Introduction

Question of Interest

Areas, that interest me, are Indian mythology and Indian Philosophy. After a strong overdose of Western literature and literary theory, my mind became conditioned to impose the presuppositions of Western Philosophy onto the literary and cultural reality around me. Fortunately, after the initial euphoria, I realized that these theories are mere efforts to describe problems relating to ‘meaning in life and literature’ with something, that was constant or ‘absolute’. The “Absolute”, referred to as “Logos”, “Word”, “Grand Narrative” etc. in these theories is supposedly lost after the ‘age of doubt’, that set in the West, particularly in its most recent phase of post-structuralism, which turned everything into an aporia. It was due to this realization, that made me turn to Indian literatures, past and present. They seemed to inhabit another world, whose presuppositions were different. Here, I discovered that doubt and certainty can be reconciled at a deeper experiential level. Radicalism need not always fly in the face of the sacred as in modern Western culture. In this context, I found Indian Bhakti literature and arts particularly engaging.

In our culture, the question was never posed as “Whether God is or is not?” but as “How can I realize the true nature of the Reality/ Truth/ Self?” Bhakti as a path of seeking the ‘absolute’ is a way of understanding the self in relation to the larger Reality (cosmic Self). In medieval India, emotion of bhakti evolved into a pan-Indian socio-spiritual movement. There have been saints and sages from all over India whose lives are supreme examples of Bhakti. The myths, that are woven around their lives and the literature left by them, still inspire popular imagination of common Indian masses. The socio-political transformation that this movement could effect by the sheer force of its poetry and performances is remarkable. The way it challenged the feudal system, the caste system and the gender inequalities is unparalleled in pre-modern history. My interest in myths, literatures, performances and the arts of Bhakti is a small step in my journey to arrive at a more culturally rooted answer to prevailing problems of the self and society.
Relevance of Bhakti Poetry

Bhakti movement began in Tamil Nadu in the 6th century, spread all over India and continued well into the 16th century. In terms of popularity and significance, no other pan-Indian movement has been as lasting as Bhakti movement. It is very much a living tradition in Modern India also. The main reason for its widespread appeal may be, that except for promising the ‘Truth’ (or the ‘moksha’, liberation), the highest achievable goal in Indian way of life, it also extends a democratic attitude towards all people and life forms. Bhakti movement, that had bhakti poets as its major exponents, could cut through the callously rigid ‘varna’ structure with its strictly compartmentalised caste system. It was not possible for an individual born in a certain caste to go up or down the four rungs of the caste ladder. However, Bhakti’s view considered ‘love’ to be the highest ‘dharma’ and thought book-learning, status and wealth associated with higher castes of brahmins, kshatriyas and vaishyas respectively as rather impediments in the complete self surrender to God. With this kind of perspective, Bhakti movement could defy Brahmins’ exclusive right to know (Jnana) and attain the highest ‘Truth’.

By expositing, that God dwelt in all the hearts and by denouncing all major knowledge bodies, this movement opened its doors not only for the lower castes, poor and illiterate people but most importantly for the women.

In addition, the shift in the means of expression from Sanskrit to vernacular unleashed the creative potential of women bhakti. These poets played a very significant role in the development of regional languages and literatures also. For instance in all the major regional languages, one or the other woman bhakti poet attained prominence; Andal in Tamil, Akka Mahadevi in Kannada, Lad Ded in Kashmiri, Meera in Rajasthani and Gujrati, are only to name a few. By making the vernacular, the medium of their expression, these poets helped to make it more flexible and more suitable for conveying simple colloquial wisdom which usually contained profound philosophical thought.

1 ‘Varnasharam Dharma’ inscribed in the ‘Dharmashastras’ reinforced the caste structure based on birth and divided the society into four castes namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra in hierarchical order.

2 Lal Ded from Kashmir is remembered as the mother of the mother-tongue in the region.
Though it is a remarkable aspect of our culture, that women's poetry survived not only oral forms but in written forms also, it should be noted that Bhakti marga was not an easy choice for women bhaktas than it was for men bhaktas. While bhaktas like Kabir and Tukaram could continue to be the householders, it was not possible for women bhaktas Akka Mahadevi or Meerabai to remain in ever dominating and ever threatening patriarchal set up. Except for Bahinabai, women bhakti poets had to struggle their way out of social norms and marital forms that were too oppressive to contain their aspirations for personal spiritual growth. These woman saints did not begin as rebels or social reformers as such but were simply individuals searching for a spiritual space free from tyrannies of institutionalised social and religious systems. Since similar hierarchical tyrannies prevail even in contemporary society and culture, these women poets' lives continue to inspire women today.

The literary value of their poetry is also unique. The kind of poetry they wrote, was neither 'Shravvyakavya' (epic-poetry) nor 'Drishyakavya' (dramatic poetry). It was both and much more. Expression of their mystical experience took such forms, which cut across the genres of literature and those of art.

Bhakti poetry is in fact a rich inter-fertilization of forms of art and literature. It emerged as an amazing culture that amalgamated art, music, literature, philosophy, politics, sorteriology and mysticism in its fold.

Present Study

I have chosen Andal, ninth century woman saint poet from Tamil Srivaishnavite tradition and Akka Mahadevi, twelfth century Kannada woman saint poet from Veershaivite tradition for the present study. This choice was motivated primarily by the fact, that though both the woman-poets are studied under the common rubric of Bhakti phenomena, there are very subtle differences in their perception of life and that of the God, which manifest in their poetry and this in turn has influenced the way they were received by the community to which they belonged and also by the society on a larger scale. While Akka Mahadevi was considered as a revolutionary and a rebel, Andal was very much a part of the tradition and the community structure. Akka Mahadevi could never be
integrated into the mainstream religion, Andal always occupied the central place in Srivaishnava religion. Akka Mahadevi’s image posed a threat to the perceivable image of the Goddess in Hindu pantheon and iconography, Andal had been raised to the status of a goddess in her lifetime itself. In fact, the major thrust of the study is on the reception of these women bhaktas by the society in their own times and the times that followed. This is done by looking into how the works of these poets and the legends about their lives have been adapted into various art forms including films, songs, processions, temple architecture, calendar art and painting etc.

The methodology adopted for this study involves:

a) Textual analysis of the poetry of Akka Mahadevi and Andal from religious, literary and socio-political angles.

b) Field studies of Tiruppavai ritual performance in Srivaishnavite centres like Srirangam in Tamil Nadu and Melkote in Karnataka.

c) Analysis of classical and neoclassical musical renderings of Akka Mahadevi’s vachanas with the help of interviews and meetings with scholars and singers.

d) Analysis of representations of the two poets in literature, theatre, cinema, painting and calendar art.

The register used here is adapted from the field of semiotics so as to address questions of intersemiotic transformations between verbal, performing and visual arts and to understand specific ways in which these culturally significant women’s texts are represented in other genres of art. The idea has also been to understand the extent to which this process is socio-historically mediated and is subject to further transformations.

Hence chapter one, “Evolution of Bhakti from Ancient Religions” is dedicated entirely to create a religio-historical scenario, in which these poets are rooted. This chapter also outlines major points of difference as well as similarity between the specific religious denominations to which the poets under study belonged.

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3 The temple near Shikaripura in Udutadi district in Karnataka
4 Srivaishnavism and Veershaivism.
Chapter two, "Sri Andal: Srivaishnavite Woman Alvar Saint and Her Path of Bhakti", focuses on Sri Andal’s life and works with reference to classical Bhakti discourse and poetic corpus of other Alvars.

Chapter Three, "Akka Mahadevi: Veershaivite Woman Saint" works around Akka Mahadevi and recreates the context in which she lived and sang her songs. This is done with reference to works of other vachana poets of her time and also with reference to Veershaiva concerns as an ideology as well as a religion.

Chapter Four, "Intersemiotic Transformations in the Poetry of Akka Mahadevi and Andal" is the central concern of the thesis and relates to how the works of these two women saint poetesses take shape in other genres of art. This chapter begins with a brief introduction to how and why we formulate the term "Intersemiotic Transformations".

I would like to make it clear here, that the use of the term ‘semiotics’ is more as a word with a specific meaning than as a category of Western literary theories. ‘Semiotics’ is simply defined as ‘study of signs’. To this extent, we can use this term when we refer to a specific language register which has its own signs. And hence, extendedly I use the term "Intersemiotic Transformations” as it is very conducive to explain the interchangeability happening within various art forms, that build up their base on Bhakti literatures. The chapter later deals with how these transformations are working within as well as outside the works of the chosen poets in the sense of filtering into forms of expression other than their poetry.

Chapter Five, “Findings” is a kind of personal appendage to the understanding of “Bhakti Experience” without the religious paraphernalia. It is an attempt to extricate the Bhakti experience from its mystical aura and to make it more accessible to our perceptive faculties.

Finally, the “Appendix” consists of the results of the field studies and the interviews conducted during various visits to Mysore in Karnataka and to various temple centres in Tamil Nadu.