

Women Seer-saints of India and Their Songs

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IN INDIA, AS ELSEWHERE in the world, music and literature have often converged since the earliest times. In hymns, songs, and intonations India has inherited, through millennia, a remarkable legacy in which exceptional literature finds an inspiring voice. And this tradition of the synthesis of literature and music that germinated in the Vedic Age has remained alive and vibrant since then.

Seer-saint-poets of India such as Kabir, Surdas, Tulasidas, Mirabai, Gorakhnath, and others adopted music as a medium to express their devotion as well as their realization of Truth. In this tradition of saint-composers there was a considerable presence of women who were spiritual seekers, saint poetesses, ascetics, mendicants, and devotees. They recorded their spiritual experiences and realizations in the form of songs, which not only bear the distinctive impression of their personal journeys but also illustrate the social and cultural milieu of their times, their achievements and failures. They were often not only seers but spirited women who dared to question parochial social structures of their times and faced innumerable personal hardships and challenges. Their single-minded devotion and intense love for God transformed them into spiritual heroines of their times.

God's Brides

Spread across a vast expanse of space and time, these women are unified in their unique language of love, truth, honesty, strength, and empowerment. This spirit has lived on for centuries through oral singing traditions in their

respective regions. These women belonged to different regions in India and sang in their own mother tongues: Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Kashmiri, Rajasthani, Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi, and others. Most of them were well known in their own regions during their lifetime. Some of the lyrical forms, composed by these women saints, date back to more than a thousand years, while some are a few centuries old. The songs portray the divine love of the women seers as well as a myriad of metaphors encapsulating their feelings regarding life. Some songs even articulate spiritual wisdom of a high order, which are by no means inferior to the compositions of other saints in terms of substance or feeling.

The songs of these women seers are sung even in the present times by musicians and lay people. The nameless bearers of these traditions—men and women of different castes and classes, though mostly of lower castes—have played a vital role in preserving these songs, thereby championing their authors. A feature that characterises these songs, whether by better or lesser or unknown authors, is the popularity they continue to enjoy among the common unsophisticated people of the villages. The songs thus appear to be, for the common folk, a well-suited opportunity for a cultural activity of a higher order. For instance, songs of women saints of Rajasthan and Gujarat are largely sung by people belonging to lower castes, even in present times—they can easily relate to these songs. A handful of songs of women saints of Assam, Odisha, and Manipur in the Vaishnava tradition, were collated from very elderly traditional teachers of Assamese culture

and then published in Odiya texts and Manipuri sankirtanas respectively. These women were well known during their lifetime, within their own regions, and—with the exception of Sija Laiiobi, the Manipuri princess-saint—they were acknowledged as the first poetesses of their areas. Unfortunately only a negligible amount of works belonging to them can be traced today.

A remarkable phenomenon that has emerged in the songs of Andal (ninth century, Tamil Nadu), Akka Mahadevi (twelfth century, Karnataka), Mirabai (sixteenth century, Rajasthan), Tarigonda Vengamamba (eighteenth century, Andhra), and Sija Laiiobi (eighteenth century, Manipur) is the immense yearning to be united with God as brides. These women are the best examples of bridal mysticism, where a mystic woman—or man—shuns all worldly bindings and considers herself married to the Divine. Andal was the first of the mystic brides among all women saints. In a different space and time, this aspect of devotion is exemplified by other women saints such as Akka Mahadevi, Mirabai, Vengamamba, Sija Laiiobi, and others.

These women were the earliest poetesses of India, whose feelings and experiences come to us through songs. These are oral traditions that have been preserved in the different genres of Indian music, such as Sama Vedic, folk, and Hindustani and Carnatic classical music.¹

Vedic Seer-poetesses

The first hymns ascribed to women seers of the Vedic period are sung as Sama Veda hymns in the earliest known musical tradition of India. This is evident in the chanting-singing traditions of Samagana prevalent today. The songs by seer-poetesses during the great bhakti movement of the mediaeval period, in the local vernaculars, are sung in the regional musical forms in their respective regions to this day.

Brihaddevata (2.82–4) and *Arshanukramani* (10.100–2), which are authoritative treatises on the Vedas, record twenty-seven women seers of the Rig Veda—the first and earliest literature in the world—who have hymns attributed to them. Little is known about them, and that mainly through traditional sources, but the inclusion of their hymns in the two above-mentioned treatises is significant for the present study, as these women are mentioned as *brahmavadinah*, women seers who attained the knowledge of Brahman, also called rishikas.

Reference to some of these rishikas is also found in the Sama Veda Samhita, the earliest literary document on Indian music, in which the system of chanting or singing the Sama Veda hymns in four, five, six, and even seven Vedic *svaras*, musical notes, was formalized for the first time in the history of Indian music.

Of the twenty-seven rishikas of the Rig Veda, Vak, Godha, Indramatri, and Sarparajni have hymns attributed to them in the Sama Veda Samhita. Scholars are divided in their opinion about these women being real or mythical characters, even though they are mentioned as women seers in two authoritative Vedic treatises.

The hymns ascribed to the women seers of the Vedic age were not only sung as Sama, along with Sama hymns of other male rishis, but were also documented in the notation system of the Sama tradition. These Sama hymns are still sung by *samagas*, experts in different living traditions, which is enormously significant in the history of Indian culture.

Bhakti Traditions

The mediaeval period in India produced many saints of the bhakti type, beginning with the Shaiva saints of the Tamil region in the sixth century. Sixty-three Nayanmars and twelve Alvars of the Tamil region were the earliest Shaiva

and Vaishnava saints respectively, whose lives and songs of love for God brought radical transformation in the religious life of India. For the first time God was not an entity to be feared or adored from a distance, but was now openly loved as a master, child, playmate, friend, lover, or father. The various traditions in which the women seers-saints flourished are the following:

(i) Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions in the Tamil region

(a) Shaiva tradition of Nayanmars

(b) Bhagavata tradition of Azhvars, or Alvars

(ii) Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions in Karnataka and Andhra regions

(a) Virashaiva or Lingayat movement

(b) Haridasa tradition

(c) Vaishnava tradition

(iii) Vaishnava and other *panths*, sects, from the Deccan or the region around Maharashtra

(a) Mahanubhava *panth*

(b) Varkari *panth*

(c) Ramdasi *panth*

(iv) Gujarat, Saurashtra region, and Rajasthan

(a) Vaishnava tradition

(b) Mahapanth or Nijara *panth*

(v) Shaiva tradition in Kashmir

(vi) Vaishnava traditions in eastern India, including Assam, Odisha, and Manipur.

Baul mendicants of Bengal of the past and present have had women sadhakas but no record exists of a woman Baul who expressed her feelings and experiences through her own songs. They are known to sing their guru's—Mahajan's—songs.

The iconic fifteenth-century saint-poetess Mirabai, whose life and music assumed the proportions of an enduring legend in India for their unique significance, is widely revered today as one of the best exemplars of all consuming devotion to a spiritual ideal and equal in stature

with India's greatest saints. She rejected societal norms with defiance, leaving her marital home to be united with her divine lover Sri Krishna. Her life and music blurred distinctions between worshipfulness and intense love. Today, after six centuries, celebrated and admired for her role in shaping both India's spiritual and cultural life, her songs are sung not only in the folk traditions of Rajasthan and Gujarat but also by classical musicians in both Hindustani and Carnatic genres.

Karaikkal Ammaiyar, literally 'the saintly mother of Karaikkal', of the seventh century, is one of the sixty-three great Nayanmar saints of Tamil Nadu. She is the first saint poetess of India. In one of her songs, Karaikkal Ammaiyar describes herself as a *pey*, ghost, who dances in the company of Shiva, in the cremation grounds of Tiruvalankadu:

'Earnest Brass Mirabai'

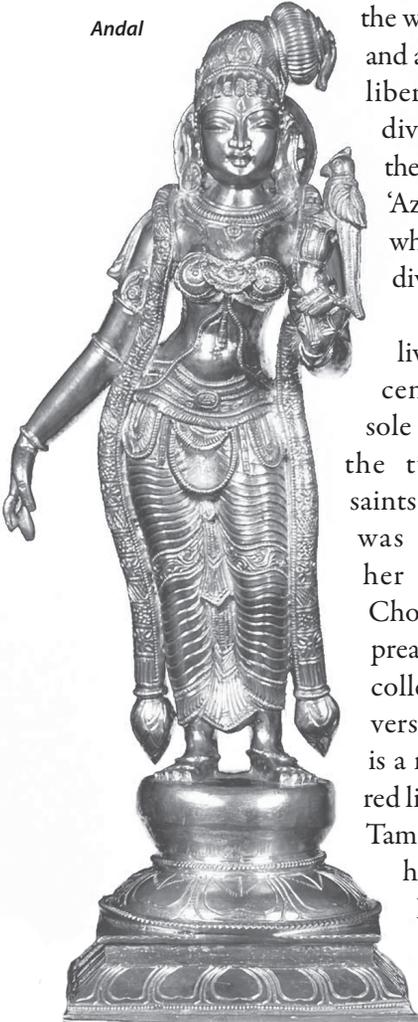


The female pey has
 sagging breasts and bulging veins
 hallowed eyes and bared teeth
 ruddy down on her sunken belly
 long canines
 and lanky shins on knobby ankles;
 she lingers, howling, at the cremation
 ground.

Dancing here,
 with effortless composure
 as his matted locks radiate in all directions,
 our father resides at Tiruvalankadu.²

The Azhvars lived between the sixth and the ninth centuries and were devotees of Vishnu.

Andal



They considered life in the world as transient and aimed to achieve liberation through divine union with their God. The term 'Azhvar' means 'one who is immersed in divine love'.

Andal, who lived in the ninth century, was the sole woman among the twelve Azhvar saints and, like Mira, was dedicated to her Ishta Devata, Chosen Deity, since preadolescence. Her collection of thirty verses, *Tiruppavai*, is a much loved sacred literature in most Tamil Hindu households to this day.

In her first song Andal sings of

her journey on a bright moon day in the month of Margazhi—December-January—to the abode of her beloved deity:

In the month of Margazhi,
 on an 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, the son of Nandagopa is known
 for his sharp spear and fierce deeds:
 He is the darling child, lion cub of
 the 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.

The other celebrated work of Andal is *Nacchiyar Tirumoli*.

The Virashaiva or Lingayat movement and the Vaishnava-Haridasa tradition in Karnataka flourished from twelfth century onwards. The Virashaivas visualized a society free from discrimination based on caste, creed, and wealth. Their philosophy rejected the prevailing social, political, and religious systems. The adherents of this faith were also known as Lingayats, 'those who wear a *linga*—Shiva's emblem—on one's body'.

Among the thirty-four Virashaiva women *vachana-kartris*, composers of *vachana*,³ Akka Mahadevi was the most eminent and radical woman saint. She was a wandering mystic who shunned all worldly ties to embrace Shiva as her immortal husband. She lovingly addressed her deity as Chenna Mallikarjuna in her *vachanas*. She rejected the authority of the Vedas as well as prescribed discriminations based on caste, gender, and class. Her fearless expressions are in the form of *vachanas*, numbering more than a thousand, which contain spiritual wisdom of the highest order and are sung even today.

In a *vachana* Akka Mahadevi recounts for her friends her dream about Shiva, the bestower of blessings, who comes to her for *bhiksha*, alms.

In Maharashtra, Mahanubhava, the Varkari and Ramadasi *panths* grew during the period between the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries. The Varkari *panth*, a living tradition in present-day Maharashtra, was led by saints belonging to diverse backgrounds such as the heretic brahmanas, social outcastes, shudras, the untouchable Mahars, and even devadasis. Women leaders were common in this sect, and saints of this tradition such as Muktabai, Bahinabai, Janabai, Soyarabai, Nirmala, and Kanhopatra were reputed to be immersed in love for the Divine. Their songs, well known as *abhangs*, were addressed to their favourite deity Vitthala—Vishnu—of Pandharpur.

In an *abhang*, Janabai sings in praise of Pandharpur, the abode of her beloved deity Pandharinath, or Vitthala, where devotees congregate to sing and dance intoxicated in divine love. Janabai says: ‘One who sings God’s name from the heart is sure to find refuge in Him.’

The Shaiva rebel saint Lalleshwari, or Lalded, of the fourteenth century, is the most prominent woman saint-poetess of Kashmir. She composed in the vernacular language of the region, while the language for scholarly writings prevalent during her time was Sanskrit. The compositions of Lalded are known as *lalvakh*; they are full of imagery and exceptionally poetic in nature. A few selected *vakhs* of Lalleshwari are illustrated here:

With a rope of untwisted thread am I towing
 a boat upon the ocean,
 Where will my God hear?
 Will He carry me over?
 Like water in goblets of unbaked clay,
 do I slowly waste away
 My soul is in a dizzy whirl.
 Fain would I reach my home?



Statue of Akka Mahadevi at her birthplace, Udathadi

In time past we were,
 in time future we shall be,
 Throughout the ages we have been,
 Forever the sun rises and sets,
 Forever Shiva creates,
 dissolves and creates again.

* * *

He from whose navel steadfastly
 proceedeth in its upward course
 The syllable Om, and naught but it,
 And for whom the *kumbhaka* exercise
 formeth
 A bridge to the *Brahma-randhra*,
 He beareth in his mind the one and only
 mystic spell (*manthar* or *mantra*),
 And of what benefit to him are thousand spells?

* * *

Thou alone art the heavens,
 and Thou alone art the earth.
 Thou alone art the day, the air, the night.
 Thou alone art the meal-offering, sandal paste,
 the flowers, the water of aspersion.
 Thou alone art all that is.
 What, therefore, can I offer thee.⁴

The women saints from Gujarat and the Saurashtra region chiefly belonged to two religious traditions, namely Vaishnava and Mahapanth, or Nijara *panth*.

The spiritual precepts of the Mahapanth were designed for practice by man and woman together as husband and wife, or even otherwise. Close secrecy was maintained around these tenets, and only a practitioner had access to them. Practitioners came from all walks of life and often belonged to the lower strata of society. In several instances women became the guru or the initiator. References to women belonging to this *panth* such as Toral, Liralbai, Lidalbai, Amarbai, and others are traced back as early as the fourteenth century.

In one of her songs Liralbai, of the sixteenth century, sings:

O Ram,
Who created this body?
Why did you make it so (transient)?

The moon, sun, the multitude of stars,
Hammer and sickle, shapes and designs,
All reside within me.
Why did you then make it so (transient)?

Orchards, trees, wind, and water,
Dwelling spaces, gardens,
my tree-beds and fruits,
even the reaper,
all are within,
Why did you then, make it so (transient)?

Lock and key (of my existence) dwell in me,
the opener is also present,
Ganga, Yamuna, the holy pilgrimages,
are all within,
Why did you then, make it so (transient)?

O tell me, my Ram,
why did you make this body so transient?
Liralbai seeks to know the Truth, O Ram.

Known as the Mirabai of Andhra Pradesh in the eighteenth century, Tarigonda Vengamamba was an ardent devotee of Lord Venkateshvara.

Like Mirabai, she believed she was wedded to her divine Lover. In the course of her struggle against the oppressive social order of her time, she was drawn towards philosophy and yoga and became a great yogini and poetess of her time.

These eminent seer-saints as Mirabai, Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Lalded, and others paved the way for a remarkable number of women spiritual seekers, most of whom led ordinary lives but inspired by their love for God achieved exceptional heights in their spiritual lives. Most of them, though unlettered, were not deterred from singing to God in their simple vernacular languages. Their compositions were not written down for several centuries, but were carried forwards till the present through the age-old oral traditions of India.

The abiding influence of the songs of women seers, albeit uneven and scattered across communities in present-day India, is evidence of the deep impact they exercised in their own time. For the literary and musical value of the songs and their messages of transcendence, of sublime surrender, or even of assertion of women's autonomy, they constitute a priceless heritage to the whole world. 

Notes and References

1. Sama Vedic hymns ascribed to four women seers of the Vedic age, and songs and lives of about seventy-five women saint-poetesses of the mediaeval period, which are sung even today, have been traced by this author.
2. Translation by Karen Pechilis, *Interpreting Devotion* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 188—Tiruvalankadu is about sixty kilometres from Chennai (Madras).
3. *Vachanas* are prose texts in Kannada composed by Virashaiva saints that evolved in the twelfth century.
4. See George Grierson and Lionel Barnett, *Lallavakyani, or The Wise Sayings of Lal Ded* (London: Royal Society, 1920).