

Humanising the Divine: A Comparative Study of Andal’s Tiruppāvai and Akka Mahadevi’s Vachanas

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Abstract:

This paper, titled “Humanising the Divine: A Comparative Study of Andal’s Tiruppāvai and Akka Mahadevi’s Vachanas,” examines how two major women poets of South India, Andal of Tamil Nadu and Akka Mahadevi of Karnataka, recompose the divine notions and practices through philotheotic frameworks in their poetry. Traditional Indian theological practices contrast with the ideas implied in both Andal’s Tiruppāvai and Akka Mahadevi's vachanas. Both the poets transmuted bhakti into a separate knowledge system, where an individual’s spiritual experience becomes collective memory and an individualistic approach towards God. Andal’s hymns illuminate a longing for Vishnu by portraying him as her beloved. Vishnu is coiled with the rural culture and seasonal celebrations. In contrast to Andal's application, Akka Mahadevi’s vachanas are radical in framing Shiva as her sole intimate companion. This paper studies how both Andal and Akka Mahadevi reconfigure spiritual experience in their respective spiritual traditions (Shaivism and Vaishnavism). Also, how Tamil bhakti lyric and Kannada Vachana poetics assert female devotional authority. By placing God in the sphere of human emotion, Akka democratises the patriarchal structures within religious study. This study demonstrates how their works collectively reveal the aesthetics of Indian devotion, which is central to the Indian religious discourse.

Keywords: Bhakti poetry, Philotheotic Framework, Feminine mysticism, Shaivism and Vaishnavism, Comparative poetics.

INTRODUCTION:

Reading bhakti poetry in the twenty-first century requires contextualising South Indian poetics within the frameworks of sociological and Indian religious history. The selected works (Tiruppāvai, Vachanas) emerging between the seventh and twelfth centuries shaped the bhakti movement in the two important clans of spiritual thought (Shaivism and Vaishnavism). Akka Mahadevi and Andal, or even Mirabai, have a distinctive motif of humanising divine creatures by marrying God rather than performing traditional divine temple rituals, priestly mediation or scriptural formalism. This paper performs a comparative study of Andal's Tiruppāvai and Akka Mahadevi's vachanas to examine the notion of humanisation of the divine through a philotheotic framework, a mode of devotion that fuses both love (*philia*) and divinity (*theos*) through an experiential knowledge. The concept of Philotheotic devotion addressed in South Indian bhakti poetry functions as a love-based epistemology. Philotheotic devotion seeks divine knowledge in the immediacy of emotional intimacy with God. This framework limns love as a mode of knowing, and devotion functions as an experiential epistemology. This attempt to read Akka Mahadevi through the lens of philotheotic devotion helps to theorise the alternative divine interpretation. Her work illustrates how this epistemic mode reconfigures bhakti into an alternative knowledge system in which devotees apprehend the divine truth through personal memory and experience. Both poets are distinct from the Virasaivism and Sri Vaisnava tradition; both poets locate the divine within the space of human emotions. In doing so, bhakti is reconfigured not only as an act of worship but also as a distinct mode of knowledge.

Andal's *Tiruppāvai*, composed in classical Tamil, talks both *akam* (internal) and *puram* (external) properties, as Archana Venkatesan says, "If one were to evoke classical Tamil poetic paradigms of the interior (*akam*) and exterior (*puram*), then the *Tiruppāvai* moves from the external worlds inhabited by the *gopīs*, pausing at the threshold of their homes, but not quite entering there" (81). The *Gopīs* mentioned were cowherd maidens of Vrindavan, known for

their intense and pure love for Lord Krishna. These Gopis appear in the narration of the *Tiruppāvai* verses 1, 9, 10, 16. Structured as thirty hymns traditionally recited during the Tamil month of Margazhi (mid-December to mid-January) in the early morning, *Tiruppāvai* is recited as a seasonal rhythm. The concept of seasonal rhythm in Tamil poetry closely aligns with the classical Tinai system. Tinai system amalgamates poetics and ecology to organise landscapes and human emotions according to specifics and geographical zones. Despite Andal herself being from the Marutham landscape, this seasonal rhythm aligns more with the Kurinji landscape, and during the margazhi season, it is recited for its subjective matter. “For example, the structure of kurinci poetry is built on mountain landscape, season of cold winter and midnight union of ideal lovers” (Kandhan 290). The morning rituals after the 9th century constructed a new narrative, unlike earlier narratives, by narrating Andal’s birth as an incarnation of Goddess Bhumidevi (Earth Goddess), but historians confirmed Andal’s birth in Srivilliputhur and the place is also known as Godapuri. “As a birthplace of Andal, this town is also known as ‘Godapuri’, which is the original name of Andal” (Kavitha 25), and it is quite paradoxical for one who reads both historiography and scriptural narratives. “In Srivilliputhur Andal temple precinct, there are two temples, Andal Temple and Vadpathrasayee Temple, side by side, and in between the two, there is a garden where Andal appeared as Ayonija” (Kavitha 26).

Akka Mahadevi’s vachanas are composed in Kannada and are distinct from Andal’s work radical devotional stance. Akka Mahadevi emerged as a saint-poet in the 12th century by closely associating with the Virashaiva movement. She rejects marital expectations and bodily adornment as she asserts herself in exclusive devotion to Shiva, whom she addresses as Chennamallikarjuna, and questions the patriarchy. Unlike Andal’s seasonal devotional mode, Akka Mahadevi’s bhakti is individualistic and confrontational; through the anonymous poetic form, she emerges as the earliest Indian rational saint poet. “The vacanas were neither prose

nor poetry; they were religious renderings of a devotee's mind. In a way, it was also a literary revolt against the existing poetic form of Kannada. It has neither the laxness of prose nor the inflexibility of the verse" (Sherley 2). She played a significant role in the development of the Lingayat movement started by Basavanna and joined with the team of sharanas. "Among the Virashaiva Sharanas, the great names that stand out are those of Basavanna, Allama Prabhu, Channabasavanna, Akka Mahadevi, Siddharam, and each of them had reached a unique spiritual height" (Guttal 135).

Andal fell in love with Lord Vishnu after hearing the tales of Vishnu from Periyalvar, whereas Akka, personified God, and her vachanas did not end by just praising Chennamallikarjuna but also questioned the corpo-central image portrayed towards women. As Vijaya Guttal Comparatively says that:

The identification of women as body-centred and the close association of sexuality with the feminine is another patriarchal construct that gets splintered by women saints like Akka Mahadevi, Mira and Lallesvari. The case of the women saints perhaps projects a paradoxical situation where, although they appear to reject the patriarchal structure at the physical level, they seem to operate within the same framework at the spiritual level.
(136)

This model cross-examines the patriarchal and institutionalised interpretations of religion that privilege textual authority over experiential knowledge.

MODES OF WOMEN'S BHAKTI IN VAISHNAVISM AND SHAIIVISM:

In the broader discourse of bhakti, across regions, women's contribution is underappreciated in the annals of bhakti historiography. The bhakti tradition in South India is prominent from the sixth century onwards, with the emergence of the 12 Alvars (devotees of Vishnu) and 63 Nayanmars (devotees of Shiva) in Tamil Nadu. Initially, bhakti tradition

evolved with oral sources and slowly entered the scriptural culture. The study on scriptural history shows that there are very few sources of information about the women bhakti poets. As Rekha Pande says, compared to male bhaktas, female bhaktas have a very limited history and documented data available about them. Those available sources are even elitist and male-biased models, and women's voices are completely absent from them. The important point here is that none of the women in this period has been patronised by any court biographer, nor is any religious hagiography produced, and those that are produced are segmented according to the men's sophistication (63).

Chronologically speaking, Andal's emergence predates Akka Mahadevi by approximately five centuries, and it can be traced that the individual form of spirituality was not a matter of concern at that time. In the first hymn (Markali Tinkal), Andal calls the ayarpati, which Archana Venkatesan, in her translation, calls "richly adorned girls" to join her pavai nonbu (vow/ritual). Continuing in the second hymn, she addresses the people of this world to consider the ritual. "All you people of this world, consider the rituals of our pavai-vow" (Venkatesan 52). Pasuram (Hymn)¹⁵ highlights the communal element of devotion by depicting the gathering of girls for a devotional song. These hymns of Andal show that the scenery here is a mass devotion and not merely an individual one. This section shows the distinctions in devotional philosophy, particularly regarding the form of practice to the supreme deity and the soul's relationship with the divine, as observed in the Vaishnavism bhakti tradition, especially in *Tiruppāvai*.

Akka Mahadevi has a unique philosophical stance within the bhakti tradition, being rebellious against ritualism, in opposition to brahmanical orthodoxy and social conventions. The belief system articulated in her vachanas is that Shiva cannot be won only through the Sastras, Vedas and Puranas, but Shiva abides in the worshipper's heart itself. She presented herself as a rational figure within the institutionalised religion by claiming spiritual authority

for the individual worshipper. In her spiritual discourse, she condemns the system of rigid ceremonies and superior authority given to priests. She exemplified Madhurya bhakti (which is also categorised in the hymns of Tiruppāvai) in her vacanas, a form of intense devotional love where the soul sees God. By effecting this form of bhakti, she captures the spousal relationship between the soul (atma) and the divine (parmatma).

In the case of Akka Mahadevi's Shaiva bhakti, devotion is not just humanising God or making one appear divine, but also elevates human experience. This divine individual experience is labelled in her radical asceticism, which includes the rejection of clothing. This nakedness is a rejection of human creations. Akka Mahadevi symbolises her nakedness to spiritual transparency that aligns the body directly with divine truth; she is addressed in the case of Lal Ded/Lalla, who modulates Kashmiri Shaivism. Megha Jayadas, in her thesis *Bhakti as Resistance: A Study of Select English Translations of Bhakti Poetry*, observes that:

After the whole transferal of all her earthly love and yearnings, she consequently passes into the stage of complete transcendence. Entering into the superior height of sexual transcendence, gender variances become totally worthless and the saint poet, whether man or woman, regardless of their gender, walks alone naked. For her, the entire world itself was a huge cage where the common people, who become occupants, are categorised into males and females. (133)

In this sense, Shaivism enables a more confrontational form of women's bhakti, where devotion actively resists institutional and social control.

DISTINCTION ON WOMEN'S DEVOTIONAL AUTHORITY:

Early voices for women's social rights arose from the bhakti tradition. Back in the days when feminism was not a conceptual discussion, poets like Akka Mahadevi, Mirabai, Lal Ded and so on stood as pioneers and voices for women's value and rights in society. LG More

suggests a similar point is that feminism was not a widely spoken movement at a time when the bhakti movement started spreading its influence in the vernacular literature of India. In this milieu, Mirabai and other poets in the bhakti movement played a crucial role by sowing seeds of Indian feminism—they raised the voice of women's issues through their songs and ways of life (190).

In the case of Andal's devotional authority, as referred earlier, there are 12 Alvars, and Andal is the only woman in the list of twelve. Unlike Akka Mahadevi, it is essential to study and analyse Andal's works within the framework of her background. Andal (originally named Kodhai) is found as an infant in a garden by Periyalvar, another prominent Alvar saint and a devout worshipper of Vishnu, in Srivilliputhur, Tamil Nadu. She is considered to be an incarnation of Bhuma Devi, the Earth Goddess and consort of Lord Vishnu. A famous part of her story involves her habit of secretly wearing the flower garlands intended for the temple deity before they were offered to Lord Vishnu, to see if they looked good on her, a symbolic act of her personal and intimate love for the Lord. When her father discovered this and was upset, Lord Vishnu appeared in his dream and commanded that He would only accept the garlands that Andal had worn first. This earned her the name "Chudikodutha Sudarkodi" (the lady who wore and gave her garland).

The Lingayat movement is one of the earliest progressive movements led by women's representation. This movement is led by Basavanna, whose philosophy is rich in egalitarian principles.

As a woman's status improves in a progressive society, her subjugation decreases. The ideal society envisioned by Basavanna and the Sharanas in the 12th century was a big step toward women's freedom, and one will be in a better position to assess their epoch-making contribution if one looks at the condition of women at that time. (Savitha 04).

Understanding the mystic tradition is essential in reading Akka Mahadevi's vacanas, as she is a known rebel poet who articulates against the patriarchy. All these rebellious actions are against the marriage institution structured within male convenience and female discrimination, and later, she herself married God. Here, the marriage is conceived in a mystic sense.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TIRUPPĀVAI AND VACHANAS:

Akka Mahadevi's vachanas and Andal's *Tiruppavai* both represent women's devotion in the South Indian bhakti movement, from a different perspective. Nevertheless, they differ significantly in their philosophical approaches and poetic style. To start with, the usage of metaphor, Akka Mahadevi often uses metaphors to place God within one's mind.

Like

Treasure hidden in the ground

taste in the fruit gold in the rock

oil in the seed

the Absolute hidden away in the heart

no one can know the ways of our lord

white as jasmine. (Ramanujan 115)

In vachana-2, the very first line, "Like treasure hidden in the ground", she used the word 'ground' for existence, and the word treasure for God. To understand this line in a simple phrase, God is hidden within existence. The word 'Jasmine' she repeatedly uses to attribute her beloved, Cennamallikarjuna. But she delves beyond honouring Cennamallikarjuna, which is lacking in the case of Andal's work. In the attempt at translation, A.K.Ramanujan did not take much creative liberty to achieve the glorified poetic gesture. Meanwhile, Andal's metaphors

are highly mythical, “as the form of the primordial lord:/supreme in the final deluge” (Vekatesan 54). This line from hymn 4, the cosmic is humanised by being made agriculturally relevant. Rain recalls Vishnu’s role during cosmic dissolution. Andal’s sense of eco-poetics is demonstrated in the conceptual application of pralaya, which means annihilation, referring to the cyclical end of the universe in Hindu cosmology. In this hymn, Andal prays to Lord Vishnu for rain. As referred earlier, she represents Marudham Tinai, the region of fertile land and expects rain for cultivation. Here she prays to Lord Vishnu rather than Lord Indra, who is actually the God of rain, because of the consideration of Vishnu as the supreme being. The early medieval Vaishnavite theology that Andal follows holds that all other deities, including Varuna and Indra (the rain gods), are subordinate to Lord Narayana (Vishnu). In the fourth pasuram/hymn, the notable factor is the ecological cycle of Tamil Nadu. In Tamil Nadu, the margazhi month (mid-December to mid-January) is the time when the Tiruppāvai is recited every year, followed by the rainy season. Consequently, the personification of rain is directly and solely devoted to Vishnu. “Aazhi Mazhai Kanna”, or as Archana Venkatesan says, “Beloved rain, withhold nothing from us (54), and the repeated usage of the word rain implies the cosmic comparison with her beloved, and her subjective notion is more towards Vishnu.

Akka Mahadevi’s works address societal issues towards women, which apparently results in her rejection of all worldly attachments. “I’d a feeling it would hurt you/ if I displayed the body's seals of love. / O brother, don't tease me needlessly.” (Ramanujan 113). The corporeality sensation in these lines is distinctly illustrated by notably saying the rejection of her body for public or male scrutiny; by doing so, she places her body as a sacred site of devotion. This corporeal component illustrated in her vachanas displays the fundamental distinction in the concept of corporeality between the Eastern bhakti tradition and Western literature and Western religious scripture. As Sumathi Yadav observes: “Human corporeality has always been a part of the Eastern and Western religious/ philosophical/ cultural discourse,

both in the Western and Eastern ancient world views to the modern debates on the diverse appropriations of the body” (74). The concept of *saranagati* or *sharanagati* (a core concept in Hindu Vaishnavism, which means total surrender to God or the divine) is emphasised in the later lines of the same *vachana*. “I’m given entire into the hands of my lord” (Ramanujan 113). This line talks about absolute devotional surrender without a human intermediary and no institutional sanction, such as marriage, a priest or even a temple. The articulation of *saranagati* here represents a personal devotional stance, unlike Vedic philosophy, which is a ritualistic and doctrinal act.

Similarly, Andal’s *Tiruppāvai* differs significantly from Vedic ritual surrender. In *pasuram*/ hymn 28, she articulates the concept of *saranagati* as a devotional idiom. “Even though we are simple cowherds/with little wisdom” (Venkatesan 78), Andal explicitly claims the lack of knowledge as a spiritual qualification and not merely as a self-depreciation. Here, the ignorance of a *sastra* treatise or a work of sacred scripture does not bar grace, which draws the variation between *bhakti* and Vedic learning. “We are just artless children/ who out of love called you names/ Do not hold that against us” (78). Another notable difference in *bhakti* culture is violating the ritual decorum of calling God by a pet name, and Andal embraces the violation. In the label of ignorance, Andal submits herself and the *gopis* to God.

The concept of *maya* (illusion) occupies different positions in the devotional imagination of Andal and Akka Mahadevi. The poetic treatment of both poets reveals the contrasting theological orientations within the Vaishnava and Shaiva *bhakti* traditions. Illusion is a divine mystery in *Tirppavai* that transcends through mass devotion. In contrast, Akka Mahadevi presents illusion as a pervasive and coercive force that enslaves the consciousness, and surrendering to Shiva is the only solution to attain liberation.

“Illusion has troubled body as shadow
troubled life as a heart
troubled heart as a memory
troubled memory as awareness.” (Ramanujan 118)

Akka Mahadevi maps illusion in different stages and asserts an effect on that illusion as such:

Table 1

Level	Effect of Illusion
Body	Shadow (Loss of substance)
Life	Disturbed heart
Heart	Memory becomes unstable
Memory	Awareness itself is clouded

In this vachana, illusion colonises consciousness. Even jnana, or wisdom, is not immune to it. This vachana is presented as a classic example of scepticism in Shaivism toward intellectual knowledge divorced from divine grace. In Tiruppāvai’s fifth hymn, Andal presents illusion as a divine play, or leelai in Tamil. Andal addressed Vishnu as “O enigmatic mayan” (Venkatesan 55) and identifies maya as an internal quality of the divine. Unlike Advaitic theorisation of maya, which veils truth, Andal’s maya shows Vishnu/Krishna in a playful presence in the river Yamuna, as mentioned in the latter line of the fifth hymn, “lord who plays by the great unsullied waters of the Yamuna” (55). Together, this framework reimagines the theological notion of maya in the bhakti tradition.

CONCLUSION:

In the discourse of bhakti culture and literature, Andal's Tiruppāvai and Akka Mahadevi's vachanas demonstrate that South Indian bhakti poetry offers an epistemological framework in lived experience and spiritual intimacy with the divine. This paper has studied how reading these texts through the lens of philotheotic devotion evokes a mode of knowing that fuses love and divinity. The paper has shown how the bhakti tradition has the ability to modify according to region and cultural practice as a form of knowledge or memory, contrasting with ritualism. Both Andal and Akka Mahadevi humanise the divine in different paths and relocate God from the distant realm of transcendence to human emotions. The differentiation is that Andal focuses on the subject of love towards her beloved, and Akka Mahadevi focuses on issues in the human space, and her rejection of this human space is conveyed via the vacanas that also glorify the divine, Cennamallikarjuna. Tiruppāvai situates devotion within collective and seasonal rhythms. Usage of *akam-puram* poetic device from the Tinai system, and the communal practice of *pavai nonbu*, demonstrates that Vaishnava bhakti is a plural form of devotional practice. However, in Vachanas, the love-based epistemology is presented in which divine truth is apprehended through ascetic discipline, corporeal transparency, and individual emotional intensity. This comparative reading reorients bhakti studies away from viewing devotion as an emotional supplement to theology or as a homogenised pan-Indian movement. The continuous emphasis on the philotheotic framework aims to examine bhakti literature through a critical lens of cognitive devotion. This study presents the space where the selected women poets theorise divine-human relations in ways to reshape the study of Indian religious aesthetics.

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