Chapter One
Evolution of Bhakti from Ancient Religions

Ancient Religions

Vaishnavism and Shaivism have flourished together, sometimes conflicting sometimes coalescing with each other, as part of basic Hindu religious tradition after the onset of Bhakti movements in India. It is interesting to note, how the two streams that originally belonged to two different cultures altogether, finally became a part of the mainstream Hindu religious culture. Shiva, as has been established, was a Dravidian god and Dravidians' culture was an agrarian culture. They lived a settler's life and Shiva originally could well have been a fertility god. 'Linga' (phallus symbol) associated with Shiva, is a primitive symbol and conforms to this idea of fertility. This points to the fact, that the concept of God with a manifest form possibly came first to the Dravidians who lived a settled life. Also related to this is the idea of House of the Lord-God i.e. Temple. This is also a Dravidian contribution. Later, when both Aryan and Dravidian cultures co-mingled, Shiva attained the status of prime God in the whole of the subcontinent.

Vishnu, on the other hand, was an evolute of the Aryan god, Indra. Aryans were originally a nomadic tribe, hence their gods were generally without a form and were generally abstract and depicted the forces of Nature. Vishnu, primarily an abstract supreme god of the Vedas, was originally associated with Indra, (god of rain and thunder) who is conceived amongst the most powerful deities in the Rig-Veda. Krishna's association with Vishnu was also probably a result of the complete merging of the two cultures. Krishna (lit. the Dark One) could well have been a regional Dravidian deity, who was later integrated into the Aryan fold. This might be one reason, why there are innumerable efforts, which are seen throughout the Vedic, Upanishadic and Puranic and Epic literatures, to project the oneness of both Shiva and Vishnu and finally the supremacy of both in the larger cosmic structure. Invocation from Rig Veda - “Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti”, which means “the God is one, though the wise call him by various names” is the driving force behind the spirit of polytheism in the Hindu culture. Therefore, there is the harmonious coexistence of Shaivism and Vaishnavism. While
Vishnu devotees conceive Vishnu as the ultimate cause of creation, Shiva devotees consider Shiva to be the causal principal in the creation.

However, our point of focus is not Vaishnavism and Shaivism as such but their respective offshoots viz. Srivaishnavism and Veerashaivism as Andal and Akkamahadevi flourished during a specific religious upsurge of these sects. At the same time, before we could see the major line of difference between the two, we should have a look into Shaivism and its evolution in India.

**Shaivism**

Religion in its primitive form was an obeisance to the terrifying and incomprehensible aspects of nature. Gradually, as man started understanding the cosmic forces, he learnt to celebrate them. Religion constituted the ways of understanding and appreciating these cosmic principles. Shaivism is a religion of this stage in human journey of evolution. In other words, it is there from the beginning. This religion promotes a life lived in harmony with creation and its rhythms as they manifest in nature. This is a religion of love and celebration of life and its mysteries. Alain Danielou, in his celebrated text “While The Gods Play”, traces origins of Shaivism and declares it to be one of the most primitive religions in the history of mankind dating back at least 6000 years.

More recent research in historical studies confirms that Dravidians entered the Indian sub-continent much before Aryans did. They came to India in 9000 B.C. after the first ice age came to an end. Prof. M. Sakhare confirms that Dravidians migrated from a continent called Lemuria, which later got drowned into the sea. They spread from Kanya Kumari (Cape Comorin) to the Himalayas, evolved and reached the peak of their civilisation between the sixth century B.C. and the second century B.C. According to Alain Danielou:

> It was the Dravidians who built, among others in the Indus Valley, the cities of Mohenjo Daro and Harrappa, considerable traces of which have recently been discovered. The influence of the Dravidian civilization was very extensive. It

---

affected the whole continent, but also extended to the Sumerian cities with which the people of the Indus were definitely in contact Sumerian deity called the Lord of the Animals corresponds to the Indian Pashupati (Lord of the Animals). The Sumerian Goddess, the Lady of the Mountains, is called Parvati (Lady of the Mountains) in India. The Sumerians were called “Black Faces.” The followers of the old religion, throughout the course of history and still today, called the Kalamukha (Black Faces) in India. [Danielou: 1987: 7]

He further says, “Shaivism”, the religion of the ancient Dravidians, was always the religion of the people. Shiva had been the central deity of the pre-Aryan cultures in India. A famous stone image from Harrappan sites that depicts a lean yogi sitting in lotus pose is recognized as an image of Shiva. Metaphysical, cosmological, and ritual conceptions of Shaivism were preserved by communities of wandering ascetics living on the fringes of the official society, whom the Aryans scornfully called Yati(s) (wanderers), Vratya(s) (untouchables), or Ajivika(s) (beggars) [Thipperudra Swamy: 1968:15]. Agamas, Puranas and Yoga, are the sources where the major principles of Shaivism are laid down. Shaivagamas are the ancient texts that deal elaborately with the rituals and tenets of Shaivism.

Agamas contain the rites of worship of the deities - Shiva, Shakti and later of Vishnu. Aryan’s sacred scriptures, the Vedas, contain the deities that are representations of powerful aspects of the Nature like Varuna (Air), Indra (Rain and Thunder), and Surya (Sun). In the words of Prof. Sakhare, “the Vedic religion was a system of propitiation or conciliation of those Nature powers by means of sacrifices and offering into the fire,... while the Agamic deity was a personal deity that controlled the forces of nature.” [Sakhere: 1978:173.] Probably this was the reason why the path of devotion was an inherent and natural way of attaining Moksha in Shaivism. However, later both Agamic and Vedic streams merged into each other and Bhakti evolved as the highest path to attain liberation in Hinduism, where both Vaishnavism and Shaivism flourished together.

---

6 “On a seal found in Mohenjo-Daro, a divine figure seated in Yogamudra surrounded by wild animals is found. Experts have guessed it to that of Siva Himself. Its head dress in the shape of a trident has confirmed this belief. Here Siva is depicted as the great yogi and Pasupati. The Lingas that are found in Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro are eloquent evidence to prove that the worship of Siva, not only in the form of idols but also of Sivalinga, was already in vogue even at that period.” [Thipperudra Swamy:1968:24]
It is worth noting here, that due to Aryan influence and resultant supremacy of Vedas, scholars until recently held the view that Agamas are a part of the Vedas only. It was in 1050 B.C. (approx.), that Aryans invaded the Gangetic plains and destroyed the ancient cities of Indus. They conquered the natives and subjugated their culture, philosophy and religion. But the southern and eastern parts of the subcontinent could preserve their culture and religion for a long time. The natives were derogatorily called as ‘Dasyus’ and were accorded a servile status by the Aryans. By 600 B.C. Aryans had carved a very strong foothold over the entire land. Vedas, Upanishads and Epics, which hitherto were being transmitted orally as a part of the Brahminical education system, now started assuming a kind of standard form as the Vedic writing happened during this period. Writing was however subject to change and the palm-leaf manuscripts needed to be copied after a stipulated time. In fact, it was only after some thousand years after the Aryans first came to India, that the process of consolidation of texts began to happen but it went on happening well into the common era.

It were the Brahmin scholars, (rishi(s) and muni (s), who started writing down classical texts on palm leaf manuscripts. This required copying at regular intervals. This copying of texts often provided ample scope for revision and for integration of native and contemporary knowledge systems. New additions were often inadvertently autochthonous and received ideas from native wisdom. In fact, Aryans couldn’t but integrate elements from these native traditions, which later became a part of a broader phenomenon called

7 Renowned indologist Malati J. Shendge has an interesting point to support the thesis that Dravidians were a highly civilized race and it were Aryans who are indebted to them for everything that comes down to us in the name of “Refined” or “Shreshtha” (lit.the best) as they call themselves. She says: “On the other hand during the centuries that followed the conflict between the Aryas and Asuras, the Aryas who settled down in the new home, adopted this culture which was definitely more advanced than their own, and also adopted the language It must be remembered that the Indus civilization i.e. the Aksura culture was literate, having a script for the language and naturally with a greater awareness of the process of civilization itself. Whereas the Aryans were defeated, dispossessed of their land and driven out of their home. The adoption or absorption of the Asura culture by the Aryas was total so that no difference between them and the Asuras remained. This ‘symbiosis’, if it could be so named was given the name of Aryan culture”. [Shengde:1997:72]

8 "The first inscriptions date from the third century B.C. The Vedic Language had evolved, giving birth to various vernacular languages, the Prakrit(s). Writing allowed the Aryans to fix the religious and philosophical texts until then passed on orally. It was on this basis that great scholars forged an artificial language called Sanskrit, the “refined language” devised to last forever, which little by little, became the universal language of the culture. In the fourth century B.C., the grammarian Panini, summarizing earlier works, established in his famous grammar, the definitive form of Sanskrit, which has not changed since.” [Danielou:1987:13]
Hinduism. In *Rig-Veda*, for instance, Rudra appears as a terrifying, howling god responsible for destruction. This was certainly a Dravidian god, who later interestingly got integrated into the Aryan culture. In fact by the time of *Yajurveda*, Rudra–Shiva is established as the Lord (Pati) of all the gods who are beasts (pashu-s) before Him. And gradually, in *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* Rudra–Shiva is raised to the status of theistic Brahma, the supreme God of the universe.\(^9\) [Sakhare: 1978: 110.] It is important to note, that while other major Upanishads talked about non-theistic Absolute Brahman, *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* conceives Rudra–Shiva’s dual form of ‘protector-destroyer’ as the Supreme. Hence, the idea of a personal God in the form of Shiva, that basically comes from the Agamas, sieves into the Upanishads thereby attesting the presence of Shiva- *Bhakti* much before Vishnu- *Bhakti* in Bhagwad Gita in the epic period, to which beginnings of *Bhakti* are generally associated.

Shaivism, however, was preserved in its mystical form by secret communities of ascetics, who were wanderers and who preferred to live away from the social milieu and generally remained at the outskirts of civilized society. These ascetic wanderers passed on their esoteric wisdom, mystical rites and religious cults to closed groups of disciples. Many such non-Aryan sects like Pashupata, Kalamukha(s), Kapalika(s) and Dashnami Nagas were able to preserve and sustain their mystical and occultist theological traditions.

Makkhali Gosala (560-484B.C.) and Lakulisha (100 B.C.) are two important figures which relate to these ancient streams of Shaivism. Gosala was a contemporary of Buddha and Mahavira. The two princes actually followed Gosala and lived with him as ascetic-wanderers for a substantial period of their lives. Initially, they were attracted to the freedom and joy of living without inhibitions, offered by Gosala’s religion. This religion contrasted with the excessive Vedic ritualism and Brahminical oppression, which was not overt but covert and manifested for aristocracy generally in the form of moral obligations psychologically ingrained by Brahmans in religio - political atmosphere. Performances of elaborate rites such as Havan(s) and Yajna(s) like ‘Ashwamedha Yajna’, sacrificial Yajna(s) and Yajna(s) for the pitr(s) i.e. the ancestors etc., had great financial bearings and the outcome was often a wasted effort. More financial burden on the Royal treasury.

actually meant more taxes on the subjects which more often than not had the danger of causing feeling of dissent in people against the ruler.  

Vedic ‘karmakanda’ or ritualism had reached a kind of saturation and was already on decline, when these two princes emerged on the religious scene. Later they separated ways from Gosala and also from each other to move on to lay the foundation of two great atheistic religions of Jainism and Buddhism, which also like Shaivism, influenced all world religions in some way or the other and particularly through their tenet of non-violence. Underlining fact however remains, that these two religions are poles opposite to Shaivism. [Danielou: 1987:29]

After Gosala in sixth century B.C., it was an Ajivika saint called Lakulisha, who brought Shaivism into the forefront of Indian religious culture and helped in finding for it a central place in the civil society. Lakulisha was probably a contemporary of John the Baptist and lived in around 100BC. [Danielou: 1987: 29.] Lakulisha belonged to a non-Aryan priestly class called “Jangama” and ‘Kalamukha’ sect which had been active in the South up till the 13th century A.D. and probably later. [Thipperudra

---

10 A classic example of this dissent is the Veershaiva movement in 12th century Karnataka, where Brahmanical pressure on the king Bijjala of Kalyana to perform an elaborate Yajna led to levying of extra taxes on people. This was certainly one of the causes of the murder of Bijjalla among other more stronger reasons like ‘Anulom Vivaha’ which was not acceptable to the Brahmans as they found it against the ‘Shastras’.

At the time, the families of the warlike aristocracy were in revolt against the authority of the Brahmans and the rigid ritualism of the Vedic religion.

Immense sacrificial ceremonies, such as the sacrifice of the horse (ashvamedha), through which the Brahmans imposed their power, ruined the states financially. Gautama was at first attracted to the antisocial mysticism of Shaivism. For a time, he was also a disciple of Gosala and very close to Mahavira, who was three years younger. For several years he practiced with the austere and free life of a wandering monk. He eventually left them, however, and soon became their rival. [Danielou:1987: 23]  

11 In the fourth century, Chandra Gupta, an adventurer of Scythian origin, who had married a princess of the ancient Shiva tribe of the Lichavi, assassinated the last monarch of Pataliputra and ruled from A.D. 319 to 330. It is from this period on that representations of Lakulisha are to be found in India. These portray him as a naked yogi with a staff (lakula) in his left hand and a citron (matu-linga ) in his right, with his penis erect and either standing or seated in lotus posture. At about the beginning of the eleventh century, the Lakulisha cult seems to have shifted its activities to southern India. [Danielou:1987: 29]

12 There are evidences in literary texts and inscriptions found in various mathas and Shiva temples in Karnataka’s Belgaum, Hassan, Halebid and Ariskhere regions, which mention activities of Kalamukha priests. It seems that this ancient sect was gradually absorbed by Veershaivism. According to H. Thipperudra Swamy:
Swamy:1968:40].His major contribution to Shaivism was that he expounded the ancient religion of Pasupata and revived practices of Hatha Yoga, Tantra and also cosmogonies of ancient Samkhya philosophy. Madhavacharya in his famous Sarvadarshana Sangraha, refers to a certain book about Pasupata religion which seemed to have been written by Lakulisha. During Lakulisha’s time Kushanas were the major rulers in the North. To quote M.R. Sakhare:

In the early centuries of Christian era, Shaivism prevailed during the period of Kushans. The earliest coins bearing Shiva emblems, an image of Shiva with trident in hand on obverse and his bull on reverse are those of Kushans. Wema Kadphises, a powerful prince of Kushan race, styles himself on the reverse of his coins as a devotee of Maheshwara or a member of the Maheshwara sect. [Sakhare. P. 132. 1978.]

According to Prof. K.P. Jaiswal, it was around 150 A.D. after the rule of imperial Kushanas that Barashivas started expanding their kingdom in the North and took over Bihar, United Provinces of Agra, Oudh, Bundelkhand, Central Provinces, Malwa, Rajputana and Madra republics in Punjab. They declared Lord Shiva as the presiding deity of their kingdom. This spirit was sustained by the Vakataka dynasty that ruled between 284 A.D.- 348 A.D. However, after the coming of Gupta kings, Vaishnavism spread in the North as most Gupta rulers were ardent Vishnu devotees including Samudragupta, the last of Gupta kings. After this period, prominence of Vaishnavism and Shaivism rose and fell in North India according to the political conditions prevalent in the country. For instance, during the reign of Harshavardhana in the seventh century A.D. Shaivism gained prominence again while after the Muslim invasions and under British Colonial period, both Vaishnavism and Shaivism grew and sustainably remained a strong silent religious force in the country.

“Though Veershaivism and Kalamukha Saivism, principally differ from each other, yet it may be said, the Veershaivism of Basavanna’s time was ready to absorb the influential Kalamukha sect. Several Kalamukha Mathas were converted into Veershaiva Mathas. Pandits have admitted that the conversion of the Kalamukha Matha at Puvalli of Belgaum district into a Veershaiva Matha is a living testimony.” [Thipperudra Swamy:1968:40.]
Philosophy of Veershaivism

Veerashaivism or ‘Heroic Shaivism’ is an offshoot of Shaivism which arose in Karnataka in the 12th century. However some schools of thought consider it to be a very old religion. Inspite of the debate it is certain, that the religion became consolidated after the Sharana movement in 12th century under the leadership of saint Basavanna.

Veerashaiva philosophy emphasizes more on the means of attaining the goal of ‘Siva Sayujya’ or ‘Oneness with Siva’ than on organized metaphysics and theory of cosmogony. The cosmological expositions as found in other forms of Shaivism like Pashupata, Tamil Shaivism, Shaiva Siddhanta and Kashmir Shaivism etc. are reflected in vachana literature only indirectly.

Veerashaivism conceives a system of faith and practice for its followers. This system centres around the concept of ‘Shatsthala’ i.e. six phases or stages in the spiritual journey of a sharana. In fact, before ‘Shatsthala’ (six stages), three preparatory ‘sthalas’ are mentioned. Hence in all, they become nine sthalas like the nine stages of Navadha Bhakti as discussed with reference to Alvars and Vishnu - Bhakti. In this context, Prof. A.K. Ramanujan observes:

“The vachana and later Virashaiva texts in Kannada and Sanskrit speak of the mystical process as a succession of stages, a ladder of ascent, a metamorphosis from egg to larva to pupa to the final freedom of the winged being.... Six phases or steps (sthala, sopana) are recognized. The devotee at each stage has certain characteristics; each stage has a specific relationship between the anga or the soul and the linga or the lord.” [Ramanujan: 1973: 169]

Entry into the Veerashaiva faith is reserved by initiation by a competent Guru. Guru initiates the disciple by giving a mantra and an ‘ishta-linga’ to the disciple. This linga is to be worn on the physical body. A more popular name of Veerashaivism is “Lingayat”, which comes from the practice of wearing the linga on the body. Guru, Jangama and Linga are principally and practically important for a Veerashaiva. Regardless of caste or class one can get initiated into the path by a Guru. After Guru comes the Linga. In the words of Prof. S.C. Nandimath:
"The Linga presented by the Guru functions as Acharalinga in the nose, as Gurulinga in the tongue, as Sivalinga in the eyes, as Jangamalinga in the touch, as Prasadalinga in the ears, and as Mahalinga in the heart. The linga worn on the person is termed as lshtalinga and the linga meditated in the centre of the heart, Pranalinga." [Nandimath: 1965: 37. Vol.1]

In the initial stages, the seeker has to understand the first three ‘sthalas’ and then through understanding has to proceed further on the spiritual path.

**Three Preparatory Sthalas**

‘Sthala’ in Sanskrit means place. In Veershaiva faith, it represents the ‘stage’ or phase in the journey of a sharana to the Divine. The three essential requisites are the stages of awareness which need to be developed or are already present in the seeker due to ‘punyas’ (good deeds) of the previous births.

**Pinda-Sthala**

The first ‘Sthala’ is the ‘Pindasthala’. ‘Pinda’ is pure jiva or an individual with a pure heart with consciousness of the divine principle working in the creation.

**Sansaraheya-Sthala**

_Sansara_ is the unending cycle of birth and death. To be bound in this cycle without any hope for liberation is ‘Sansara’. To understand the nature of the ‘Self’, as being a part of ‘Paramshiva’ and meditate on this with a hope to finally cut through this cycle without getting disturbed by the play of _Sansara_, is the purpose of this stage in the life of the seeker.

**Mayavilasvidambana-Sthala**

_Maya_ is Siva’s own power that works to put up the play (_Lila_) of the Lord Himself in perfect conjunction with His Will (Ichha - Shakti). This _Maya_, which feeds the five senses with various kinds of foods is varied and attractive. It entangles the mind of the seeker in its clutches if he/she is not aware. Therefore the function of this sthala is to make the seeker understand true nature of Maya as illusion.
Now we innumerate the six main phases or *shat sthalas* of Veershaiva philosophy.

**Shat- Sthala**

When the seeker thus prepares him/herself after initiation by Guru, in the form of receiving mantra and the *Ishta - linga*, by meditating constantly on the true nature of the Self, then he/she is ready to enter the next six sthalas known as ‘*shatsthalas*’.

**Bhakta-Sthala**

At this stage, the seeker has to offer dedicated service to the ‘Lingam’ (*Lingapuja*), ‘Jangama’ (*Jangama Dasoha*) and to the ‘Guru’ (*Guruseva*). This stage demands complete surrender of the self to the three principles of divinity in the form of Guru, Jangama, and Linga. Through the *Karamyoga* or *Sarkayaka* the seeker becomes purer and purer.

**Maheshvara - Sthala**

At this stage, the faith in the Divine becomes more and more consolidated and becomes a living reality with the bhakta. Now the bhakta is still doing the external worship-Ashtopchara, Shodashopchara Puja etc. but is no more dependent on it to feel the Divine consciousness pervading inside and outside him/her.

**Prasadi-Sthala**

‘*Prasada*’ actually means grace of God. Grace descends as we surrender to the Divine Will. The more the dedication, the more will be the grace. *Avadhana* (Attentiveness), *Nirahamkar* (egolessness), *Sujnana* (Right knowledge as opposed to ignorance) are the characteristics of the seeker at this *sthala*. The seeker makes the offering of the ‘ego’ by removing ignorance and is called a ‘*Prasadi*’. In his/her *Arpana- Kriya* or acts of dedication, he/she offers his/her body, mind and property to the Guru, Linga and Jangama respectively. By making this offering, all these entities are purified of the ‘*malas*’ or impurities and the seeker receives them back now as *Prasada*.
Pranalingi - Sthala

Experience of the Self is the hallmark of this stage: Here the seeker, completely withdrawn from the outside world, turns inward and experiences the presence of linga in the very breath going in and out. Experience of the subtlety of the Divine is revealed through stirring of Kundalini- Shakti within the central nerve Shushumna. This happens due to constant meditation upon the linga in the palm which brings about the synthesis of Drishti (Subject) and Shrishti (Object) [Nandimath:1965: 40].

Sarana-Sthala

In this stage, the seeker has become established in the light of the Divine and enjoys the bliss of divine consciousness. All the conflicts, that arise due to ‘Avidya’ (ignorance) are dissolved and the seeker achieves a blissful state of tranquility.

Aikya - Sthala

This is the last stage in the journey as propounded by the Shat-Sthala scheme in Veershaivism. Here the seeker has become one with the divine and has achieved Shivattava. He/ she now has no independent will or identity of his/ her own but becomes one with the Divine Will.

Prof. S. C. Nandimath in Vol.1. of Sunya Sampadane writes about one more sthala called ‘Jangama- Sthala’ with reference to Allama Prabhu’s spiritual journeys, that were taken up by him purely in order to show the path of liberation or ‘Jeevan-Mukti’ to deserving seekers throughout the land.

Interestingly in a long vachana by her, Akka Mahadevi talks about all these states and other characteristics of Veershaiva faith in detail. This vachana is worth quoting in full:

Thinking that the animate and the inanimate
Are born of Siva’s Consciousness
And finding Siva’s soul in all creatures
And that of all creatures in Himself,
Due to the dual nature of Siva,
The compassionate omniscient energy
Is to be obtained in the Bhaktasthala
The energy of perfect satisfaction
Is to be obtained in the Mahesvarasthala,
Without losing heart on account
Of blame, obstacles and troubles,
And thinking that joy, sorrow, pain and pleasure
Come to one at God's behest.

The energy of eternal vigilance
That causes the propitiousness of eternal Parasiva
Who is the cause of the temporal world including body,
Is to be obtained in Prasadisthala, mark!
The independent energy which creates
Awareness that Siva is so independent
That though the motion of the whole world
Including body, is subject to Him,
He is not subject to any,
Is to be obtained in Pranalingisthala.
The manifest energy that creates awareness
That all manifest things including body,
That are subject to Parasiva are ephemeral
And that Lord Parasivalinga,
Who is the cause of the birth
Of all manifest things including body,
Alone is eternal,
Is to be obtained in the Saranasthala, mark!
The infinite energy that causes
The complete union with Parasivalinga,
By showing the union of Anga and Linga
Is to be obtained in the Aikyasthala, mark!
Proof of this is in Sivarahasya. \[ TH-16300 \]
O Sankara, that which is supposed
To be Bhaktasthala
Is called omniscience!
Mahesvarasthala is my satisfaction.
That which is supposed to be Prasadisthala
Is called unbridled vigilance,
And that which is supposed to be Pranalinga
Is called Liberation
That which is supposed to be Saranasthala
Is called manifest Sakti,
And that which is supposed to be Aikyasthala
Is called infinite Sakti.
Unless they trample down the way to birth,
By knowing the state and nature of
Six-fold energy in the six-fold sthala
And embodying the six-fold linga
Through meditation and worship,
They cannot become Sthalabrahamis.
But how can the wretched fellows
Who blame and censure blindly,
Enjoy other’s wife, maidservants and prostitutes
Eat filth, and like Potaraja, Jogi and Kshapana,
Go about begging for a loaf of bread,
Some by tying their hair into knots and buns
And some by shaving their heads,
Be ever called detached sthalabrahamis, sir?
I say ‘Hail’ to the holy feet of Cennabasavanna,
Who by knowing the six-fold energy of such eternal
Sthalabrahama Nirabhari
Has become the detached Jangama
Sthalabalabrahami,
O Cennamallikarjuna!  
[Yaravintellimath:2006:149]

This vachana is a very significant one not only in Akka’s oeuvre but in the entire corpus of the ‘Sharna Literature. Besides revealing Akka’s understanding of different stages of the spiritual path, it opens a wide window to the tenets of Sharna philosophy in simple experiential poetry. The six-fold energy explained by Akka can be realised only by serious seekers like Cennabasavanna. She staunchly criticizes the fake-seekers and hypocrites! The last lines about the fake sadhu(s) and licentious men are an indication of the corruption in the prevailing religious streams. Twelfth century Veershaivism was a movement which opposed all those practices which had turned into empty, repetitious rituals devoid of the spiritual goal of self transformation.

Akka Mahadevi’s life coincided with the upsurge of Veershaivism in Karnataka. Basavana, who was the leader of Sharna movement, set up a common ground of interaction for the Shiv-Sharanas in Kalyana. This was called Anubhava Mantapa (lit. Hall of Experience). Sharanas frequented this place to hold discussions on social, spiritual and political concerns.

Most often these dialogues were in the form of vachanas. It is believed that Akka Mahadevi, during her journey as an ascetic- wanderer, visited Kalyana to meet Allama Prabhu, Basavanna and other sharanas at Anubhava Mantapa. The sixteenth chapter, “Shodashopdesha” of the famous 15th century compilation of vachanas called Shunya Sampadane, narrates the interaction between Akka and Allama Prabhu.

Besides the supposition, made in Sunya Sampadane that Akka Mahadevi visited Kalayana and interacted with sharanas, there is enough evidence in her own vachanas indicating that she subscribed to the tenets of Veershaivism and considered herself as one among the sharnas. She sees sharanas in high regard. The vachana quoted above is an example where she clearly praises sharana Cennabasavanna. In another vachanas, she says:

---

To see, to talk and to converse  
With your saranas is a pleasure.  
What is there that your Sarana’s experience can not do?  
What is there that your Saranas’ discourse cannot do,  
O Cennamallikarjuna?  
[Yaravintellimath:2006:167]

and yet in another vachana:  

The ground Thy saranas have trod  
Is holy, Lord!  
The city where Thy saranas live  
Is city of Kailasa!  
The spot where Thy saranas stand  
Is thine own abode!  
O Cennamallikarjuna Lord, …


Evolution of Religion (Shaivism and Vaishnavism) and Emergence of Bhakti in South India with Reference to Tamil Nadu

One of the most ancient of world cultures, Tamil culture is said to have its beginnings some 3000 years before Christ. However, indigenous natives of this extreme southern part of the sub-continent must have undergone the Paleolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic stages of evolution, before they established themselves in the region as a cultured and refined race with elements of a well developed civilization. Due to specific geographical features like mountains, rivers and plateaus, this part was protected from political invasions from the North. There is also no evidence of cultural transmigration from the North till about 600 BC. Vedic literature from the North seldom reveals any knowledge about the region lying to the South of Vindhyas. A later hymn of Rig Veda suggests, that someone expelled from the Aryan-fold took up ‘Dakshinapatha’ i.e. way to the South. On the pattern of ‘ashram’ life of Aryan sages as seen in Vedas and Upanishads, several
natural caverns adapted for human inhabitation have been found in southern Tamil districts also. These caves depict Tamil inscription in Brahmi script, which belong to 2nd BC. A Buddhist text Sutta Nipata mentions a Vedic scholar and teacher, who left Kushala and moved to a village on the bank of river Godavari. These above mentioned evidences are first few to indicate a slow, peaceful penetration of Aryan's Vedic culture into the southern region including the Tamil Land.

However, a most lucid account of ancient Tamilian culture comes down to us through the premier body of literature of the region in Sangam period. The dates of this period are debated and are supposed to range anywhere from 200 B.C. -250 A.D or 500B.C.-200 A.D. According to a legend first recorded in a ninth century A.D. commentary to a grammatical treatise, there were three Sangam periods in succession which lasted for about ten thousand years. However some 30,000 lines of poetry, that have become extant clearly belong to the last and third Sangam period. Synchronism referred to in the Sangam literature, especially poetry, suggest a span of 150 to 200 years including some six successive generations. Out of the three important kingdoms of the region namely Chera, Chola and Pandya, only some Chera genealogies find mention in the poetry of Sangam Period.

Two important epics, Cilapadikaram and Manimekalai, which were earlier ascribed to Sangam period, are now considered as works of post Sangam age. [Nilakanta Sastri: 1963:11-12]

Cilapadikaram, which is believed to have a Jaina authorship, the author being Ilango Adigal (prince ascetic), nevertheless reflects Tamil culture in its rich variety. The legend of a chaste wife Kannagi and her trader husband Kovalan, Cilapadikaram is a telling account of people’s beliefs, customs, rituals and other religious practices. It reveals, how many faiths silently mingled and coexisted with each other in this period. In Cilapadikaram religious concepts of sin, its expiation, those of charity and of receiving gifts find different manifestations in different characters that are portrayed in the epic. These characters come from a wide spectrum of caste, class and religious systems.

---

14 This treatise is named "Iraiyar Arapporul" which suggests that the author of the work is Lord Shiva himself.
Buddhists, Jains, Brahmmins, and Aryanas are portrayed as living together in mutual respect and recognition.

On the other hand, Manimekalai, is preeminently a Buddhist work, which recounts the story of Manimekalai, daughter of Kovalan and his chaste paramour Madhavi. In this epic, the heroine Manimekalai in the role of a nun is certainly used as a mouthpiece to propagate the Gospel of Buddha. It is however very significant that a women nun is portrayed as a liberated soul (Buddha), considering the fact that official Buddhism denies ‘Nirvana’ to women.

In fact, in both the epics women are reverentially portrayed. This is true not only of the heroines but also of other women characters such as Madhavi who is a courtesan and paramour. Tamil culture has always afforded the respect due to women as human beings. This is clearly reflected in the literature of various eras.

These epics also indicate an ascendancy of Jainism and Buddhism. Manimekalai in particular propagates Buddhism in exclusion of other religions. Scholars believe that while in Sangam age these two religions coexisted in harmony with other faiths, in post Sangam age, they become powerful and oppressive. It was in reaction to the fear of extinction, that traditional religious leaders started consolidating what we now know as Hinduism. Buddhism and Jainism emphasized upon asceticism and other life-negating values. In these religions human desires are considered as the root cause of suffering. Tamil land, which exuberated in nature’s bounty and sense of prosperous fulfillment, acknowledged and accepted human desires and passions. Basic man-women relation, understood as the source of ‘Ananda’ (bliss) in this world, later transforms into the Madhurya or Nayak-nayika bhava between an individual devotee and God. This is the clue to the origin of Bhakti in Tamil Nadu. Composition and singing of hymns and songs in praise of God in vernacular in the beginning led later to more organized devotional expressions like debating, competition in miracle performances, tests of truth of doctrines etc. Devotees would gather together, sing, dance and would wander from one place to the

---

15. It is interesting to note that author of Manimekalai, Sattanar, a grain merchant and a Buddhist by faith, was a contemporary of Ilango Adigal, who was a Jain monk. Sattanar hailed from Madurai.
other spreading this enthusiasm through this new kind of passion for none else but God Himself.

Although South India assimilated Vedic culture from the North, it contributed the aspect of Bhakti to Indian religion and philosophy. Bhakti existed in earlier times but this element of passionate love for God came only from Tamil Alvar and Nayanmar saints. In Ramayana, Mahabharata and in Upanishads, Bhakti or devotion has a very serene and detached face. Laxman, Hanuman and Arjuna are not emotional in their respective devotion. In Bhagwad Gita, Lord Krishna talks about ‘Sambhava’ (equanimity), ‘Sakshibhava’ (witness attitude) and ‘Sthitaprajnayata’ (steadfastness), all of which indicate a very controlled and disciplined living. In fact, in the North of India these qualities are celebrated as the premium qualities of an ideal human being with a very controlled, evolved and detached view of life. The sources of these values are Vedas, Upanishads and Epics.

However, in South India, be it due to the need to drive away or resist the spread of ascetic and life denying Jaina and Buddhist religions or due to the presence of a life affirming sincerity inherent in the Tamil culture, there is this projection of common human passion into relationships between individuals. And personal love, which is an experiential aspect of all existence, has very extensively and comprehensively touched the living and cultural aspects including the religious expressions of people in this region.

There are many theories about the origin of Bhakti, but I believe that the accessibility of this kind of experience at all levels with no pre-requisite qualification, is the most important factor in development of an attitude of Bhakti or intense love for a personal god.

This spirit of Bhakti found expression in the efflorescence of devotional verses composed by devotees of Vishnu and Shiva, in the period from the 6th to the 9th century A.D. in Tamil Nadu. Devotees of Vishnu are revered as Alvars and those of Shiva as Nayanmars. Works of twelve Alvars were compiled in the 10th century A.D. by Nathmuni, the first Srivaishnava acharya, under the rubric of Nalayira Divaya Prabandham (The sacred Book of Four Thousand). The word Alvar traditionally means “one who is deeply
immersed” (in the love of God). This title was conferred on the twelve poet saints at a later date by the Srivaishnava community.

**Revival of Ritualism through Bhakti Movements in South India**

As stated earlier, in South India, Jainism and Buddhism were the ascendant religions after the Tamil Sangam period which lasted until the 2nd century A.D. Under the rule of Kalabhras in the South, ‘this-worldly’ religious and cultural values of Tamils suffered oppression and excessive censure in the 3rd and even the 4th century A.D. But just like Bharashivas and Vakatakas in the North, Pallavas kings established Shaivism as their state religion in the South. The Pallava dynasty ruled the Southern land between 295 A.D. to 360 A.D.

Initially the rise of Shaivite and Vaishnavite (Nayanmar and Alvar) Bhakti movements was a process of consolidating non-ascetic values of love and heroism already present in Sangam culture, but later these movements were used to channelise other dimensions of cultural traditions including questions of caste, class and gender.

When these Bhakti movements were able to create a strong social support and participation of the masses, then they automatically attracted royal patronage which led to consolidation of Bhakti values. There are examples in the Tamil history when Kings were converted into Shaivism and Vaishnavism. Evidently Mahendraverman, an early 7th century Pallava ruler was himself a convert from Jainism. His contemporary Nayanmar saint Appar, earlier a Jaina, successfully converted the king into Shaivism. Similarly another Nayanmar saint Campantar transformed the Pantiya region by converting the king and his subjects to Shaivism. Writings of some of these saints were instrumental in shaping various Shaiva sects especially the philosophy of “Shaiva Siddhanta”. [Sakhare:1978:138.] Though references to Shaivism go back to the Aham

---

16 Out of the two great epics in Tamil language viz. Cilapadikaram and Manimekalai written towards the end of the Sangam period, the latter seems to have been written only to propagate the philosophies of Buddha and to prove Buddhist supremacy over other religions.

17 “Of all the religious works of Shaiva authors, Tirumandiram, the work of Tirumular, is the most authoritative; as it became the foundation on which the superstructure of Shaiva Siddhanta philosophy was
and Puram poetry of the Sangam period in Tamil Literature, one of the most important Shaiva texts in Tamil is Tirumandiram by saint Tirumullar. [Sakhare1978:136.] Tirumullar was one among the 63 Nayanmars who lived in the land during the 4th and the 9th century A.D. Sambandar, Appar (circa 650 A.D.) and Sundarar (circa 800 – 825 A.D.) together with Manikavasagar, who wrote Tiruvvasagam are considered as four ‘Samayacharas’ of Shaivism or teachers of Shaivism. Sundarar wrote songs about the lives of Nayanmars in his work Tiruttodattogai. However it was an eleventh century Shiva devotee, Sekkilar, who wrote detailed accounts of the lives of 63 Nayanmars in his celebrated text Periya Puranam. Periya Puranam is an interesting rendering of the devotional acts and miraculous incidents in the lives of Nayanmars. This text has assumed the status of a sacred scripture in South Indian Shaiva religious culture.

Just as Shaivism established its roots in Tamil culture through devotional songs of Shaiva saints, Vaishnavism reestablished through the devotional songs of Alvar saints.

In Tamil Nadu, the first three Alvar saints were active during the fifth and sixth centuries and Alvar’s Vishnu Bhakti reached its culmination with Nammalvar in the 7th century and receded with Mathurakavi and Kulashekhara Alvar in the 9th century AD.

When Alvars and Nayanmars in Tamil Nadu were pouring devotional songs in praise of Vishnu and Shiva respectively, they were somehow trying to counter the influence of religions of Buddha and Mahavira. These saints singing ecstatically used to wander from temple centre to temple centre thereby reviving the ritualistic temple lives in the whole land of Tamil Nadu. Compositions of these saints were integrated into temple rites which led to a new amalgamation of agamic rituals and the Bhakti compositions, consequently initiating a whole new culture of inclusive, open, free flowing expression of divine love in an otherwise exclusive Brahminical ritual context in the temple space. In Vishnu temples, songs of Alvars from ‘Divya Prabandham’ are sung and in Shiva temples, compositions of Nayanmars from ‘Tevaram’ are sung. This also indicates, how Bhakti compositions actually were harmoniously integrated into the already existing ancient

raised later by Tirumular’s successors. But it is mainly the Nayanars that were greatly instrumental in the spread of Shaivism by their life of intense, sincere, exemplary devotion.” [Sakhare.1978: 138.]

It is a significant fact that Shaiva-devotionalism made popular by the Nayanmars in seventh century was also being sung earlier by women saint poets like Karaikkal Ammaiyyar and Avvaiyar
A system of agamic ritual worship, thereby making the whole system open to common masses. As the saints sang in vernacular and not in classical or courtly language, they held great mass appeal and their popularity increased manifold as the temple integrated the songs in its worship routines.

Gradually this new Bhakti tradition found roots in the culture and conferred great powers on the Temple space, which with time afforded more and more political bent to the temple administration. Another outcome of popularity of Bhakti saints and through the ‘teertha-yatras’ (pilgrimages), their relation to sacred geography, was an upsurge in the building and development of temples. Wherever these saints went about singing, people thronged them and the places they touched during their journeys were transformed into sacred places. Whole cities and townships came up around temple structures during the period of Nayanmars for instance. The 63 Nayanmars saints in Tamil Nadu filled the whole land with their devotional songs, that carved a permanent place in the consciousness of Shiva devotees. These saints left their mark in public memory by visiting many cities. Using the colloquial language, they sang wandering through the land with a large following thereby creating sacred geographies or ‘teertha-sthalas’. Examples of Appar and Sampabandar (Campantar) are particularly interesting. According to R.Champakalakshmi:

“Campantar’s hymns (seventh to eighth centuries AD) are considered the most successful from the Bhakti point of view, as they, apart from their emotional significance, also establish Siva as the local god and the transcendent deity. Campantar’s hymns are also significant as extolling the idea of pilgrimage. On his peregrinations to various Saiva shrines composing melodious Tamil hymns, he is said to have been accompanied by crowds of fellow devotees. A panar or musician called Tirunilakanta Yalpanar set his hymns to music (pan) and accompanied him on his journeys. Campantar also visited many Siva shrines with his elder contemporary Tirunavukkaracar (Appar), both of them drawing a large following of devotees.” [Champakalakshmi and Gopala:1996:142.]

The power, these saints wielded over the populace, was not only due to the colloquialism of the songs but also due to their high emotional appeal and great music
compositions. The idea of pilgrimage led to two important things--- adaptation of temples of local deities into the Shiva fold and construction of grand temple-structures on a large scale. According to K. Meenakshi:

“The construction of temples began roughly during the Pallava-Pantiya period i.e. seventh to ninth centuries, and gained momentum and reached its culmination during the Cola period (ninth to twelth centuries). The Colas are known to have constructed a large number of temples. Though the earlier ruling dynasties instituted grants for worship at and maintenance of temples, it was during the Cola period that temples were institutionalized, becoming thereby the centre of all social and economic activities…” [Champakalakshmi and Gopala: 1996:122.]

K. Meenakshi raises an important point while mentioning the role of temples in the socio-economic aspects of the medieval South. She says, that when Bhakti led to construction of temples and revived agamic modes of worship, the Brahmins, who were in the know how of rituals and also supposedly more pure, “acquired high ritual status and others, ritually less pure, came to be assigned lower ranking, leading to the emergence of a hierarchy around the temple based on brahmanical caste relations”. [Champakalakshmi and Gopala: 1996:122.]

Dwelling on this point a little, one can easily infer that the Bhakti movements which were a reaction to the heterodox religions, had to count at least one positive aspect of these religions, which was their position against ‘Varnashram dharma’ i.e. caste-system. And probably it was to acknowledge this, that Bhakti followers had to be inclusive of all castes. However, caste equality proclaimed by various saints and Acharyas never actually sieved down into the social set up. There are many examples of saints from lower classes who were denied entry into the temples and who gave up their lives sitting at the temple gates.(Ex. Nandanar, a Shaivite devotee, Tiruppanalvar, a Vaishnavaite saint).19 [Sekkizhaar: 1985:564.] Temples till this date protect this caste hierarchy. C.V. Narayan Ayyar argues that:

---

19 [Sekkizhaar: 1985:564]
"By feigning to admit the low born in their ranks and treat them on a par with the higher groups, these sects wanted to take the edge away from the Jain propaganda that only Jainism stood for a society of equals. In practice, however, the sudra Nayanar continued to suffer as ever, from social disabilities.” [Narayan Ayyar: 1974:122.]

**Institutionalization of Bhakti Culture**

Nathmuni in the 10th century compiled the works of Alvars in *Nalaya Divya Prabandham* and Acharyas like Yamunacharya and Ramanujacharya, putting the writings in philosophical perspective, created a whole new religion of Srivaishnaivism in the 12th century. In the context of Shaivite faith, Nayanmars writings were also consolidated by various authors like Sekkizhaar, Tirumullar and Appar. ‘Tevaram’ is the collection of hymns of Nayanmar saints. A major philosophy that arose from Nayanmar saints’ writings was Shaiva Siddhanta. ‘Nalaya Divya Prabandham’ and ‘Tevaram’ contain the hymns of Alvar and Nayanmar saints respectively, which were integrated into the temple rituals in Vaishanava and Shaiva ‘devasthanams’ (temples). The strong theological base provided by Ramanujacharya, where he successfully integrated Sanskrit Vedas and Tamil ‘Divyaprabandham’ of Alvars, helped in according a scriptural status to the Alvar literature, while Nayanmar hymns served a limited function of ritual singing at the Shaiva temples and could never be raised to form a theology.

After the initial phase of Bhakti euphoria in Tamil Nadu and later in Karnataka, Bhakti culture received strong support from the royal patrons and became institutionalized in the processes of temple administration- its policies and politics by the 11th and 12th centuries. Temple administration gained enormous power, that centered itself in the hands of a few in the line of priestly hierarchy.

Poignant Story of saint Nandanaar, who was a dealer in dead animal carcasses, appears in *Periya Puranam* by Sekkizhaar. He had to walk through fire to purify himself before he could walk towards the temple in the city of 'Thillai'. Sekkizhaar says:
The very moment he entered the fire,  
His delusive false appearance lost its form,  
And in the form of a great muni of great virtue, he rose from the fire  
With the white thread shining on his body,  
And matted locks to match. [Page. 564.]
According to R. Champakalakshmi:

“In the medieval South Indian context, all the emergent institutions and urban forms, including the nagaram, ‘merchant guilds’ and craft organizations, were merged into a single systemic relationship. Diverse economic and ethnic groups were thereby accommodated as a substantial component within the same structure, i.e. the temple society, by seeking validation within the norms of the traditional order of ritual ranking.” [Champakalakshmi: 1996:163]

However, in spite of its integration into the political systems of the times Bhakti as a principle always propagated equality of all the individual souls in the scheme of creation. Time and again the saints referred to this idea in their songs. Therefore, when the medieval temple ranking rituals excluded the commoners, saints from this era challenged the temple itself as house of God and posited the idea of body of the individual bhakta itself as the temple or real house of God.

Therefore, within the Bhakti movement there initially were phases of establishment of structure like temple as a symbol of love and devotion for god and later those of revolt against these structures when they became too orthodox in their turn.

Challenging the Temple Structure: Tamil Siddhas and Kannadiga Veershaivas

R. Champaklakshmi has pointed out in the above quoted essay that Nayanmar hymnists had a close affinity with Siddhas and some of them like Tirumular were from Siddha tradition, which incidentally was a kind of voice of dissent against the initial thrust of Bhakti movement on the sacred space (temple) and the manifest form of the deity.[Champakalakshmi: 1996:159]

Early Siddhas belonged to the early phases of Bhakti (7th -9th century AD) but the later Siddhas arose in the post institutional phase of Bhakti. These saints were adherents of ancient yogic practices and “challenged the established religious and social order, and denounced the exterior manifestations of religious practices such as elaborate sacrifice, idol worship, and pilgrimage to holy places.” [Champakalakshmi: 1996:125] Siddhas

---

probably registered their voices of protest when they witnessed the temple space transform into oppressive centers of power and also into a space of caste politics and exploitation of lower castes. In a way, it was a need of the times to defy this external temple structure and to relate back to the inner sacred space of true bhakta (devotee). This ideology was profitable to the ruling classes as it erased any threat of rebellion whatsoever from lower castes to acquire a more legitimate role in temple politics. Hence the voice of the Siddhas was very relevant to provide a broader political base to the Bhakti philosophy. To quote a song by Sivavakkiyar for example:

Brick, black stone, red linga,
Copper and other base metals
You say Siva resides in these metals
After you realize yourself
The omnipresent god will sing and dance within you.\(^{21}\)

This song is an example of how Bhakti impulse of freedom was already trying to go beyond the physical confines of the temple, which had become a centre for political power and which still excluded a large section of the society. A similar impulse of freedom appears to have given impetus to the Veershaiva movement of Karnataka which sought to throw its doors open to all, irrespective of cast and gender in the 12th century. Veershaivites created an entire line of symbolism around the microcosm (the human body) and the Macrocosm (the Cosmic Consciousness). They relegated the ‘Sthavar Lingam’ (fixed linga) of the temple to adopt the ‘moving lingam’ worn on the body by the Veershaiva devotee- thus doing away with the need for external rituals and rites that were the forte of the temple priestly class. Veershaiva religion created its own praxis of Bhakti that allowed for an expansive outlook and a philosophy that defied the ‘Varnashrama Dharma’.

Above discussion brings us to a point where we can take off to our poetesses Andal and Akka Mahadevi, who were put under the aegis of Srivaishnavism and Veershaivism respectively by the interpreters of religions and historians.

Finally it should be noted that _Bhakti_ movements were actually free from the religious doctrines and denominations. They actually kept on enlivening the essentially positive in the religious systems. Also these movements have kept on flourishing and have taken various turns down the centuries and are still impregnating mundane life with high inspiration.
References


