

## Article

# Revisiting the Experiential World of Women's *Bhakti* Poetry

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**Abstract:** My recent research on an early female *bhakti* saint brought to the fore differences between her perspective as represented in poetry attributed to her and her medieval biographer's representation of her concerns. Through that study, the widespread academic use in recent scholarship of traditional biographies to interpret female *bhakti* saints became especially visible and problematic to me. In this experimental essay, I consider what patterns we might find if we prioritize the poetry attributed to influential female *bhakti* saints, navigating the significant issues of subjectivity, voice, and utterance to discern the contours of their devotional subjectivity as an authoritative nexus for conceptualizing and expressing individual and group devotion. In contrast to scholarly assurances that female *bhakti* saints are internally steadfast or that they are mainly troubled by external situations, I argue that their devotional subjectivity voices their realization that diverse embodied experiences of contestation are generative for a shared sense of devotion.

**Keywords:** bhakti; India; women's poetry; devotional subjectivity; voice; experience

My project is to revisit the comparative study of female *bhakti* saints in order to understand how *bhakti* is authoritatively represented by women. There have actually not been many such studies. Probably the most influential has been A.K. Ramanujan's "On Women Saints," which is somewhat incongruously found in an early version in Hawley and Wulff's edited volume on goddesses in its original publication (Hawley and Wulff 1982).<sup>1</sup> I read his article and the entire collection during my graduate studies, and Ramanujan's article helped shape my thoughts on *bhakti* at that time. Now, much later, I have published a book and a number of articles on the female *bhakti* saint Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, doing a deep dive for many years. Some of the differences between my approach and Ramanujan's are immediately apparent to me; for example, he relies on the biographies of the female saints to construct his graph of patterns in their lives (Dharwadker 1999, pp. 272–73). More recent scholarship has followed his lead in "reading" female saints through their biographies. In contrast, my studies have shown that there can be a vast difference between the concerns of the poet-saint and those of her biographer (Pechilis 2012). My point is that the poetry and the biography are two separate creative events, often separated by hundreds of years, and they demonstrate distinctive perspectives. This in itself warrants a fresh comparative effort that prioritizes the poetry attributed to the female *bhakti* saints, even as we rely on authoritative biographies as well as community memories in our understanding of the gender of each poet.

In this essay, I prioritize poetry that is remembered as associated with prominent female *bhakti* saints who were celebrated early on, and can be thought of today as influencers. My emphasis on their voices will require a review of current scholarly discussions of problems in determining the subjectivity, authenticity, and nature of their utterances. I argue that between the stability of female saints as "secure in their identities" according to Ramanujan's assertion (Dharwadker 1999, p. 277) and the instability of the poetic voice as demonstrated through recent academic questions there exists a generative space for thinking about female *bhakti* saints' authority by identifying their discursive project as creating a devotional subjectivity. Positing a devotional subjectivity allows us to locate their voices between individual and group, and not either-or. A persistent pattern in their voices is the



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simultaneity of their confidence and vulnerability. Their words expose their realization of devotion not only as ideational but also as bodily praxis. This essay's consideration of their authority reveals patterns of their vulnerability and confidence, as well as their determined exposure, that constitute a devotional subjectivity at once individualistic and accessible to others.

### 1. The Influencers

Central to the hermeneutics of *bhakti* poetry in regional languages is that *bhakti* authorizes a devotee to speak about their observations, experiences, and interpretations.<sup>2</sup> In the case of *bhakti* authors, such as the female poet-saints considered in this essay, we have a record of their history of interpretive attention. As Joan Scott notes on a general basis: "Experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted" (Scott 1991, p. 797). Norman Cutler has theorized a rhetorical model that emphasizes the "communion" aspect of *bhakti* poetry as a performance that circulates via a triad of god-devotee-audience (Cutler 1987, p. 51). Building on both, I proposed that the communion enabled by interpretation (both the poet's experience and the audience's experience) engages a feeling of non-duality in terms of the perception of comprehension (Pechilis 2012, pp. 20–21), in which difference and similarity exist simultaneously. *Bhakti* poetry is characterized by heterogeneity in terms of diversity of participants, languages, regions, and time periods. Ramanujan's analysis focuses on patterns, and since he performs a skilled comparison, he does not emerge with sameness but instead with possibilities. He influentially focused on various social categories in his analysis, especially stages of life, marriage, wives, initiation, and social norms. For example, Ramanujan starts from the premise that "her god is her first love; she undergoes no conversion," then presents branching possibilities from that premise that she "will marry no mortal" or "marries a mortal but." These two branches then each give rise to two more distinctive paths ("attains her god" or "escapes marriage," and "gets rid of him" or "stays with him", respectively), etc. The social perspective, mainly drawn from biographical texts, has predominated in other comparative studies that I shall draw on for my project as I attempt to shift the comparative basis from these social norms to the interpretive experiences imaged in *bhakti* poetry as a key component of female *bhakti* saints' authoritative devotional subjectivities.

Ramanujan discloses that the pattern he devises is based on his reading of a Kannada compendium of stories of the saints that includes one hundred women, as well as the Vedanta Press's *Women Saints East and West* ([1955] 1979). "For the sake of brevity" he chose fifteen female saints that he considered "representative, and structurally typical" (Dharwadker 1999, p. 573, n. 2).<sup>3</sup> His selection includes some saints who are not ordinarily considered to be *bhakti* saints, including Avvaiyār from classical Tamil tradition, and others who may be better classified as gurus, such as Bahiṇābāi and Gauribai (Pechilis 2004, pp. 25–31). For the purposes of my discussion, I narrow down the field of influencers even further, for two reasons. In the first place, I am interested in female saints who are known and claimed specifically as *bhakti* poet-saints. In the second place, I focus on female *bhakti* poet-saints whose work has been accessibly translated into English in a scholarly-informed manner, which enhances their recognition and influence.<sup>4</sup> If I can repurpose a statement by Mikhail Bakhtin, an act of translation "lives a tense life on the borders of someone else's consciousness" (Bakhtin 1984, p. 32).<sup>5</sup> I would add: in all directions, including reading someone else's translation. I have benefitted from the interpretive discussions of the translators that surround their translations.

I focus here on five poet-saints: Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅṅāṅ, Āṅṅāṅ, Mahādēviyakka (also Akka Mahādēvi), Lal Ded (also Lalleśvari) and Mīrābāi. Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅṅāṅ composed in Tamil and is usually dated to 550 C.E. Her work appears in the Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* canon, the *Tirumurai* and has been accessibly translated by (Ramachandran 1993) and (Pechilis 2012, 2016). Āṅṅāṅ composed in Tamil and is dated to the ninth century. Her work appears in the Śrī Vaiṣṇava canon, the *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham*, and has been accessibly translated by Dehejia (1990), Venkatesan (2010), and Chabria and Shankar (2016). Mahādēviyakka

composed in Kannada and is dated to the twelfth century. A hagiography written about fifty years after Mahādēviyakka lived identifies her and other Vīraśaiva poets as saints (Ben-Herut 2018, pp. 3–14, 112–23),<sup>6</sup> and their poems were collected in the sixteenth-century Vijayanagara era. Mahādēviyakka's poems have been accessibly translated by (Ramanujan 1973; Chaitanya 2017). Lal Ded composed in Kashmiri and is dated to the fourteenth century. The earliest account of her appears in a late sixteenth-century hagiography, followed by a reference in a text from the mid-seventeenth.<sup>7</sup> Her identity is unresolved, as discussed by Dean Accardi, who notes that “[t]he vast majority of scholarship identifies Lal Ded as a Hindu in the lineage of medieval Trika or Kashmir Śaivism,” concealing or marginalizing her interactions with Sufis, while others promote the view that her “religious identity was secondary to her sociocultural identity as a Kashmiri,” and still another group views her as “a confirmed and committed Muslim who converted to Islam at the hands of the powerful Šūfīs she encountered” (Accardi 2018, p. 426). Her poems have been accessibly translated by Ranjit Hoskote (2011), who contends that the corpus in her name, while “deeply anchored in the personal experiences of an individual,” has been produced by “a contributory lineage,” based on a number of interpolations (Hoskote 2011, p. xxxiii).<sup>8</sup> Mīrābāī composed in Rajasthani (Marwari and Mewari), Braj, and Gujarati and is dated to the sixteenth century. Her poems are found in collections of poetry in early manuscripts, one problematically dated to the late sixteenth century followed by some from the seventeenth century and then a large number into the late eighteenth century (Hawley 2005, pp. 89–116; Martin-Kershaw 1995, pp. 116–28); an especially influential collection of her poetry was published in 1932.<sup>9</sup> Her poems have been accessibly translated by (Hawley 2005, pp. 89–138) and Nancy M. Martin (2007).<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Their Voices

Mīrābāī's corpus is large, which scholars attribute to the creation of hymns by others in the style of the poet (Hawley 2005, pp. 89–116; Shukla-Bhatt 2007). If I can pause on this point for a moment, the fact of many authors using the name Mīrābāī has led Nancy Martin to state more widely that:

The voices [of female *bhakti* poets] are understood as belonging to very specific women with a known set of life experiences. Perhaps not surprisingly, their songs have been treated as if they give us direct access to female subjectivities and voices that can then be compared with those of their male saintly contemporaries. But is this really what we have? In the vast majority of cases it is definitively not, for these bodies of song belong to the improvisational realm of oral performance and most bear the marks of innumerable contributors in an ongoing process of co-creation by women and men from a vast range of social locations that cross the boundaries of language, culture, religion, and time. (Martin 2019, p. 97)

While Martin is in good company with this observation on the elasticity of Mīrā's oeuvre as I discuss later, and she makes important points about gender and *bhakti* poetry in this article on “The Gendering of Voice in Medieval Hindu Literature” (2019), I wonder if framing her discussion with this statement at the beginning—it is the second paragraph—undermines the study of female saints.

Why single out female saints specifically? The issue of people composing devotional poems and then “signing” them under the name of the saints occurs in the poetry attributed to Mīrā but also that of Kabīr, Ravidās and Sūrdās; for example, Jack Hawley provides an example of a poem “by Kabīr” that mentions a train, which of course could not have been authored by Kabīr (Hawley 2005, p. 6). In an article on “Author and Authority,” Hawley points to several factors that serve to emphasize authority rather than authorship in a Western sense, including: the performance context, requirements of the genre, attraction to poetic and biographical themes, and the signature as seal, which leads him to conclude that: “In devotional Hindi poetry, to give an author's name is not so much to denote who said what as to indicate the proper force of an utterance and the context in which it is to be

appreciated" (Hawley 2005, p. 47). This issue speaks more to the dynamics of popularity and influence rather than of gender, in my view.

Moreover, on the issue of an expanded corpus of songs, we need to note that there may be a major distinction between south Indian *bhakti* traditions, notably Tamil, and north Indian *bhakti* traditions. About two-thirds of the way through the article Martin notes that "[t]here are rare exceptions, however, where individual authorship is more certain," and she names Āṅṭāl, judging that: "We might reasonably assume that these texts may actually give us access to the thoughts and feelings of this specific ninth-century woman of a *brahmin* household" (Martin 2019, p. 113).<sup>11</sup> The Tamil corpus may be more stable than the *bhakti* poems in north Indian languages such as Hindi/Braj, Rajasthani and Gujarati, given that the Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* and Śrīvaiṣṇava traditions both have texts since medieval times that talk about the creation of their own textual canons (Prentiss 2001a, 2001b; Venkatesan 2010, pp. 5–9; see also Shulman 2016, pp. 123–41).

Kumkum Sangari's comprehensive article from (Sangari 1990a, 1990b) presents us with a model that assumes that individual subjectivity is largely erased by a common language. Her comparison of Mīrābāī's and Kabīr's poetry on the figure of the widow and the *sati* leads her to conclude:

The combination of the sociality of the female voice, with the signature whether male or female implies a personal subject knowingly immersed in an oral collectivity who does not choose to do more than leave a small mark of his/her repetition and innovation on existing expressive modes, who claims neither full originality nor singular innovation, who knows and accepts that devotion is marked not by novelty but by repetition and submersion. If Mira's *bhajans* create a different figural space then it is also a space which relies heavily on older and contemporary ways of seeing which she can personalize but which she cannot fully individuate. Her emphasis on suffering, on the cost of her devotion puts her *bhakti* into another register but Mira's is not a unique subjectivity—the boundaries between her own speech and the speech of others are unclear. In this sense her *bhakti* is a 'public' consciousness in the form of an intimate longing. (Sangari 1990b, p. 1550)

More recently, Chakravarti Ram-Prasad has pointed out the gendered implications of such assumptions about language: "I want to suggest that the contemporary significance of Āṅṭāl lies in her being taken as a woman who speaks of love of God but with a voice resembling that of a man whose work she must have known, a voice, moreover, already heard in a preexisting literary sensibility" (Ram-Prasad 2019, p. 146). True, but what other choice did women have, given phallogocentrism, as feminists have pointed out,<sup>12</sup> and even to characterize Mīrā as having an emphasis on "suffering," as Sangari does, seems to echo the gendered social priorities of her biographers. Chloe Martinez builds on this reconsideration of authority by arguing that the autobiographical voice of Mīrābāī is a "pose" that is "productively *inauthentic*" in that it centrally communicates "three key elements of *bhakti* religious transformation: authority, experience and critique" (Martinez 2018, p. 2).

Of course, there are always issues of historicity in the study of remote figures, and thus subjectivity is tricky, even when the figure is well documented. But we should be mindful of the cost of not working with a notion of subjectivity. I am reminded of historian Laura Lee Downs's critique of historian Joan Scott's declaration that gender is a "useful category of analysis" in Downs's article, "If 'Woman' is Just an Empty Category, Then Why Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night?" (Downs 1993). Downs argues that "women must live as subjects in time" and "must inhabit those gendered categories, even as they strive to unmake them"; therefore, "[t]his paradoxical condition will never be resolved so long as we invoke the constructedness of woman in order to avoid the tangled knot of subjectivity . . ." (Downs 1993, p. 436).

Traditional sources much closer in time to the *bhakti* poet-saints than we are have described these individuals as existing, and located them by gender identification. Since *bhakti* poems are "songs of experience" in Norman Cutler's felicitous phrase, there is an

assumed individual subjectivity and body that goes with the poet's name. The default historical mode is to assume a man wrote whatever artifact we have, so it seems a missed opportunity not to seriously entertain a community's assignment of a female author. Additionally, we should note that binary sex identity has for most of history been assumed to be a factual, real and naturalized, so an author who is remembered as female is significant.<sup>13</sup>

*Bhakti* poems themselves show us that there were some poets who felt themselves justified in appropriating elements of someone else's lived experience, such as Nammālvār and Kabīr singing in "a woman's voice" or Eknāth singing in a "low-caste voice." That is their privilege to try to appropriate the life experiences of others, particularly those who have less social power than they do. Their experiments may be liberating for them: "The immense diversity of gendered voices and the people who speak in them offer men and women alternate possibilities to taste, try on, assume, play with, and enjoy, with the potential for transformation, both spiritual and social, embedded therein" (Martin 2019, p. 118). But that does not change the fact that the voice is not grounded in the specific type of body it purports to represent, and that the assumption of singing about what one knows, which plays a crucial role in the genesis, nature and meaning of *bhakti* poetry, is elided. As Chakravarti Ram-Prasad reminds us in his careful analysis of gender in the theopoetics of Tamil Śrīvaiṣṇava *bhakti* poetry, "what we are looking at is how a human being is being gendered, always already and yet also by choice. We can neither start with a contrast between the given and the constructed nor can we claim to see a pure act of construction with nothing given left over" (Ram-Prasad 2019, p. 146).<sup>14</sup>

Arguably, female *bhakti* poets' authority depends on the attribution of a female body to voice their poetry, a point to which I shall return.<sup>15</sup> *Bhakti* poetry is experiential in nature: it is observational, situational, and sensory. One sings about what one knows. To approach this issue, scholars have attempted to compare the voices of saints remembered as embodied women and the voices of saints remembered as embodied men who sing in the voice of a woman. Archana Venkatesan and Chakravarti Ram-Prasad have explored the issue in Tamil Śrīvaiṣṇavism. In Nammālvār's poetry, 270 verses out of about one thousand one hundred verses of his *Tiruvāymoli* "dramatize the longing of the *talaivi* [heroine], while all one hundred verses of his impressionistic *Tiruviruttam* fully develop the *akam* theme with the heroine at its center" (Venkatesan 2007a, p. 19). Tirumaṅkai has decads and complete poems throughout his corpus of three works devoted to a female voice (Venkatesan 2007a, 2007b). In comparing Āṅṅāḷ to selected of these works, Venkatesan finds that Āṅṅāḷ distinctively "juxtapose[s] the material and mythic worlds to signify the heroine's (*talaivi*'s) union and separation with the divine" (Venkatesan 2007a, p. 21). Ram-Prasad does not find a distinction in terms of "the emotional presentation" (Ram-Prasad 2019, p. 138) but does in terms of "body morphology in their language" (pp. 138–40). Specifically, "creative agency in Āṅṅāḷ is about asserting what the person who takes herself as woman may tell of her emotions rather than about asserting that she is a woman as her culture would have it" (p. 142).

My own attempt to suggest this porous border in *bhakti* poetry between individual identity and wider access has been to emphasize the poet's creation and performance of a devotional subjectivity, in which both a specific human view and its accessibility to others are simultaneously posited and enacted in the poetry (Pechilis 2012). It is this creation of a devotional subjectivity in *bhakti* poetry that makes accessible a mode of being that is contoured and rendered legible by a specific person's life experiences yet not wholly defined by them. A male poet who purposefully and explicitly takes on a voice that he represents as a different embodiment than his own (such as a woman's voice or a low-caste male's voice) is different from someone who anonymously sings in the style of a given poet. The former is exploring the craft of poetry in an experimental manner that rests on social capital and involves appropriation. The latter suggests someone who wants to belong, and finds the devotional subjectivity of the given poet to be an accessible pathway to do so. The hearer of a *bhakti* song can take a variety of relational positions with respect to it, perhaps 'she's female like me' and/or 'I have had the same or similar life experiences'

and/or ‘this sentiment speaks to me though my embodiment and life experiences are very different’, which makes possible remembering the song, singing the song oneself, or even, when cultural conditions permit, composing a song in the saint’s name. In the crafting of a devotional subjectivity, the border between individual expression and accessibility to others is not fixed. The *bhakti* poems allow us to eavesdrop on, imagine, engage, and speak about what it is like to see, feel, hear, taste, and smell when one embodies a devotional subjectivity. Redefining relationships on the basis of a perceived shared devotional subjectivity and its ways of being are also at the core of *bhakti*.

Biographies of the saints purport to do this work for us. They group the saints under the premise that they have a similar devotional subjectivity even as their life circumstances differ. But their main aim is to create distinctive individuals. In terms of comparing female saints, the problem with adhering to the biographies is that they are attributed to male authors and though they ingeniously draw on details from the female saints’ poems, they are concerned with creating a gendered individualistic biographical narrative. As I have discussed, this is helpful in revealing cultural attitudes towards women in the biographer’s own time (Pechilis 2012). Here is the difference: *Bhakti* poems may have been authored by women and are classified by *bhakti* communities as such, but *bhakti* biographies are understood by no one to have been authored by a woman. My analysis of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār revealed, for example, that the male hagiographer was much more concerned with using gender as a structure than the poet herself was, and his aim was to ensure female propriety. Thus, we must do the work ourselves to find patterns in the devotional subjectivities voiced by female *bhakti* poets. Since *bhakti* poetry most often posits a continuity between voice and body, this is part of our interpretive frame. But in analyzing the devotional subjectivity constituted in the poetry we can look at the female body in a different way than represented by biographies of the saints, while relying on them to a greater or lesser extent for the gender identification of each poet.

I would like to join the previously-mentioned scholars’ careful analysis of gender, experience, and performance, and to draw on others that are wider in comparative scope, such as Uma Chakravarti’s (1989) analysis of the body and marriage in the works of female saints in south India; Vijaya Ramaswamy’s (1992) emphasis on alienation in her analysis of some seventy-five medieval female saints across India; and Rekha Pande’s (2010) emphasis on self-determination in her analysis of thirty Vaiṣṇava and seventeen Śaivite female saints, the majority from Tamilnadu. What has struck me in reading through translations of my selected five female *bhakti* saints’ poetry is the consistent pattern of an admixture of confidence and vulnerability in their poetic creation and performance of a devotional subjectivity.<sup>16</sup> A review of poems attributed to my selected five female poet-saints reveals a great variety of contexts represented in their poems, which decenters the context of domesticity and its rejection that is prioritized by many biographies and interpreters. Instead, their authority rests more on their engagement of confidence and vulnerability as embodied experiences of contestation that drive the ongoing, unfinished, and very human project of *bhakti*.

Kāraikkāl Ammaiār:

Birth in this body  
 enabled me to express  
 my overflowing love  
 through speech,  
 and I reached your sacred red feet.  
 And now I ask  
 oh, lord of the gods  
     whose neck shimmers black,  
 when will the afflictions  
 that birth in this world also enables ever end? (Pechilis 2012, p. 26)

The opening image of this verse makes it clear that a body is necessary to enact a devotional subjectivity; intriguingly, Kāraikkāl Ammaiār does not overtly claim that she is female anywhere in her poetry. Part of the reason may be that she wants to create a widely human devotional subjectivity rather than a specifically gendered one (Pechilis 2012); and indeed, having love, speech and afflictions is common across bodies and genders. The devotional subjectivity creates an intimacy between the human and the divine, though reaching the lowest part of the divine is indicative of a supplicant who stands in relation to a powerful agent in whom she shelters and whom she serves. The second portion amplifies that perceived distance contextualized by intimacy, emphasizing the bodily grandiosity of the divine (who can swallow poison that turns his neck black but otherwise does not affect him) in contrast to the bodily limitations of the human. The promise of protection illustrated by the neck that shimmers black is sought yet uncertain. The humble and the grandiose are thus inextricably entangled; yet the last line disrupts the seamless connection by her questioning of the relationship in theological terms. It suggests that the relationship, though she is doing everything right, is lacking. Rather than think this silently, she articulates it, not only making the concern visible but posing a demand for further knowledge. Her response to vulnerability here is not submission, but confrontation, on the basis that there is much she already knows about herself and her lord.

Āṅṭāl:

In the garden-ponds of your backyard  
the *ceṅkalunīr* blossoms have opened their purple lips  
and the *āmpal* blooms have closed their dark petals.

Ascetics with brilliant white teeth and brick-colored clothes  
venture out  
to blow the conch in their temples.

O beautiful girl,  
who promised to rouse us first!

Wake up!

O shameless one!  
O sweet-talking girl!

Come now,

sing of the one  
who holds aloft the conch and discus  
in his broad hands

sing of that lotus-eyed one.

*ēl ḍr empāvāy* (Venkatesan 2010, p. 64)

This is not a portrait of a dutiful daughter. The beautiful young girl has overslept, even though she had promised to rouse her friends so that they could go to the Krishna temple in the auspicious early morning time to fulfill their vow (*pāvai nōṅṅpu*). The girls are understood to be the *gopīs*, female cowherd girls who love Krishna. Traditionally, the text is interpreted to describe a vow undertaken by Āṅṭāl herself; yet the medieval commentator Periyavāccāṅ Piḷḷai felt he needed to raise, and to answer, the question of “how a Brahmin girl like Āṅṭāl (for she was the foster daughter of the Brahmin garland maker, Viṣṇucittan) could practice a vow meant for cowherds.” His answer is that she “imagined herself as a *gopī*, because her love for Kṛṣṇa was so profound” (Venkatesan 2010, p. 85). Since the body is nature, it is vulnerable to time just as the beautiful petals of some water lilies close at dawn while those of others open. The girl’s “sleep” can also be understood as god-intoxication, which another verse describes using the term *pēy*, and commentators have

taken this to mean “that the girl has been taken over by Kṛṣṇa and has lost all associations with this world” (Venkatesan 2010, p. 98).

Eventually, each girl does wake up to the sound of her friends’ voices and the promised reverberations of the conch shell so close to Vishnu. While this poem, the *Tiruppāvai*, ultimately has all the girls gather for community worship of Krishna, reaffirming associations with this world, to me it is extraordinary that it devotes one-third of its content (10 verses) to describe the disruption of girls oversleeping the auspicious time. Whatever narrative work these “Awakening the Girls” verses perform—and we can note that the gathering of girls could have operated under a different premise, such as collecting a different flower at each girl’s home—they bring attention to the physical needs of young women, which become the eroticized focus of Āṅṭāl’s *Nacciyaṛ Tirumoli*.

Mahādēviyakka:

Other men are thorn  
under the smooth leaf.  
I cannot touch them,  
go near them, nor trust them,  
nor speak to them confidences.

Mother,  
because they all have thorns  
in their chests,  
I cannot take  
any man in my arms but my lord  
white as jasmine. (Ramanujan 1973, p. 125)

Several of Mahādēviyakka’s poems speak directly of the distance she wishes to put between herself and her human husband.<sup>17</sup> This poem casts a wider net by demoting all men in comparison to the male Śiva as “the Lord White as Jasmine” (Mallikārjuna). She uses an image from nature to denaturalize the commerce and coupling between women and human men, likening it to the experience of being stung by a thorn beneath a smooth leaf. The thorn itself is not hurt as it scratches and tears the flesh. With sexual overtones, it is her body that gets punctured by the encounter from the thorn in the male chests. As well, the integrity of her sense of self is ripped, since communication with human men is unstable and untrustworthy. Eschewing this vulnerability, the poet imagines that a real and reassuring intimacy can only be achieved with Śiva, the “smooth leaf” of his chest drawn near by her arms, the sensuality enabled by an unconditional trust.

Lal Ded:

Up, woman! Go make your offering.  
Take wine, meat and cake fit for the gods.  
If you know the password to the Supreme Place,  
you can reach wisdom by breaking the rules.

Fatten the five elements like they were rams meant for the sacrifice.  
Feed them the grain of mind-light, and cakes fit for the gods.  
Then kill them. But don’t rush.  
You need the password to the Supreme Place  
to reach wisdom by breaking the rules. (Hoskote 2011, pp. 21–22)

Translator Hoskote considers these to be “companion” verses and they are numbered sequentially in his translation. They are united by a refrain in translation, involving a “password” that is needed to “reach wisdom by breaking the rules.” He identifies a Kaula Tantric orientation in the offerings of meat and wine, which speaks to the self-consciously transgressive tone of the passages (see Hoskote 2011, pp. lv–lvii). A woman is specified as performing the ritual. The second passage puts an unexpected twist on worshipping

with offerings: the “fattening of the five elements,” or engagement with the elements that make up the world and the body, becomes intensely performed with both mental focus and material goods, yet not to enhance their presence but instead to “kill” them. The directive, “but don’t rush” seems especially provocative; it suggests the confidence of spiritual mastery, in which the female practitioner deliberately earns or even creates the “password” to see through conventional understandings of material conditions. Hoskote points out the ongoing vulnerability of the practice: “the process is a delicate one, and any false step or missed stage can condemn the failed questor to delusional arrogance, a fragmented consciousness, or worse, states of impaired consciousness” (Hoskote 2011, p. 162). The verses offer a critique of physicality even as it is engaged.

Mirābāi:

My greedy eyes cannot turn back.  
Looking again and again, friend  
the greedy ones still want more.

I stood at my door; Mohan came in fine style.  
Leaving all covers and my family’s control.  
I revealed my face.

Mother-in-law, sister-in-law both night and day  
keep on trying to dissuade me.  
Unsteady and restless, my eyes will not listen to their advice  
and remain sold into another’s hands.

Some say I am good, some say bad  
I accept their words as a gift, raising them to my brow.  
Mira is the beloved of the clever Mountain Bearer,  
she cannot go on without him. (Martin-Kershaw 1995, p. 139)

This is a widely known poem, in part due to its focus on the eyes, which is a significant genre of devotional poems,<sup>18</sup> and in part due to an established way of reading the poem as a description of “Mira’s devotion in conflict with her role as a married woman” (Martinez 2018, p. 6). What is significant to me is her bodily urgency. The “greedy eyes” search for the beloved; they drink him in; they expose her disinterest in female in-laws’ advice as well as her immersion in her beloved. Mirābāi can uncover her face and “sell” her eyes, but her eyes uncover her in their “unsteady and restless” behavior when she lacks a visual focus on the image of her beloved. Her eyes see, touch and hear, suggesting a distinctive modality that challenges the conventional social mode of “good” and “bad.” Instead, the eyes simultaneously embody confidence and vulnerability; she is both imperious towards her in-laws and subjected to their attempted intervention, and she is both bodily compelled to the Mountain Bearer and at a loss without him.

### 3. Their Work

We also need to reexamine the authority of the female poet-saints’ words as spoken. As written, the Tamil examples became enclosed in a canon structure; the others are found in various manuscripts, which is also a type of authority since they are remembered and circulated. The spoken word resonates with a different authority; in the study of religion, it is most commonly considered revelation. I cannot think of a more resonant visual image of many of the assumptions made by Western religions about the nature of revelation than Caravaggio’s 1601 *Conversion on the way to Damascus*. Revelation is sudden and unexpected. It is received by humankind; in this case, Paul is leveled by its power, yet reaches his hands upward as though to grasp rather than to repel it. The agency is divine: It is not bodied, but a beam of light originating from above. The recipient is an unlikely candidate—Saul/Paul had been a persecutor of Christians, as suggested by his militarized garb. Transformation

is (temporary) disorientation, yet it is also life: Paul's flushed cheeks and peaceful face contrast with the darkened, dead-eyed man and horse, rendered similarly to suggest their common and unfortunate unawareness of Christ. What cannot be visually depicted in this style is the aural dimension of the story from Acts 9:3–9: the voice that asks "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?" and then self-identifies as Jesus.

In the study of religion, revelation is predominantly understood to be a category of divine disclosure, especially via speech, to humankind. As in the painting, the speech is often disembodied and represented by an image of light. Revelation is a category that emphasizes a hierarchy of power in terms of speaking, hearing and promulgating (Ward 1994; Wahlberg 2020). Women's participation is concentrated in the subordinate roles of hearing and promulgating the divine utterance, largely through their traditional and contemporary practice of the role of prophet, in the sense of prophetic divination, which existed and exists widely in global locations (e.g., Bouldin 2013). As Martti Nissinen notes in her discussion of ancient Near Eastern, Biblical and Greek prophecy, quoting in part from Ross Kramer: "Prophecy is a gendered phenomenon. The very idea of intermediation implies the "notion of penetration of a human by a divine agent, and casts the prophet into the role of the passive, penetrated, god-possessed female" (Nissinen 2017; Kraemer 2013). This is not to say that there is no power to be derived from such a location; for example, Elaine Hobby has shown that a small minority of women in early modern England, from the aristocratic Lady Eleanor Davies to Quaker women, used prophecy to participate in current political discussion (Hobby 2002): "It is arguable that prophecy is the single most important genre for women in the early modern period: with God's permission, a woman could write, and, for awhile at least, could insist on having a hearing" (Hobby 2002, p. 279).

What of women who spoke about the nature of religion itself and were not using religion to delve into politics, such as the female *bhakti* saints considered in this essay? In order to recognize and to address such an example, we need to reconceptualize our characterization of "revelation." We can draw on a lesser-known yet potent meaning of revelation as used in the vernacular, which suggests a different kind of unveiling of the hidden, pointing to a dramatic coming to know and presentation of information: a realization. In a religious context, this vernacular sense of revelation can change the power dynamics by shifting the speaking agency to a woman, and making the divine the listener to her new and distinctive insights. Perhaps this turn to the vernacular to understand revelation is especially appropriate, since one of the hallmarks of *bhakti* or devotional participation in post-classical India is that poet-saints across the land composed poetry in regional vernacular languages rather than classical Sanskrit. Poets who wrote *bhakti* poetry in Tamil, which is Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār and Āṅṅāḷ's language, are understood to be the earliest to perform this vernacular style of *bhakti* composition.

Hinduism more generally challenges the divine disclosure model of revelation. In Hinduism, Vedic literature is known as *śruti*, 'that which is heard', which is commonly understood as a category of revelation in this sense. However, that the Vedas are considered authorless by the Mīmāṃsā philosophical school, which according to Purushottama Bilimoria (1989, p. 165) "grounds intentionality, otherwise attributed to the author or subject, in the givenness of language itself," challenges the specificity of a divine speaker assumed in the Western-derived category of revelation. Other traditions view the Vedas as first heard by august seers, some of whom were women; a contemporary female guru profiled by Antoinette DeNapoli considers these vedic sages to have achieved "self-knowledge" on their own (DeNapoli 2021). Post-vedic Hinduism provides a distinctive model. God is represented as speaking in a class of texts called Purāṇa; for example, the deity Śiva in the *Śiva Purāṇa*. This is an authoritative genre of texts that are classified not as *śruti*, but as *smṛti*, 'that which is remembered', which points to generative human involvement. This largest class of texts in Hinduism is generally characterized as composed much later than the vedic literature, attributed to named authors, written down, and modified through circulation. This mode of Hinduism, which has been predominant for more than a millennium, thus entangles the human with the divine in its literature, its use of images for

worship, and in its philosophies that illuminate ways to understand connections between the human and the divine.

Realization is also helpful in the sense of making concrete. Even when ‘revelation’ is understood primarily as the voice of the divine, that voice still needs creation, since as Paul Clavier states, “creation is the very preamble to any genuine revelation” (Clavier 2013, p. 255). *Bhakti* literature in the regional languages of India prioritizes that creation; poets speak to and about the divine, and it is the voice of humanity that prevails (Carman 1987; Prentiss 1999). The words—spoken, sung, written—expose the devotional subjectivity of the speaker. In fact, *bhakti* demands such an exposure; the words are believed to reveal the commitment of the heart. But this discursive project not only brings the inside out; it also makes the body of the devotee visible as well, as the embodied poet enacts the devotional subjectivity in the world through speech and action. Female saints expose their realization by both word and deed.

An emphasis on realization allows us to focus on the work of female *bhakti* saints as knowers of their own enacted experiences. A perspective such as Ramanujan’s that female saints always, already have the truth prevents us from seeing and acknowledging their work. One example is the tendency of interpreters to associate travel primarily with male saints. As Kumkum Sangari notes in her discussion of *Mīrābāī* and *viraha* (separation): “Viraha was bound to marital and mercantile travel, courtly male profligacy and patriarchal privilege. Female viraha is repeatedly generated by male deceit, fickleness, profligacy and, of course, male travel” (Sangari 2011, p. 271). In this kind of formulation, women are negatively affected by male travel. What is less noticed is that female *bhakti* poet-saints represent themselves as participating in travel, too; it is part of their body of work in that both their words and their bodies are exposed as they enact their devotional subjectivity in the world. Their travel is more devotional exploration rather than achieving a goal-oriented task. In the following verses, we can discern their distinctive bodily engagements as variations on the common theme of travel: the confident body in a hostile place; the vulnerable body in a pleasant grove; the autonomous body even in its nudity; the vulnerability of travel leading to confidence within; the body harmoniously inspired by its unfamiliar surroundings made familiar by a devotional subjectivity.

Kāraikkāl Ammaiār:

The lord,  
 crowned with the moon in his matted locks,  
 adorned by the bobbing cobra encircling his waist,  
 whirls in his sacred dance;  
 by his grace  
 Kāraikkāl<sup>pēy</sup> of the blazing mouth and teeth  
 thrives at this burning ground;

those who sing her ten hymns and dance  
 will have all their ills destroyed. (Pechilis 2012, pp. 197–98)

Who “thrives” (the Tamil word used is *malinta*) at a cremation ground? Any human body in that place will be dead, and as the verses surrounding this one describe, the corpses are pulled apart by jackals and by ghouls (*pēy*), who feast on its liquified marrow and bloody intestines. The verses focus on such elements that provoke sensory discomfort, from screeching owls and rattling desiccated seed pods to fire and thorny bushes. The cremation ground (*kāṭu*) is distinguished from cultivated areas where people live (*nāṭu*) precisely by these sensory inversions—the cremation ground looks frightening, smells vile, sounds eerie, and forbids touch and certainly taste. It is a theatre of the vulnerability of the body. So who thrives here? A poet, who identifies herself with the ghouls (*pēy*) to the extent that she uses the term in a phrase that seems self-referential in this signature verse, Kāraikkāl<sup>pēy</sup>. She cannot actually be a ghoul, since as her verses describe the ghouls are ruled by their violent instincts, and they do not possess a clarity of language. But what they do possess is

bodily proximity to the elegantly dancing Śiva in that place. That proximity and vision, which she has also realized, lends the poet an invulnerability to that inhospitable place, though remaining quite aware of its sensory challenges.

Āṅṭāl:

In the lovely flower gardens of Tirumāliṛuñcōlai  
mighty war elephants tussle in play,  
creepers of jasmine display their bright white smiles,  
the dark flowering creepers laugh at me mockingly.  
My dear friend, to whom can I divulge the  
torment his garland inflicts on me? (Venkatesan 2010, p. 171)

The speaker is in a grove that she calls “the dark grove of Māl,” and it appears to be springtime due to the flourishing of flora and fauna in this verse and others in its ten-verse set (Venkatesan 2010, p. 211). Normally, the grove would be considered an auspicious, cool and delightful refuge, and her description of elephants in play and scented flowers gestures in that direction of sensory delight. However, the poet does not share in that delight, but instead experiences torment, such that the jasmine is “mocking” rather than providing an affirmation of her own youthful beauty. When she sees the flowers, she is reminded of the lord’s garland and that he is not in front of her, though elements that he creates and uses to adorn himself are. She is surrounded and invaded by Māl in her devotional subjectivity, experiencing his absence rather than actual presence. She realizes the violence of the world when god is not present. Archana Venkatesan points to the “violence” of such a situation as the poet’s “dominant means of expressing an impossible desire and the fleeting nature of her encounter with the divine” in this text, the *Nacciyar Tirumoli* (Venkatesan 2010, p. 13).<sup>19</sup>

Mahādēviyakka:

You can confiscate  
money in hand;  
can you confiscate  
the body’s glory?

Or peel away every strip  
you wear,  
but can you peel  
the Nothing, the Nakedness  
that covers and veils?

To the shameless girl  
wearing the White Jasmine Lord’s  
light of morning,  
you fool,  
where’s the need for cover and jewel? (Ramanujan 1973, p. 129)

This verse is widely understood to refer to the poet-saint’s shedding of her clothing, and she does refer to herself as wearing the “light of morning,” suggesting that her body is exposed to the elements. It is at least equally concerned with the social connotations of nudity, expressed by her sharp references to “confiscate,” “nakedness,” and “shameless,” describing a gendered logic in which female (“girl”) bodies are subject to be seized if they are exposed. But the body is itself a cover: it is a condition that marks a boundary, separate and apart from any clothing and adornment that may cloak it. The body should be seen as “glory” not only because of its associations with nature created by the divine, but because the body renders visible the personal autonomy that is expressed by speech, and should be understood and respected as such. Lal Ded has a similar verse, in which she distinctively emphasizes the body as “the Self’s own form” (Hoskote 2011, p. 143).

Lal Ded:

Love-mad, I, Lalla, started out  
 spent days and nights on the trail.  
 Circling back, I found the teacher in my own house.  
 What brilliant luck, I said, and hugged him. (Hoskote 2011, p. 15)

There are two poems of Lal Ded that seem to convey her traveling and receiving the public's hostility towards her ("lash me with insults;" "hurl a thousand curses at me"), which she dismisses ("their barking means nothing towards me") (Hoskote 2011, pp. 94–95). But more representative of her devotional subjectivity are verses such as the above, in which she asserts that the divine is within. In this particular verse, she uses the physicality of travel to suggest an unnecessary departure from knowledge of the true nature of the self as divine. Part of the work of devotion, then, is to question one's own assumptions; love does not have to be directed "out there," but can enable recognition and confidence that one can "hug" the divine in the home of the self.

Mīrābāi:

Friend, the sight of Vrindavan is dear to me.

In every house there is a *tulsī pūjā* offered to the Lord;  
 and *darśan* of Govind-jī.

The pure waters of the Yamuna flow;  
 Milk and curds are standard fare.

On a jeweled throne the Lord sits,  
 Wearing a crown of *tulsī* leaves.

Wandering among the groves, Dark Lover,  
 I hear the strains of your flute, Murali.

Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Bearer,  
 Without singing *bhajans*, a person cannot shine. (Martin-Kershaw 1995, p. 162)

Travel can also be delightful, as in this verse attributed to Mīrā. Vrindavan is materially pleasing as a place where one can see and be seen by (*darśan*) visual images of Krishna in homes and the temple—the latter are distinguished by their majesty—which people worship (*pūjā*) using holy basil (*tulsī*). Nourishing substances that have sacred associations (the river, milk, curds) overflow. Mīrā's own mode of devotion is to visit the groves where the *gopīs* (cowherd women) are said to have danced with Krishna, and she too hears his flute. It prompts her to join in, singing a devotional song (*bhajan*) that creates an aural intimacy. It is clear that though she is not from this place, its resonance with her devotional subjectivity means that she belongs in this place.

#### 4. Concluding Thoughts

The female poet-saints I have discussed in this article were all claimed by *bhakti*. Their use of mythologies, philosophies and practices that originated elsewhere in Hinduism are understood to be framed and shaped by a *bhakti* vision; both the Gita and the poet-saints are understood to claim that *bhakti* unifies and represents the culmination of tradition (Prentiss 1999). This brief comparison shows that female *bhakti* saints create complex devotional subjectivities in their poetry. The diversity of the contexts of which they speak—burning ground, festival day, intimate embrace, ritual practice, and extended household—and the experiences they convey display both individualistic situations as well as a pattern of their admixture of confidence and vulnerability. My analysis challenges Ramanujan's often-quoted characterization, based on his analysis of biographies, of male saints as

needing to change within, especially via conversion, in contrast to female saints being “secure in their identities” (Dharwadker 1999, p. 277). Instead, they expose themselves to experiences of contestation. If one focuses on the *bhakti* female saints’ poetry, one can see that their concerns cannot be circumscribed solely by an “external” conflict with their households. They are instead deeply invested in human challenges relating to many themes, including the quest for intimacy with the divine, the status of the body, the nature of self-knowledge, and the sensory experience of sacred place. The female saints, both individually and patterned, embraced experiences of contestation as generative, in contrast to their biographers, who often tried to domesticate and “protect” them. Taking the verses out of the received biographical context and viewing them as spiritual realization helps us to see not only the female saints’ work in crafting a devotional subjectivity, but that their concerns, while grounded in gendered difference, can be and were shared by other devotional people. And that is the basis of the authority that has always, already been granted to male saints.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> General editor of *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan* Vinay Dharwadker suggests that: “This essay probably grew out of the unpublished lecture on ‘Men, Women, and Saints’ that Ramanujan delivered at the Center for World Religions at Harvard University in 1976” (Dharwadker 1999, p. 573). He further suggests the location of the section on women within the unpublished lecture (Dharwadker 1999, p. 575). I am using the “corrected copy” from Ramanujan’s files published in (Dharwadker 1999, pp. 270–78), also listed under Ramanujan ([1999] 2014) in my bibliography.
- <sup>2</sup> Thanks to Tyler Williams for raising issues of author and hermeneutics in response to an early draft of this essay that I presented at the terrific full-day “Sensing Bhakti” symposium designed by Bhakti Mamtora and Iva Patel at the Madison Annual Conference on South Asia 2022, see <https://www.regionalbhakti.org/sensing/> (accessed on 1 March 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> He specifically names them in this note and in the article text: 7 Vīraśaiva female saints (Tilakavve, Vīrasaṅgavve, Dālāyi, Gogavve, Rēkkave, Vīracōlādēvi, and Mahādēviyakka), 3 Tamil saints (Avvaiyār-Śaiva, Kāraikkāl Ammaiār-Śaiva, Āṅṅāl-Vaiṣṇava), Lalla or Lallēśvari (Kashmiri, Śaiva), Mīrābāi (Hindi, Vaiṣṇava), Bahīnabāi (Marathi, Vaiṣṇava), Gaurībāi (Gujarati, Vaiṣṇava), and Kurūramma (Kerala, Vaiṣṇava). Other comparisons include Vijaya Ramaswamy’s identification of 75 female saints (Ramaswamy 1992) and Uma Chakravarti’s comparison of four south Indian female saints (Avvaiyār, Kāraikkāl Ammaiār, Āṅṅāl, Akka Mahādēvi) (Chakravarti 1989).
- <sup>4</sup> Anthologies are also helpful to a comparative inquiry, such as Andrew Schelling (2011) and Sandya Mulchandani (2019).
- <sup>5</sup> Cited (using a different source) in Ramanujan’s essay on “Towards a Counter-System: Women’s Tales,” in (Dharwadker 1999, pp. 429–47, quote on p. 447).
- <sup>6</sup> Or Liṅgāyat or Śaraṇa; See Ben-Herut on the terminology (Ben-Herut 2018, pp. 14–21).
- <sup>7</sup> The *Tazkirat al-‘Ārifin* (1587) and the *Asrār ul-Akbar* (1654); see Accardi (2018, p. 413) and Hoskote (2011, p. xvi).
- <sup>8</sup> Hoskote also points out similarities and differences between Lal Ded’s poetry and *bhakti* poetry; he locates her poems as “premiered far more substantially on *jnana-mārga* than on *bhakti-mārga*” (Hoskote 2011, p. xxviii).
- <sup>9</sup> Paraśurām Chaturvedī 1932. *Mīrābāi kī Padāvalī*. Prayag: Hindī Sāhitya Sammelan.
- <sup>10</sup> The “first extensive academic translation of more than 200 Mira poems into English” was by A.J. Alston in 1980 (*The Devotional Poems of Mirabai*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass); there have been many popular translations as discussed in (Martin 2010; quote on Alston is from p. 17).
- <sup>11</sup> See also (Venkatesan 2010, p. 9), where she says: “Whereas we are reasonably certain that the poet Kōtai [Āṅṅāl] composed the *Tiruppāvai* and *Nācciyār Tirumoli*, the same cannot be said of Mīrā.”
- <sup>12</sup> The problem of phallogocentrism is relevant here, as influentially discussed by Hélène Cixous (1976) (this is a revised version of “Le Rire de la Méduse,” which appeared in *L’Arc* (1975) pp. 39–54).
- <sup>13</sup> We could also raise here the issue of caste as historically viewed as factual, real and naturalized. High caste male poets sang in the voices of low-caste men. However, I do not find the attribution of a low-caste status to be problematized and undermined in the way the female voice has in scholarship.

- <sup>14</sup> See also: “The trouble I have been talking about is the impossibility of disentangling intuitions about the given/taken nature of gender from performative re/construction of it, even when we know that gendered power is encoded in that givenness” (Ram-Prasad 2019, p. 145).
- <sup>15</sup> Though Venkatesan (2010, p. 6) notes that Āṅṭāl’s “position as one of the *ālṅvār* is tenuous, and she is sometimes excluded from [the] list [of poets],” especially since the time of Vedānta Deśika (1268–1369 CE).
- <sup>16</sup> Kenneth Bryant’s masterful challenge (Bryant 1978, pp. 21–42) to the scholarly consensus that viewed a selection of Sūrdās’s poetry as primarily displaying *vātsalya* (mood of parental love) by his emphasis on its admixture with “epiphany” has been influential on my thinking here.
- <sup>17</sup> Such as poems # 102, 114, 134, 322, 328 in (Ramanujan 1973).
- <sup>18</sup> According to Hawley, “‘eye’-poems” constitute “a huge group in which Mīrā’s signature occurs along with that of many other poets” (Hawley 2005, p. 112).
- <sup>19</sup> Intriguingly, the master poet Nammālvār has a verse in which he takes on a female voice in a similarly depicted situation. The commentator Periyavāccāṅ Pillai (13th century) noticed the connection of this verse from Āṅṭāl with Nammālvār’s *Tiruvaymōli* 9.5 (Venkatesan 2010, p. 211).

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