one
Rid me of my Maya
[Translated by H.S. Shivaprakash]

Hence, for Akka ‘Maye’ poses its own challenges to her personal self. She is not talking about the concept of Maya in general as a means of all human bondage but of ‘Maye’ in

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46 Maya which is a feminine principal in Vedanta, is called as ‘Mave’ by her and is neuter gender in Akka Mahadevi’s vachanas. Sometimes she even uses male gender to represent Maya.
47 Fourteen worlds are depicted in Chandikadalam Mantra. Below: Atal, vital, sutal, talatal, rasatal, mahatal, patal. And above: Bhu, bhuvah, svah, maha, jana, tapah satya.
particular where the limitations posited by external as well as internal attachments come to hinder the path of evolution for the seeker.

**Akka’s Yoganga Trividhi: A Site of Transformation of Tantra into Shiva Yoga into Poetry**

Apart from vachanas Virashaiva saints also composed swaravachanas (vachanas for singing) and esoteric texts like Allamaprabhu’s Mantragopya and Akka’s Yoganga Trividhi. Most studies of Akka have depended mostly on vachanas than on other texts. Scholars’ preference for vachanas is quite understandable. They speak direct to the modern reader without the mediation of obscure esoteric symbolism which swaravachanas and esoteric texts are replete with. However, the absence of any attention to texts other than vachanas has rendered the existing texts, including the most perspicacious of them, lopsided. Vachanas have been viewed as expressions of freedom (‘I sing as I please’, as Basvanna said) However, after examining other texts than vachanas, one discovers that sharanas’ freedom is based on ‘the secret discipline’ that informs both swaravachanas as well as esoteric texts. In fact, some of these esoteric symbols spill over into vachanas, particularly the species called bedagina vachanas. Like texts of tantric tradition called sandhabhasa (twilight language) and utilvabhasa (inverted language) of Nirguna panthas of the North, these texts employ a transluscent language distinct from sarala (direct) vachanas. Allama Prabhu has composed the maximum number of bedagina vachanas. Akka has hardly written such transluscent vachanas. However her Yoganga Trividhi employs many conventions of bedagu. The examination of this esoteric text is complimentary to our understanding of vachanas particularly because of its intertextual and intersemiotic dimensions. Unlike other such works, Akka’s work is characterized by great lucidity of diction and clarity of images that is present in her vachanas also.

Yoganga Trividhi by Akka Mahadevi is a remarkable text as it shows a convergence of Bhakti and Tantric sadhana. In Tantra and Yoga the goal of sadhana is enlightenment. In Bhakti, the goal is not merely enlightenment but Bhakti itself, which is sheer joy of union with the Ishta, the chosen One. Complete self surrender and surrender of the ego at the feet of the Ishta is true Bhakti. Here in Yoganga Trividhi, Akka Mahadevi considers
“seva” or selfless service of the guru, God and other bhaktas as her supreme delight even after she has become completely liberated from the dualities in her consciousness. Even in Andal’s Tiruppavai, which is purely a Bhakti text, the goal finally is not partaking of boons and gifts from God but to be able to live in His ‘sanidhya’ (close vicinity with Him).

However, Yoganaga Trividhi can also be reasonably described as a short poetic treatise on experiences of awakening of ‘Kundalini Shakti’ or power. Akka Mahadevi describes this song as Tattva-pada, “song of essences”. She writes about her experiences using a symbolic language which is an inherent part of Tantric discourse. Kundalini Yoga is a part of Tantra and in common parlance it might be described as a yogic discipline to complete awakening of the inner potential which leads to self realisation. With respect to consciousness, Kundalini awakening leads to attainment of Turiya state of consciousness, where all the limitations of the gross, subtle and causal body are lifted. The awareness reaches an expansion, where all the states of consciousness become enlightened simultaneously.

Bhakti Elements in Yoganga Trividhi

All the elements of bhakti can be seen in Yoganga Trividhi:

1. This work ends with a “Phalashruti” (statement of the boons that get conferred over the individual who reads or copies or sings the text of this work):

   Whoever copies or sings with love Yoganga Trividhi will be rid of disease, rebirth and suffering – One with Linga they prosper in happiness. [Stanza 66. Yoganga Trividhi]

2. There is desire in Bhakta-sadhaka for complete surrender of the self and ego:

   Slave of your slaves servant of your servants
   I took refuge in your feet- O great Guru (Ghana Guru)
   Nurture me with your compassion.

   [Stanza 57. Yoganga Trividhi]
Make me a slave in the house of Bhaktas
Give me the eternal joy – of partaking
The leftovers of Bhaktas
[Stanza 63.Yoganga Trividhi]

3. There is no other desire left in Bhakta except for the desire to be in His Sanidhya:

While walking speaking dressing and eating
I will not let go of your feet – this resolve
Be established in me.
[Stanza 50.Yoganga Trividhi]

4. Joy is found in the union with the supreme:

Being rid of the support of anga and taking refuge in Linga
My heart has completely merged in Linga – therefore
I have no quality of anga anymore.
[Stanza 48.Yoganga Trividhi]

However in spite of features of Bhakti in it, Yoganga Trividhi, is primarily a Tantric text.

Tantric Aspects of Yoganga Trividhi

All Tantric and yogic texts ascribe enormous importance to the Guru. In Yoganga Trividhi, Akka Mahadevi begins by offering worship first to the Guru and next to the God. In Tantra, Guru and God are considered as One. Guru literally means one who dispels the darkness. Human Guru is a realized soul who has already achieved the state of “Jeevan Mukti” or liberation. Symbolically the Guru is a principle that leads to removal of all obstacles on the path of sadhana by showing the correct path to the seeker.

In Tantra besides other rites and rituals, Guru is worshipped as equivalent to God. Sir John Woodroffe quotes from Guru Tantra:

“If the guru is pleased, Siva is pleased; if he is displeased; Siva is displeased. If the Guru is pleased, Sivani is pleased; if the Guru is displeased, Sivani is
displeased. Hence O Mahesani! the Guru is the Lord, the sustainer and the annihilator. It is he who can give Moksa.” (Guru Tantra).

[Woodroffe: 1978: 72]

Following the same lines of Tantric tradition, Akka Mahadevi begins with the desire to place the Guru at the centre of her being:

O Somshekhera O guru
Grant us the desired fruits- shine
In the space of my heart.
I begin depending on
The wisdom of Guru, the pure one-with great delight
I will sing the song of essences

[Stanza 1 and 2. Yoganga Trividhi]

After offering worship to the Guru and the God, Akka sings about the state of a yogi in an extremely mystical light and it is for this reason that the stanzas 7 to 38 are highly symbolic in nature. Akka Mahadevi is using very subjective metaphors in these stanzas. For instance, in the following stanza she talks about mind as a wild Goddess that needs to be shackled:

Capturing Maari (destructive Goddess) wandering in the town
and shackling her heavily- that town
I sold to a wise man

[Stanza 16. Yoganga Trividhi]

Yet there are some explicable references to tantric-yogic symbols describing the path and the state of enlightenment:

Listening to resounding music watching the burning flame
drinking the shower of amrit – in effect
I gave up births and deaths.

[Stanza 19. Yoganga Trividhi]
The music referred to here is *nada*, the primal sound, flame is the eternal light and *amrit* is the nectar that drips from the *bindu chakra*. These are some of the common effects that a tantric practitioner experiences during the course of his/her sadhana.

In stanza 21, she refers to *sushumna nadi*, the psychic channel which is the path taken by rising Kundalini:

Closing the gaps of nine doors
I filled my mind into sushumna- look
Amrut’s pitcher is overflowing

[Stanza 21. *Yoganga Trividhi*]

Akka Mahadevi repeatedly refers to the physical body as a “pot with nine holes”, “house with nine doors” etc. *Sushumna* is a psychic channel situated in the middle of the spinal column. According to Sir John Woodroffe:

It is said that there are 3 ½ crores of nadi in the human body, of which some are gross and some are subtle. Nadi means a nerve or artery in the ordinary sense; but all the nadi of which the books on Yoga speak are not of this physical character, but are subtle channels of energy. Of these nadi, the principal are fourteen; and of these fourteen, *ida*, *pingala* and *susumna* are the chief; and again, of these three, *susumna* is the greatest, and to it all others are subordinate. *Susumna* is in the hollow of the meru in the cerebro-spinal axis. It extends from Muladhara lotus, the Tattvik earth centre, to the cerebral region. [Woodroffe: 1956: 47.]

Stanza 31 is a direct reference to the rising of Kundalini shakti in the form of a serpent at least up to three *chakras*:

The snake in the pit lifted up her tail
Lighting up three regions—when I
Expanded into undivided light(?)

[Stanza 31. *Yoganga Trividhi*]

‘Snake in the pit’ is nothing but the *Kundalini* which is visualized in Yogic and Tantric discourse as a serpent sitting in three and a half coils in the *Muladhara Chakra* or the root
centre situated below the edge of the spine. Akka Mahadevi is talking about the rising of Kundalini from Muladhara to Anahata chakra i.e. heart centre and the consequent experience of light. Regarding the ascent of Kundalini, a renowned Kashmir Shaivite scholar Lilian Silburn writes:

The awakening and the ascension of the most vibrant Kundalini is therefore a gradual process of reintegration of the various levels, withdrawing into one another somewhat like rods sliding one within another or Russian dolls, one fitting into the other. At every stage of the withdrawal, everything is reduced to a point (bindu), from which radiate ever greater realities as Kundalini rises from centre to centre through the median channel (susumna). The Paratrimśika sings of it in a beautiful passage (pp.270-71): “the heart within which everything shines gloriously and which is shining everywhere, is the one lasting light, the Supreme Heart..... O awakened ones, adore this Heart – the universal emission –vibrating within the heart of the susumna in the great bliss of union”. [Lilian Silburn: 1988: 10]

Tantra and Veershaiva philosophy

The most important example of intersemiotic transformations in Yoganga Trividhi is found in how Akka Mahadevi relates the entire tantric vocabulary of chakras to the Shatsthala scheme of the Veershaiva philosophy. From stanza 41 to stanza 46 in Yoganga Trividhi, Akka Mahadevi takes up every chakra beginning from the base or Muladhara chakra and talks about the state of evolution related to that centre not only in classical tantric discourse but also relating it to the state of evolution in Shatsthala scheme. As discussed earlier Shatsthala scheme in Veershaivism is conceived as an evolutionary ladder for the seeker’s or bhakta’s state of consciousness.

Bhakta, Maheshshwar, Prasadi, Pranalingi, Sharana and Eikya are the stages through which the consciousness passes before it enjoys complete union with the Supreme or as she calls it ‘Linga –Anga Samyoga’. Akka Mahadevi relates these stages of evolution in Veershaiva philosophy to the ascent of Kundalini rising in the chakras and opening of corresponding centres of the (en)light(enment). For instance:
To the primal linga in the base chakra (adhara [Moolai])
Whoever offers the fragrance joyfully –
By turning the earth to the nose
Is a real bhakta.

[Stanza 42. Yoganga Trividhi]

In the above stanza, Akka Mahadevi is talking very succinctly about Muladhara chakra or the root centre. This chakra in Tantric philosophy is associated with the element earth and with the sense of smell through the nose. What Akka Mahadevi accomplishes in this three line stanza is remarkable as she first of all links the Muladhara to the Linga ("to the primal linga in the adhara chakra") thereby liberating the chakra from the usual sexual associations. Next, she describes the utter surrender and focus of the sense of smell to the gross element earth. In the next stanzas all the senses are being surrendered to the respective elements. This is an indication of how the surrender which is the essence of Bhakti begins in the very beginning of Tantra sadhana also. Here again, she conjoins Veershaiva philosophy with Bhakti and Tantra philosophy by naming this stage as the stage of a Bhakta.

In this manner she goes along in the next five stanzas to describe the ascent of Kundalini and the preliminary requirements that go along at respective stages. At Svadhishthana chakra, for instance, the sense of taste is surrendered and this is ascribed as the sthala of Maheshwari as referred to in the Veershaiva Philosophy.

After the Kundalini, which is recognized as Shakti (energy, power), pierces through the six chakras situated in sushumna nadi in the spinal column and rises upto Ajna i.e. eye-brow centre, then there is no coming back, it then goes upto sahasrar or crown centre in the middle of the head and joins the Supreme Consciousness represented as Shiva.

In the last twenty stanzas of Yoganga Trividhi, Akka Mahadevi describes this state of union attained by a bhakta when the surrender is complete. Like in Tantric philosophy, it is said in Veershaivism also that Kundalini awakening leads to the elimination of the limits of the physical body and those created by dualism in the mind. Akka Mahadevi says:
Further:

Being rid of the support of *anga* and taking refuge in *Linga*
My heart has completely merged in *Linga* – therefore
I have no quality of *anga* anymore.

[Stanza 48. Yoganga Trividhi]

Further:

My body is Guru, my breath *Linga*
My soul the moving *linga* 'Chara' *linga*, (Jangama) – thus
How can I have body and mind anymore.

[Stanza 58. Yoganga Trividhi]

It is evident, that the metaphors that Akka chose to describe the state of union or self realisation come from Veershaiva Philosophy. In classic tantric terms, 'linga' is Shiva, the Supreme and 'anga' is Jeeva or the Individual. However, these terms of reference come from Veershaivism, where the words 'anga', 'linga' and 'Jangama' (Guru) are very frequently used to relate the experiences of a Sharna.

This interconnectivity of various aspects of *Bhakti*, Tantra and Yoga, that are exposited in *Yoganga Trividhi*, clearly reveal Akka Mahadevi's spiritual achievements. She was an evolved *yogini*, *bhakta* and a tantric *sadhana* practitioner. She had experienced the awakening of *Kundalini* which is a rare phenomenon. The scope of her knowledge and experience was much ahead of the ken of a common poetic talent. This is why the range of her experiences encompasses many areas which are generally seen as exclusive of each other but they seem to find an interconnectivity in her awareness. One witnesses a kind of convergence of Veershaivism, Yoga, *Bhakti*, Tantra and poetry in this work.

**Tiruppavai and Yoganga Trividhi: Two Similar but Different Journeys**

A contrastive study of *Tiruppavai* and *Yogana Trividhi* would reveal to us not only the difference between *Saguna* and *Nirguna Bhakti* of the two poets in question but also the difference between the two ways of structuring spiritual practice and experiences in poetry.
The common point is, that both works have been conceived like journeys. Further, both of them are Bhakti-centered.

Andal’s poem is a journey from home to temple (i.e., Krishna’s house). Each stanza is a step in that direction. It concludes, on reaching the goal, with a fervent prayer for no blessing other than devotion. Her Deity inhabits a human space: He has a name, form, family and a myth. He is constituted of several narratives. Also, the journey is collective-Andal keeps on gathering more and more girls on the way. Her intense personal devotion is a social phenomenon as well.

Akka’s poem does not have such clear spacio-temporal co-ordinates of the journey. Her journey takes on a more expressly symbolic colouring. It is a journey from without to within. The stages of this journey are expressed in terms of incredible imagery of the bedagu mode.

Andal’s journey is undertaken with a single-minded devotion unmediated by any human agency. This is not the case with Akka. Her poem begins and ends with salutations to Guru, not to God. Her Bhakti is mediated by Guru-shishya relationship characteristic of paths of Tantra and Yoga. The key images, as has already been pointed out, hark back Tantric psychic physiology involving nadis, chakras etc.

Even at the climactic moment, Andal’s devotion is dualistic in the sense that it emphasizes otherness of the Lord, her intense love and longing notwithstanding. Akka’s poem is about the conquest of this otherness pertaining to an abstract Deity, who has a name but no existence outside the personal experience. He is often identified with Chennamallikarjuna, Shiva Himself.

As we move from Andal to Akka, we move from saguna to nirguna, the exoteric to the esoteric, the dualistic to the monistic, from the mythical to the mystical, from sacralisation of space to that of the self.

Andal’s world is temple-centred whereas Akka’s is body (self)-centred.

Between these two modals lies the infinite variety of Bhakti experiences and expressions.
Vachanas of Akka Mahadevi Reflecting Transformations of Contemporary Performances

The mode of existence of vachana(s) in the twelfth century is a matter of considerable debate. Were they composed orally or written down? The fact that the verbal texture of vachanas is constructed on principles of repetition, parallelism and contrast, which according to Roman Jacobson are characteristics of oral poetics. A.K. Ramanujan also emphasizes upon the orality and spontaneity of the vachana literature. Under the subheading “The Vacana Form and the Oral Poetics” in his Introduction to Speaking of Siva, he says:

The Sanskrit religious tests are described as sruti and smriti. Smriti is what is remembered, what is memorable; sruti is what is heard, what is received. Virasaiva saints called their compositions vacana, or ‘what is said’. Vacana, as an active mode, stands in opposition to both sruti and smriti: not what is heard, but what is said; not what is remembered or received, but what is uttered here and now. [Ramanujan: 1973:37]

He further relates:

A vacana (vachana) is a religious lyric in Kannada free verse; vacana means literally ‘saying, thing said’ In these Virasaiva saint-poets’ experience spoke in a mother tongue. Pan-Indian Sanskrit, the second language of cultured Indians for centuries, gave way to colloquial Kannada. The strictness of traditional metres, the formality of literary genres, divisions of prose and verse, gave way to the innovations and spontaneity of free verse, a poetry that was not recognizably in verse. The poets were not bards or pundits in a court but men and women speaking to men and women. They were of every class, caste and trade; some were outcastes, some illiterate. [Ramanujan: 1973:12]

The hypothesis, that they were composed orally, appears more probable for many more reasons. Vachanas, like most compositions of bhakti tradition, were meant for performance that involved singing, dancing and acting. Allama Prabhu speaks of having “sung” his vachanas. Basavanna also refers to singing performance when he says: I sing
as I please (Aanu olidante haaduvennu). The vachanas expressing devotional love by Basavanna, Akka and several others have references to singing and dancing in devotional abandan.

The presence of a handful of vachana poets, who were professional performers of theatrical and semi-theatrical forms, points to yet another dimension of the relationship between vachanas and performances. The vachana poets, belonging to nomadic performing tribes, have composed vachanas which can be considered free translations of their performances into the vachana form. Some examples follow.

The following vachanas of Akka Mahadevi can also be seen as intersemiotic translations of contemporary performances:

Like the Monkey at the tip of the stick
Like the puppet at the point of the string
I have acted O Father as you made me act
I have spoken O Father as you made me speak
I have lived O Father as you made me live
O Chennamallikarjuna, O world’s driving force
(H.S.Shivaprakash’s unpublished translation manuscript.)

These lines refer to a street masquerade, to acrobats, to puppeteers and to actors respectively. Akka Mahadevi might have witnessed these shows during her wanderings through the land. In another vachana, she refers to this world as putting up an empty show:

Ugh! This empty show of the world!
First of all comes, the masked one.
Saying “O father! O Pa!”
In the middle comes, a moustache-masked,
As if daubed with ghee.
At the end comes a mask of old, old age.
The moment your eye-sight ceases
The play of the world ends.
Above vachana is a more metaphorical consideration of the world itself as a big performance. Many of Akka's *vachanas* reflect contemporary rituals like those of marriage, worship, etc. In the following *vachana*, which is very famous and which immediately reminds one of the sixth decad of Andal's *Nachiar Tirumoli*, Akka, like Andal, relates her dream to her friend:

O Sister, listen sister dear,
I dreamt a dream, I saw
Rice, betel and coconut
I saw, O dear,
A groom
With short matted locks of hair
And shining teeth
Coming home for Alms,
....

Seeing Chennamallikarjuna
I opened
My eyes.
[Translated by H.S. Shivaprakash]

Yet in another *vachana*, she describes a marriage, her own:

Erecting a pavilion with an emerald floor,
A golden festoon, a Diamond
Pillar, and a canopy of
Brimstone, decorated with pearls and rubies,
They celebrated my marriage
With a wrist band, with water
Poured from hands and with
Everlasting rice,
My own people married me
To a groom called Cennamallikarjuna.
[Yaravintelimath: 2006:169]

These vachanas are a glimpse into just one aspect out of an extensive range of subjects that Akka takes up in her ouvre. These vachanas hint at the drama that the world puts up and also our participation in the show through the rites and rituals that we create to lead us into various stages of life on earth.

Vachanas of Akka Mahadevi as Sources of Intersemiotic Transformations into other Genres of Art

Shoonya Sampadane

Two centuries after the heyday of vachanas, these oral texts were committed to writing on palm leaf manuscripts which were collected, classified and commented upon in Vijaya Nagar. It was around this time that the first version of Shunya Sampadane was compiled.

One of the achievements of Veershaiva tradition is that it developed anthologisation as a creative genre. Shunya Sampadane is an unusual anthology. The vachanas are arranged not author, period or subject-wise but are interlaced as dialogues of an imagined drama centring around how the protagonist Allama, in different episodes enters into a verbal contest with the greatest living saints of those times and emerges the champion. One of the most fascinating episodes of Shunya Sampadane concerns Akka Mahadevi’s advent in ‘Kalyana’ and her debates with leading Sharanas of Anubhav Mantapa including Allama. Apart from Akka and Allama, Basavanna, Chenna Basavanna and Sidharama also participate in the debate.

Shunaya Sampadane belongs to a very unusual genre. (It is referred to as Sukatha Prasnga.) It can be considered a dramatic anthology. The vachanas of Veershaiva saints are arranged here in the form of dialogues situated in an imagined context. The purpose of the work seems to uphold the greatness of Allama Prabhu, who turns out to be the fulcrum of the work. The sequence of episodes that provide the context for dialogues
form the background of Allama’s debates with other Sharanas, out of which he turns out to be the victor. Alternatively the work can be considered the dramatic biography foregrounding Allama’s interaction with the contemporary Sharanas. This anthology was first compiled by Shivagana Prasadi Mahadevayya in the fourteenth century. According to Dr. S.C. Nandimath:

The four versions of the Sunya Sampadane have so far been traced. The idea of making such a compilation seems to have occurred for the first time to Shivagana Prasadi Mahadevayya. His originality lies in arranging the vachanas in such order as to convey an impression of an actual dialogue or discussion between two or more sarnas on a set theme and to show how such discussion was a means to the furtherance of a seeker’s progress. That is how, he assumed, discussions must have been carried on both at Anubhava Mantapa and elsewhere, where saranas met. The first compilation comprises 1012 vachanas. The next version, containing 1599 vachanas, was the work of Halegeyadeva, while the third was prepared by Gummalapura Siddhalingesha Shivayogi, disciple of Tontada Siddhalingeshvara and contains 1439 vachanas. The fourth compilation, with 1543 vachanas, was made by Gulura Siddhaviranarya and while preserving the core and essence of the previous versions, almost constitutes an independent version. [Bhoosnurmath and Menezes: 1970: XI Vol.1]

Sunya Sampadane, which was an intersemiotic translation of vachanas, further became the input for intersemiotic transformations. In fact Gulura Siddhaviranarya’s text was versified with some modifications by the poet Chamarasa in his Prabhulingalile.

Though the central episodes remain nearly the same in all the four versions, some of the differences, which appear to be minor, are significant. The treatment of the episode concerning Akka Mahadevi, is a point in case. Halegeyadeva, who is known for putting in a lot of mythological trappings to prop up the story, has included a detailed encounter between Akka Mahadevi and Kinnari Bommayya. The other versions give only a hint of this encounter. The minute and open description of the physicality of the virginity test by Kinnari Bommayya is described by Halegeyadeva in a way which is very disturbing to
the pious. This interpolation made by the second anthologist was cut down to the bare minimum by the third and fourth anthologists to see that the saint’s image is not tarnished. Neither is it Halegeyadeva’s intention to tarnish the saint’s image. But this must have become embarrassing later. Her encounter with Kinnari Bommayya is the first test Akka has to pass before entry into Kalyana. The second test takes place in Mahamane when Akka’s purity is interrogated by leading Sharanas like Basavanna and Allama. Halegeyadeva’s version of the first encounter is worth a detailed summary.

The first compiler Mahadevayya himself divinises Akka Mahadevi’s birth by describing her as a ‘rudrakanika’ (one of the female attendants of the Rudra) who descended to the earthly plane at the behest of the great Lord. Halegeyadeva elaborates it further:

On being sent to find out about the court of Shiva and Devi, the disguised attendant, while on his way, touched the woman of unblemished body and an embodiment of Devi’s sattwic aspect, she unaware that he was a hidden attendant of Shiva mistook him for a heretic and became irritated. Having read her thoughts he said to her: “Go down to the human world. Become the bride of the heretic”. At this the ‘rudrakanika’ lost her pride and filled with terror prostrated before Bhawani. The great Goddess took compassion, lifted up her head and said, “Do not fear. Overcome the curse and gain the grace of Shivaganas like Allama Prabhu and come back”. After having been sent so the pure bodied Rudrakannika was born out of the womb of Jnani, the pious wife of Shiva’s devotee Nirmalanga in Udutadi. [L. Basavaraju: 2004:159] (Translated from Kannada by H.S.Shivaprakash)

The passage shows how Halegeyadeva is keen to make the story more elaborate through the mythopoetic imagination of the anthologist-narrator. In accordance with Devi’s command Akka is wedded to king Kaushika. Having severed her bond with him, she is on her way to ‘Kalyana’ to receive the blessings of great saints as a prelude to the final destination, ‘Srisailam’. This is the time when she is espied in the outskirts of Kalyana by Kinnari Bommayya who is impressed by her nakedness and divine beauty. He thinks to himself: “If she is proved to be united with linga I will bow down to her as a guru mother or else if she has the false attachment to the body I will make her my woman.”
He then accosts Akka. Akka tries to put him off and then reminds him that he is like her brother as Shiva alone is her husband. But Kinnari Bommayya considers this empty talk and takes hold of her by force. Akka tells him to take her body if he can be so senseless and do what he likes. Kinnari Bommayya touches all parts of her body, but when his fingers reach her vagina he finds the sacred ash there. Frightened, comforting himself, he speaks a vachana, suggesting that every part of Akka’s body is filled with Shiva.

He is now contrite. However Akka comforts him saying, “Kama’s bow which consumes fourteen worlds is beyond you and me.” Kinnari Bommayya is thankful to her and admits that he is reborn through this encounter.

The third anthologist, Siddhalingesha Shivayogi, more or less follows the same storyline. Though he avoids the elaborate account of the second anthology, he gives it an interesting twist. Allama himself sends Kinnari Bommayya to prove to all the devotees how Akka has conquered lust. The Last anthologist, Gulura Siddhaviranarya, also keeps the same storyline and retains the bit saying that the test happens at Allama’s suggestion.

It is interesting that though the non realistic nature of the episode is underlined in the anthologies, the later anthologists attempted to cut down the embarrassing near-rape scene and give it Allama’s sanction.

After this “physical test” on the outskirts of Kalyana, which, in the anthologies, is depicted as a symbolic holy city, Akka goes through a spiritual test set by Allama Prabhu in Anubhava Mantappa. Sunya Sampaadane depicts the tale of her strict reception at the hands of Allama Prabhu.

Basavanna introduces her to Prabhudeva and to the assembly of the saranas. Basavanna’s vacanas 8 and 9 indicate that he knew her to be an advanced sarana. All the same Prabhudeva puts her to a severe test, possibly with a view to revealing her great worth to the assembly and clear any doubts that might be lurking in their minds. His first question is about her husband. No woman, especially a young one, could according to Prabhudeva, be admitted to the spiritual academy unless she was duly married. Mahadevi Akka replies that she has given herself away to Lord Cennamallikarjuna. She sings:
O sir, I love the beautiful One.
The Formless One, who is beyond
Death or dissolution;
Cennamallikarjuna is my groom:
All other husbands in the world
Are naught to me

[Bhoosnurmath and Menezes: 1970:265]

Harihara’s Mahadeviyakkana Ragale

Harihara (circa. 1190-1250) is the earliest poetic biographer of Shaivite and Veershaiva saints. The Nayanmars of Tamil Nadu were known in Karnataka the by 12th century as Puratanas (The ancient ones). There are a large number of references to Puratanas in Veershaiva Poetry in Karnataka. At the same time, Veershaivas were aware of the difference between the path of the ancient ones and their own. Harihara’s works, based on the life of Tamil saints, are called Puratanara Ragalegalu. Harihara also composed poetic biographies of the leading Veershaiva saints, Basavanna, Akka Mahadevi and Allama Prabhu. This group of works is called ‘Nutana Puratanara Ragalegalu’ i.e. poems about the ‘New Ancient Ones’. ‘Ragale’ is a new type of poetic narrative that Harihara shaped. ‘Ragale-s’ are story poems mostly written in blank verse but sometimes employing prose. In addition to his ‘Ragale-s’, Harihara has composed a work in ‘champu’ meter called ‘which is based on Kalidasa’s Kumarasambhavam. He is also the author of a devotional work called ‘Pampa Shatka’, a hundred verses in praise of Lord Virupaksha in Hampi.

Though the leading Veershaiva saints were to become the protagonists of many poetic biographies in successive centuries, Harihara was closest to them chronologically. Harihara’s works are spontaneous overflow of devotion. At the same time, in his depiction of the lives of Veershaiva saints, Harihara shows greater realism than his successors. Harihara’s life was spent in ‘Hampi’, which was to become the site of not only the Vijayanagara empire but also of the Veershaiva renaissance which led to compilation, anthologisation and exegesis of the compositions of twelfth century saints. Harihara’s works antedated the Veershaiva resurgence proper in Vijayanagara particularly during the
rein of Proudhadevaraya I (1419-1446). The process of mythologisation of the lives of saints begins with Harihara, for instance, all Veershaiva saints according to the depiction come into the human world because of having attracted a curse in Kailasa i.e. Shiva’s abode.

Despite this, Harihara is not insensitive to the human dimensions of saintly figures on the earthly plain. This is clear from all his works on Veershaiva saints.

According to later biographers, Akka Mahadevi was never married. The reason is, that the canonisation of Veershaiva saints had gone on by then to the extent that the biographers had begun to see them as superhuman by birth. The possibility, that Akka could have got married before her enlightenment, was just out of the question for them. In Harihara’s work, Akka was married to king Kaushika.

Here follows a brief account of Akka’s life as told by Harihara.

King Kaushika happens to see the young beauty Mahadevi while once passing through the streets of his city. He becomes completely possessed by her:

Mahadevi in the heart, Mahadevi in the eye
Mahadevi in the forest,
Mahadevi in every touch
[Nagabhushanswamy: 1996:71]
[Translation from Kannada by H.S. Shivaprakash]

He then commands his ministers: “You fools why are you not doing anything. Can’t you see I can’t live without Mahadevi”. They rush to Mahadevi’s house and tell her parents of the king’s desire to marry their daughter. The parents are all too happy but Mahadevi is infuriated. She wonders: “How can light be united with darkness, you fool? What does wisdom have to do with ignorance?” She bluntly refuses to marry the king because he is a ‘Bhavi’ (a non-believer in Shiva). The king hears about this. His passions transform into rage. He orders that if Mahadevi refuses his offer of marriage, her parents should be instantaneously put to death.

To rescue her parents from impending death Mahadevi agrees to marry the king on the condition that:
I will worship Shiva as I wish
I will be in saints’ company as I wish
I will be absorbed in the service of Guru as I wish
I will unite with the king as I wish.

On these conditions and only on these conditions does her marriage with the king take place. However this contract cannot hold for long. The partaking of marital sex, a source of unending joy for Kaushika is a source of abysmal anguish for Mahadevi. Harihara describes it in his inimitable prose:

Mahadevi’s indifference became king Kaushika’s empire of lust
As that great devotee was longing for dawn, Kaushika was longing for the dawn not to break. To the king, the sexual intercourse punctuated by Mahadevi’s protest appeared like a dream and an illusion. Thus when Mahadevi was still going through the sexual intercourse, the sun dawned as
If it was the sun of Mahadevi’s Shivjñana (spiritual wisdom).

[Nagabhushanswamy: 1996:75-76]
[Translation by H.S. Shivaprakash. P. 75-76]

On another occasion when she is being forced into sex, a Shaivite mendicant arrives at the Palace. In keeping with one of the conditions agreed upon, i.e. to be in the company of saints as she likes, she jumps out of Kaushika’s bed and rushes to give hospitality to Shiva’s devotee. Unable to contain his anger, Kaushika stops and threatens her. Taking this as a breach of contract, Mahadevi walks out of the palace and the town of Udutadi as if:

The town’s virtue was leaving in a woman’s form
As if the town’s ‘Shiva Bhakta’ (devotion to Shiva) was leaving for the hills...

Covered by the thick cloth of her hair
Like a parasol of deep devotion
Wearing the sandals of faith,
Her body filled with great ‘Vairagya’ (detachment)
Led on by the wealth of ‘Mrida-Bhakti’ ...
[Nagabhushanswamy: 1996:76]
[Translation from Kannada by H.S. Shivaprakash]

She ultimately reaches ‘Srishaila’, there to worship all pervading ‘Mallinatha’. However, Kaushika is not yet free from lust. Harihara depicts this in a highly dramatic episode. Kaushika disguises himself as a Shiva devotee and pretends to surrender to her in order to recover her. Replies Mahadevi:

Why should I live with you for all to see
What has darkness to do with light?
Or flame with coolness? Or delusion with wisdom?
Or sunlight with the moon or me with you?
Get lost, you fool.
[Nagabhushanswamy: 1996:79]
[Translation from Kannada by H.S. Shivaprakash]

Kaushika does not stop even now. He tries to bribe some fake devotees and gurus into advising Mahadevi to return to him. But this also does not work. The saints, who wanted to advise her to return to the husband, are so overwhelmed by her unflinching devotion to Shiva that they ask Kaushika not to persist any more.

It is interesting to note, that Harihara’s Mahadeviyakkana Regale does not mention Akka’s journey to Kalyana at all. It seems to be an addition made at the time of composition of Sunya Sampadane in the fourteenth century. Later biographers follow Sunya Sampadane and not Harihara. Also though Akka Mahadevi’s vachanas mention Kalyana, this does not automatically follow that she referred to a geographically located city. It might be a completely metaphorical journey to Kalyana on her part. (Kalyana is Kailasha).

As far as her address to ‘Saranas’ like Bommaiah, Allama Prabhu, Basavanna, Chennabasavanna etc is concerned, it could in all probability be an interpolation made by the copiers and compilers later as the saint’s reputation and her popularity increased.
Intersemiotic Transformations of Akka's Vachanas in Modern Literatures

The medieval Kannada works like Harihara's Mahadeviyakkanaregale and the different Shoonya Sampadane anthologies point to different ways of recreating Akka's life and works. Harihara depicts Akka Mahadevi as an embodiment of Shaivite devotion whereas Shoonya Sampadane, an allegorical dramatic anthology, narrates episodes not found in Harihara like the 'Kalyana' episode. This is to fit Akka's life into the anthologists' scheme of constructing a narrative of the vachana movement with Allamaprabhu as its centre.

In the process, the anthologies mythify the life of Akka. Later medieval hagiographic accounts of Akka's life continued this mythification.

The 20th century recreations of Akka's life are, for the most part in the direction of de-mythification. It is not that mythification vanished altogether. An early 20th century play by B. Puttaswamayya, called Akka Mahadevi which became quite popular in professional theatre, continues the process of mythification. Here also Akka Mahadevi's life begins not in the human world but in 'Kailasa'. However, some of the popular novels in the early 20th century follow a different path. Here Akka's life is narrated in human terms. One such well known novel Giriya Navilu (The Mountain Peocock) (1960s) by Basavaraj Kattimani, though it takes names and events from Chamrasa, foregrounds the human dimension of Akka. She emerges as a mortal woman who attains spiritual progress through suffering and struggle with society and milieu.

B. Puttaswamayya's series of historical novels centring around the 12th century Sarana movement, the Kranti Kalyana Series, is a novel based on close study of historical research material accessible at that time. In the fifth volume of this series, Mugiyada Kanasu (The Unending Dream), there is a whole chapter on Akka Mahadevi's visit to 'Kalyana' and her spiritual debates with Saranas in Anubhava Mantapa. The depiction in this chapter is indebted to Shoonya Sampadane.
Mate Mahadevi’s Tarangini: A Novel

A voluminous novel by Mate Mahadevi is another ambitious attempt to recreate Akka’s life and mission. The author became the first woman Jagadguru of Lingayat tradition. She set up an organisation called Basava Dal, supposed to spread the message of Lingayat religion and philosophy as interpreted by her. She claims to teach a religion based on reason and scientific temper.

**Tarangini** derives its overall framework from Harihara’s *Mahadevyiakkana Regale*. However, it does not speak of Akka’s origins in Kailasa. The name of Akka’s father, Omkar Shetty, and that of the king who was won over by her beauty, Kaushika, are also taken from Harihara. The episode of Akka’s marriage, found in Harihara, is deleted in this novel. When Kaushika asks for her hand in marriage, Akka Mahadevi agrees to marry him only after completing a vow for five weeks. Kaushika, it is agreed, should not disturb her during the period of vow. Seized by lust, Kaushika breaks his promise with the result that Akka Mahadevi refuses to marry him. The episode in Kalyana, also not found in Harihara, occupies a great deal of space in this novel. Thus this novel roughly follows the pattern of *Shoonya Sampadane*. The story of Akka’s life concludes in ‘Kadali’ forest in Srishailam.

The author, in her preface, speaks of how she actually went to ‘Kadali’ in Srishailam along with her disciples to get the feel of the region. She also speaks of how dangerously close she was to a roaring tiger but remained unharmed. The description of ‘Kadali’ is woven into the last part of the novel. The concluding paragraphs of the novel give a clue to the overall tone of the work:

Speech turned mute because of the experience beyond the body, mind and intellect. Logic came to a halt when breath forcibly entered Sahasrara, thousands of lightening bolts appeared to gleam opening the gate of ‘paschima –chakra’ in which prana vayu merged. The eyelids were lowered and a wheel of light began to revolve. The light of consciousness was melting like camphor in the flames of the great light. The current of light began to flow in the cave in the womb of Kadali, which is like the heart of Chennamallikarjuna and slowly became one with the vast cosmos. [Mahadevi: 2005:804]
This passage is characteristic of the exaggerated narrative style. Though the author appears to divest the story of mythology, the depiction of Akka’s character is excessively idealised. There are innumerable unending discourses that punctuate the narrative all too frequently. All this is a far cry from the intensely human and experiential tone of Akka’s own vachanas.

Though following the same path of idealisation, the play written by Taralabalu Shivakumar Swamiji on Akka’s life is more appealing because it depends more on Akka’s own compositions to depict her life.

All these writings constitute the depiction by the faithfulness to the character of the saint already canonized by Lingayat tradition. The treatment of the protagonist in these works entails an a priori kind of reverence deriving from the tradition.

This is where modern Kannada women writers after 1970s started looking at Akka in a totally different way.

Modern Kannada Women Poets’ Response to Akka

A large number of poems came to be written on Akka in Kannada after the 1980s, a period which saw a sudden upsurge of women’s poetry in Indian languages. A large number of women’s poems written in Kannada since then are indebted to Akka Mahadevi in a very interesting manner. Here is a poem by Kannada woman poet Bhagya Jayasudarshana:

For Akka

You cut all the knots that
Bound you and became
Free of the constraints
Imposed from within and without.
You were bold, firmly resolved
In your outbursts and sences.
The clothes with which you draped your soul
Turned greener in your inner storms
Your thunders and your rains,
Your enemies surrendered to you
In the open fields of elemental
Movements, you were the empress
Of the empire of Chennamallikarjuna.

In the battles which I fight, I hold
The weapons, weapons that
Can not rust, weapons
That can not be sharpened, weapons
Of mud and plaster;
I roam in the circle of my defeats,
Oh I haven’t gone naked, roaming
The streets of small desires.
But Akka do you know
My nakedness within,
And that I ‘ve shivered
With the winter’s cold.
(Translated from Kannada by the Author)

The poem is based on the contrast between Akka Mahadevi, the ultimate symbol of woman’s freedom, on the one hand and the self of a modern woman too human to wage Akka’s kind of elemental struggle. What is celebrated in such poems, addressed to Akka directly or referring to her indirectly, is more her radical act of human daring than her spiritual transcendence.

We shall now consider another poem by Hema Pattanshetty in which the reference to Akka is more oblique:
About Void

Without nakedness
You can not get the void
Whatever you get
Because of nakedness
Will not stay with you

All relationships turned into void
Frightened by nakedness
Turning into a complete lie
The frank heart full of love and friendship
Everything beyond the truth is false
Is there any other truth
When truth has no basis in truth
How can you trust
The talk about uniting the earth and the sky.

The nakedness of the void
Came to me as void-
The darkness of the void
Because of becoming naked there
I have got now
The inexhaustible
Void of voids all around
[Translated by HS Shivaprakash from Kannada]
[Paattanshetty, Hema. Nimma Purushasuktadalli]

Hema Pattanshetty’s poem is also built on the same contrast as the previous poem. Though Akka is not directly invoked, she is represented by the concept of nakedness and of void, a synonym for Shiva in Veershaiva philosophy. The contrast between void as a principle of metaphysical transcendence and void as existentialist nothingness are taken for each other in this poem.
The following poems by Savita Nagabhushan are the humanised reworkings of Akka’s own vachanas. The first one is a rewriting of Akka’s ‘journey poems’, whereas the second is a transformation of the series of Akka’s poems about warding off mortal male intruders.

Footpath alone is enough ....
Hungry,
I surrendered to trees
Thirsty,
I bowed down to rivers
My heart was won
By the lovely-teethed gorava
To hills
To parrots, koil birds
To soft breezes
I folded my hands
Why should a doer
Be shackled by the world?
I shrugged off the end
And moved on
When the time is ripe
Even a footpath is enough
To lead to Kadali
Does not Chennamallikarjuna
Know this?

Don’t
Don’t frighten me
I will touch and feel the fire
Don’t stop me
I will jump into the ocean
And swim
Don’t laugh
I will ride a mirage-horse
Don’t sniff
I build a sand castle
Don’t wake me up
Let me brood over eggs
Don’t be angry
I am lost in love-God
Don’t pluck
I will flower
Don’t call me
I want to be here
Don’t... Don’t... Don’t...
Don’t follow me in vain

[Translated by HS Shivaprakash from Kannada]

Though examples can be multiplied, the above poems sum up the response of the modern woman to Akka Mahadevi, the fascinating symbol of rebellion against and freedom from male norms. However, there are significant differences between Akka’s times and our own. Akka’s path of transcendence was clearly laid out for her but this path is not clear in modern times of agnosticism and doubt. Another significant point is that the spiritual journey of Akka is not directly mentioned or analysed by anyone of the poets. Her life is either mythologised or relegated as something which cannot be trodden by a common woman. Like in one of T.S. Eliot’s poems, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, in these poems one finds an invocation of inability due to human limitations and thereby a kind of refusal to take on the role one secretly aspires for. Even though Akka’s spiritual attainment is at times recognized and acknowledged, it is an ideal that the modern woman cannot emulate. Akka’s beloved was “without body, without birth ...”

However, the beloved of modern poets is with the body and subject to birth and death. The discontent with the relationship embodied in traditional marriage is another link between Akka and her twentieth century counterparts. The solutions sought are
totally different. Though there are other women saint poets who attained freedom and transcendence within the bounds of marriage, why did modern women poets turn to Akka in such a big way? The reasons are to be sought in the changing sociology and psychology of the modern, educated and working woman trying to find her way out of patriarchal mores.

Besides these women poets from modern Karnataka, who tried to hold dialogue with Akka Mahadevi, each from her own station and perspective, there is a male poet from Kerala, K. Satchidanandan, who has registered his response to Akka. His poem comes up with a more intimate glance at Akka’s mental bearings. Akka is a poetess of great universal appeal, who had hitherto been confined to the linguistic and geographical boundaries of Karnataka. Translations of Akka’s works into English had been taken up on a large scale after A.K. Ramanujan took the initial steps. And these translations have helped to break the boundaries for Akka Mahadevi. That Akka’s example was inspiring to poets outside the Kannada milieu is demonstrated by K. Satchidanandan, the renowned Indian poet writing in Malayalm.

His poem is a lyrical evocation of Akka’s journey towards Chennamallikarjuna, her destination. Unlike the poems by Kannada woman poets, Satchidanandan’s poem is an intense and impassioned communion with Akka’s poetic journey:

**Akka Speaking**

O Shiva O Chennamallikarjuna  
Open the door  
I have come, Word, all naked  
Yours, all my hidden fire,  
The coconut flower in my body  
Yours, this offering, the crescent moon  
Of my dreams. Yours,  
The divine Ganga of my words  
Yours too, the kalakootha venom  
That I drink every day  
So is the damaru of my pranas
So too the dance of time that my feet,
Freed from anklets dance
Yours, too, this minute
Born in countless yonis,
Having seen countless worlds,
Having traversed hells
I have come
Like a shepherd grazing many
Magical worlds greeted by the unripe mango
Of joy, afraid, I began searching
For you in mountains and forests,
Unaware of your being in my womb-vessel

Without giving out even a little finger
Silent, like the fragrance of champak,
Like the glow inside gold
Like pungent taste in the chilli,
Unaware that you pervaded me
I dressed myself in countless coral
Beads of Kailas,
I became all alone, yet not alone,
In the world
For me, kalpavrikshas, all trees
Sanjivinis, all plants
Shivalingams, all stones
Holy places, all my destinations,
Amrit, all drinking water
Kalyana saugandhika-s, all flowers
So long as my Beloved is within me
You glow inside me without flames
Penetrating me without bleeding
You ecstasy of union without copulation
Taking me, without slightest movements,
Beyond planets
Sprouting without sowing
You, parrot’s eye and nest,
The nest and the flowering tree,
Tree and the forest,
Forest and earth,
Earth and the(five-fold,)
world, the world and dream
The mind-stuff the dream inhabits

O Hara O Mallikarjuna
I have shut the door
I am coming step by step
Lightenings are bathing me
Floods are decking my hair with jasmines
I,standing, naked, clothed with morning sunlight
Come O blue-throated one
With your snake-garland

I hear the echoes of hooves of your ox
In the ghats
I see your crescent glow
Turning into emerald the sandal leaves
Filling the breeze with Ganga

No more the smoke of kitchen fire
Or the daggers of the wicked eyes
Embrace me with your blue arms
Put out my awareness
Suck my life out with just a kiss

From now on, just the two of us
In eternity's waves
My life-breath will sing blue

[Translated by H.S. Shivaprakash]

K. Satchidanandan in this poem is able to recreate the mystic union that is conceived in all bhakti experience. The images used here refer back to the idiom that Akka has employed in her own vachanas though the form in different. Satchidanandan’s poem also seems to transcend the gender as the persona of the poem speaks of “union without copulation” which again was the motto of the bhakti experience.

The above examples show how Akka’s life and works continue to haunt the imagination of our own age of secularist values in diverse ways.

Transformations into Drama, Dance and Music

In spite of the fact, that Akka’s name is associated with the 12th century Virashaiva movement, which has become a recurrent thematic preoccupation in Kannada literature of succeeding epochs, particularly modern period, Akka Mahadevi has not become the subject of any major work in drama and theatre. Basavanna’s life is a popular subject with theatre people. Akka Mahadevi is more popular with poets and fiction writers than with theatre people. However, there are some exceptions.

If we consider Shoonya Sampadane to be a theatre piece, different versions of this work give fascinating treatments of her entry into Kalyana. This has already been discussed. Prior to this, Harihara had also depicted Akka’s life with a lot of dramatic force in his narrative poetry.

In the twentieth century, though many plays were written about Basavanna, there are only two plays worth mentioning about Akka. The first is by the wellknown novelist and playwright of Karnataka, B. Puttaswamiah. This play was written for Gubbi theatre, one
of the most influential professional troupes of Karnataka. As it was consciously written for the theatre of spectacles, the text draws heavily on myths and legends about Akka and casts them in larger than life mould. Later he decided to write his six-volume novel *Kranti Kalian* on 12th century movement, which won him Sahitya Akademi Award.

Yet another attempt to stage Akka's life was undertaken by Sri Kumara Swamiji of Taralabalu in the late 70's and early 80's. He wrote the play 'Sharan Sati Linga Pati' and produced it himself for Taralabalu Kalasangha in Sirigere. A fairly memorable production of this play was done by the National School of Drama graduate Ashok Badardinni for the same troupe. Swamiji's play, that follows Harihara, Chamarasa and Shoonya Sampadane editions for Akka's life-story, is written in traditional manner and Badardinni used techniques of modern drama school theatre. The scene depicting Akka's departure from Udutadi following the break-up with her husband was done with great sensitiveness. Apart from this, the text and production was lacking in the complexity so essential for depicting Akka's life. Only the traditional devotional content was emphasised. Relevance of Akka's life to present times was not even touched upon.

On the whole, plays on Akka do not have the kind of complexity and contemporary relevance like those on Basavanna's life. One has to turn to modern Kannada women's poetry for that kind of exploration of contemporary significance of the great saint poet.

**Intersemiotic Transformations into Cinema: Scribbles on Akka**

'Scribbles on Akka' is a film made on Akka Mahadevi by Madhushree Datta. This film is a juxtaposition of a series of representations of Akka's life and works through documentation, image, allegory, interviews and discussions.

The film can actually be seen as a cinematic version of intersemiotic transformations of Akka Mahadevi's life and works into other genres of art. The theme of Akka's life and poetry is translated into various forms of life and art. It shows and in turn represents how Akka is represented in temple structures, in images and idols, in contemporary poetry, in theatre, in public announcements, in professional theatre, in painting etc. Besides this, the film is also about how the message of Akka's life translates into contemporary life especially into the lives of women.
The film opens up with taking out into the open the framed paintings of Akka in a kind of procession and ends with putting these frames back together in some kind of careful order. This scene becomes a symbolic representation of what the film has to offer to the viewer. As these frames offer different portraits of Akka Mahadevi, so does the film offer different readings of Akka's life and works. Each time the film maker shifts the frame of reference, Akka's life and her poetry open up new signifieds for a single floating signifier- Akka Mahadevi.

Though the film is on life and works of Akka Mahadevi, the film maker clearly conveys her message that all women share Akka's spirit of independence and positive survival inspite of hurdles and obstacles. The filmmaker accomplishes this by merging the roles played by the protagonist. These roles range from that of a contemporary Indian woman to Akka herself. The film opens in a modern metropolis showing women engaged in earning their livelihood through various kinds of employments. These women appear to be taking on all the hardships posited by life in a very graceful manner. Even a fisherwoman, who is thronged by people at a sea-side fish market, has a smile to offer. After showing this spirit of survival as the common thread that connects women in all times and places, the scene shifts directly to Udutadi, the birthplace of Akka Mahadevi.

On the outskirts of the village there is a temple and the deity of the temple is none other than Akka Mahadevi. Villagers regard her as their local deity, offer worship to her idol in the usual manners of ritual worship with incense, light, flowers, prasadam etc. They take out long processions bringing out Akka's idols, decking up young girls as Akka, singing her glories etc. In short, this episode depicts how mythologisation of Akka's life has been rendered complete by installing her image as a Goddess in the temple.

The film-maker however reconstructs Akka in all her dimensions in such a way that women from all layers of society respond to her life and works in their own way, from their own station, from their own level of awareness, wisdom, education, class, caste etc. In fact, we can divide women in two categories according to the relationship they form with Akka Mahadevi. There are women from traditional conservative backgrounds who place a kind of blind faith in Akka and her powers and then there are women with some kind of self awareness who connect with Akka on a completely different plane. Through
the first category of women, the film maker is able to project the dimensions of faith and spiritual achievement that is integral to Akka’s life (for instance the old woman who has contributed towards the construction of the temple courtyard and all the women who are interviewed at the procession). This group of women, however, does not create a dynamic relation with Akka, as they put her on a pedestal in the temple, worship her like a Goddess and recreate the established roles forgetting about the struggles of Akka, thereby relegating their own responsibility to bring about any change in the established orthodoxy. But the women in the second category are actually questioning and negotiating with the values and principles that Akka’s life represents and are trying to recreate their own identities on the basis of these negotiations. The film captures these women in their milieu as poets, translators, painters etc.

The most interesting aspect of the film is that it orchestrates quotes from a host of intersemiotic translations within the film which in itself is an intersemiotic translation of Akka’s life history and poems. As mentioned above, the film opens and concludes with the framed popular paintings which reflect the image of Akka also depicted in the ‘mythological play’ which is both shown directly and through the documentation. In these versions, Akka’s nudity is mentioned, but it is made acceptable by draping it in her luxuriant tresses. By contrast, the representation of Akka in the temple of Udutadi shows her completely dressed in a saree with a pallu pulled over her head.

On the other hand, the modern representations of Akka in present day poems and paintings and in narrative bits of Akka’s journey played by the Manipuri actress Savitri: these suggest a totally different way of looking at Akka’s persona. The difference between the representations that cover up nudity and those that open it up is that between traditional and modern ways of understanding the influential woman saint of the past. The first is based on faith and reverence. The women around Udutadi observe in their interviews that Akka Mahadevi is their village deity. The modern artist Neelima Sheikh attempts to read Akka’s life, in her own words, “in the Post-Colonial India”. She also adds, “as we see her progress on her journey we understand our own journey”. This perception is also echoed by the contemporary Kannada women poets interviewed.
Hema Pattanshetty describes her journey from attitude of awe and reverence to the one of questioning. She wonders why Akka did not choose to live in this very world. Vaidehi speaks of Chennamallikarjuna being a lie in her poem quoted in the interview. Yet another representation is in terms of the extent to which Akka’s poetry is intercontextually translated, if only partially in the lives of present day women both old and young. The idea of modern women trying to follow Akka’s journey is typified in the various roles that the actor Seema Biswas is made to play: The modern working woman, city girl visiting Udutadi, the Christian bride, the nun and at the end as a lonely young girl watching the procession of images. Overriding all these representations are the riddles of Akka’s poems sung and picturised in different ways. The solo acting by a male actor of the encounter between an infatuated Kinnari Bommaiyya and Akka is a daring exploration of the irresistible fascination and repulsion of flesh. The same thing is echoed in the Savitri bits where she is shown, first walking, later crawling towards her goal. At one point she is shown as lying nude, tired and sweating. The last long shot of this bit shows Akka played by Savitri walking nude towards the horizon.

The juxtaposition of different and even contrasting versions of Akka’s life and works in this film stays clear of reducing Akka to anyone of those representations. Akka comes out as text which is read “in contradictory and diametrically opposite ways.” However the meaning of her life is depicted as something eternally deferred.

The foregoing is not an exhaustive analysis of all the intersemiotic transformations in and of the lives and works of Andal and Akka. I have focused my understanding mostly on the texts or portions of them accessible in English Translations. However brief my account, I hope it points to a variety of ways in which these two renowned women saint poets have been engaging the imagination during their own and later times.
Reference


