

## THE SACRED AND THE FEMININE: WOMEN POETS WRITING IN PRE-COLONIAL INDIA

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This article explores the poetry of Indian women poets writing since 600BCE. The idea of freedom, love and desire in the work of poets writing in Pali, Tamil, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati and Telegu reveals the *jouissance* experienced and expressed by Indian women in pre-colonial times. The critical framework used is culled from the most ancient texts of Indian theory.

Some of the earliest Indian philosophical texts discuss the phenomenal world in terms of a paradox: it is both sacred, and also ultimately imprisoning. The sacrality arises from the maintenance of the dharmic order, so important and central to Hindu society.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the Puranas, composed c. 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century, also state that the very dharmic duties prescribed to maintain the order of society, such as procreation and funereal rites for one's parents, are revealed to be rooted in egoism and to bear the fruit of bondage (See Brubaker in Hawley & Wulff 205).

As Richard Brubaker puts it, "India knows both the sacredness of order and the sacredness that abandons order" (Brubaker in Hawley & Wulff 204), endowing the sacred, which is always female, with a complex polarity quite different from the western patriarchal binary divide implicit in the nominal *sacer* (which, in a later period, splits to denote the oppositions of the sacred and the profane). Thus the sacralization of the normative sexual relations in the dharmic order prescribes male hierarchy over the female, making the insubordination of the female decidedly adharmic, or breaking the bounds of duty. Yet, on precisely this account, breaking the bounds may be a powerful agent of moksha, or liberation from material bondage/salvation, which is the highest state to which the human being can aspire

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<sup>1</sup> Dharma, or the code of ethics, prescribes and governs the actions of individuals and groups in Indian Hindu society.

(See Brubaker in Hawley & Wulff 204-209).

Through ancient history, the Indian women who defied social norms, challenged caste hierarchy, and were outspoken before authority have been regarded as saints. Most refused the social norm of marriage and family: Mira, Gauri and Venkamma refused the rituals of widowhood. The famed poet and critic A.K. Ramanujan stresses that the classical ideals embodied in the figures of Sita and Savitri (both ideal dutiful wives of fiction) are not the only models available to Indian women. The iconoclastic poet-saints of the bhakti movement offer the example of hundreds of women who took a different path, rejecting the sphere traditionally reserved for women (Ramanujan in Hawley & Wulff 316-326). The lives of these poets present a challenge to the dharmic order which is represented in Hindu religious tradition by various goddesses, but primarily the figure of the goddess *Kali*, who symbolises the powerful female principle, which is ultimately erotic.<sup>2</sup>

A substantial part of Hindu literature describes the beauty, functions and accomplishments of courtesans (who are not to be conflated with prostitutes, as the British regarded them). The *Arthashastra*, the classical text of Hindu statecraft which was compiled c. 300 BCE, mentions the state courtesan who served as a spy and intelligence agent and whose earnings supplied government revenues (Gaur 11-12). During Mughal rule, the *tawaif* was a respected member of society, sophisticated and well versed in the arts, to whom the elite of the town would send their sons for education in manners and letters.<sup>3</sup> Similarly equally respected was the *devadāsī*, who was dedicated to the service of the deity in the temple. They were trained in dancing and the erotic arts from around the age of seven (Gaur 11-12).

Ancient Hindu cultural production speaks candidly of the sciences of sexual technique, the definition of erotic emotions and their relation to music, painting, literature, particular types of landscape and certain times of the day and the year. The many texts of the *Kāma Shāstra*, written in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, deal with the science

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<sup>2</sup> *Kali* is most often represented as the slayer of *Shiva*, who is represented as a corpse with his phallus erect. Here, male and female both display an intense and even dangerous sexuality. Even though the female is portrayed as victorious, Shiva is still alive in the representation of his sexual desire, and thereby his desire to unite with *prakṛiti* the female principle. He may be seen to be *granting or allowing Kali moksha*, see woman as adharmic, above. Thus both are victorious and therefore equal. For the representation of Kali, see David R. Kinsley (144-152) and Brubaker (204-209) in Hawley & Wulff .

<sup>3</sup> For example, Mahlaqa Bai Chanda (1767-1824) of Lucknow (Tharu & Lalita 120ff).

of sexual technique and emotion (Gaur 11-12). The various works of the Kāma Shāstra were collected and summarised by Vātsyāyana in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. This text, the Kāma Sātra, is the now classic treatise on love, eroticism and the pleasures of life. Kāma is regarded as one of the three aims of life, and these are mentioned in the most ancient texts such as the Veda, the Purāna, the Laws of Manu (Dharmashastra) and the Mahābhārata. These principles are Dharma, the code of ethics, which ensures the cohesion and duration of the species; Artha, material gain which assures survival; and Kāma, pleasure of the senses including erotic behaviour which ensures the transmission of life (Vātsyāyana; trans. Daniélou 1-12). These principles have to be practised with a sense of balance for the ideal life.

The *Rig Veda*, the earliest collection of hymns, songs and poetry, contains verses authored by both men as well as women (Tharu & Lalita 51). However, there are many extant poems and songs by women which date to pre-Vedic societies. Aryan patriarchy, which dominated ancient India from c. 1500 BCE, acculturated with the indigenous agricultural societies, which were ruled by *prakriti* or the female principle, giving rise to what is now called the Vedic period in Indian literature.

This ancient period of Indian poetry (around 1200 BCE until 1200) was dominated by the Indo-European languages of Sanskrit, Hindi, Persian, Arabic, Urdu and Bengali, as well as the pre-Vedic Dravidian languages which consist of 25 languages, particularly Tamil, which dates from the second century BCE (Preminger & Brogan 585-604).

The status of women in ancient India was equal to that of the male. As Romesh Chander Dutt narrates in his *History of Civilisation in Ancient India*, “women were honoured in ancient India, more perhaps than among any other ancient nation on the face of the globe. They were considered the intellectual companions of their husband [...and] affectionate helpers in the journey of life” (Dutt 67 in Tharu and Lalita 49). A.S. Altekar, in *Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, opines that the status of women is one of the best gauges of the spirit of a civilization, its excellencies and its limitations, going on to argue that the Vedic age was one in which women enjoyed singular freedoms (Altekar 1, 13 in Tharu & Lalita 49). In fact, the pre-eminent principle which forms the basis of one of the earliest texts of the Sanskrit Purāna, the *Devi-mahatmya* (which forms part of the *Markandeya*, composed c. 4-5<sup>th</sup> centuries) is that the ultimate reality in the universe is feminine (Coburn in Hawley & Wulff 153-165).

During the time of the Bābhavyas (8<sup>th</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE) as in

Vātsyāyana's own day (4<sup>th</sup> century) women enjoyed great freedom (Vātsyāyana; trans. Daniélou 1-12). This is apparent in the poetry and verse of women writing in various Indian languages from at least the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Many ancient women poets "chafed at the strictures of the household and the family" (Tharu & Lalita 58). These sentiments are apparent in their earliest poems, written by the *theris* (Buddhist nuns), whose verse is compiled in what is the oldest anthology of women's verse: the *Therigatha* (written around 80 BCE). The *theris* used verse to speak of the space Buddhism allowed them to contest the patriarchal powers that determined their lives.

Mutta, whose life, like that of the other *theris*, is documented in the commentary to the *Therigatha*, the *Paramatta Dipani*, rejoices in her freedom from domestic duties:

So free am I, so gloriously free,  
Free from three petty things –  
From mortar, from pestle and from my twisted lord. (Tharu & Lalita 68)

Similarly, Sumangalamata speaks of freedom from both, her husband as well as the duties of attending the family:

A woman well set free! How free I am,  
How wonderfully free, from kitchen drudgery.  
Free from the harsh grip of hunger,  
And from empty cooking pots,  
Free too of that unscrupulous man,  
The weaver of sunshades. (Tharu & Lalita 69)

The later poets of the Sangam period (c. 1 BCE – 250 AD) betray an absence of Sanskrit words and mythology, suggesting that Vedic culture had not influenced this geographical area of Southern India. The two modes of pre-Vedic poetry were *akam*, that which related to inner space, and *puram*, that which spoke of external events. The poems which speak of a thriving agricultural economy in kingdoms which traded with foreign countries (in fact, coins in that area indicate trade with the Roman empire) reveal a society in which women shared an equal status with men, but were also considered sacred. Tharu and Lalita remind us that contemporary feminist readers might be tempted to conflate the stress on Sangam women's chastity with contemporary notions of virtue, and the control of women's bodies at crucial points in their life cycle with contemporary sexual politics. Yet the remarkable sense of equality, of freedom of movement, to make relationships and take on responsibilities suggest that Sangam society's concept of women as sacred cannot be translated into forms familiar to us today (Tharu & Lalita 70ff). The complex polari-

ties in which Hindu women have always been constituted make their positions unreadable to most western-educated feminists, who often succumb to the binary thinking of their patriarchies. The following verses by Venmanipputi Kuruntokai are typical in the voicing of female desire. In "What she said to her girlfriend" Kuruntokai writes:

On beaches washed by seas  
older than the earth,  
in the groves filled with bird-cries,  
on the banks shaded by a *punnai*  
clustered with flowers,  
    when we made love  
my eyes saw him  
and my ears heard him;

my arms grow beautiful  
in the coupling  
and grow lean  
as they come away.

What shall I make of this? (Tharu & Lalita 73)

In a poem where the friend speaks about her lover who has left on a journey and not returned, Velli Vitiyar Kuruntokai writes:

He will not dig up the earth and enter it,  
he will not climb into the sky,  
he will not walk across the dark sea.  
If we search every country,  
every city,  
every village,  
can your lover escape us? (Tharu & Lalita 74)

The theme of sexuality runs through art and literature, exemplified in the very many sculptures still found in the temples of Khajurao. Although these were built in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the theme of sensual pleasure in the erotic *mithuna* figures has a sculptural ancestry of at least a thousand years, going back to before the onset of the Christian millennium (Watson 91).

The 12<sup>th</sup> century Akkamahadevi's poetry is a document of carnal pleasures which are enjoyed and evoked to mystical or spiritual ends in her search for the divine lord Shiva. As the subject of her own poems it is she who possesses agency as she actively seeks out her lord using the symbolism of love outside her binary marital bond with which she will unite with him. In one poem Akka says:

It was like a stream  
    running into the dry bed  
    of a lake,  
                    like rain  
    pouring on plants  
    parched to sticks.



challenged monism by reverting to the pre-Vedic atheist spiritual philosophy which distinguished between the universal absolute and the individual soul. Having divided them he thus sanctioned the concept of love between the divine and the human.<sup>5</sup> The devotional momentum for which he provided a theology did more than exalt the cult of Krishna as Vishnu's popular incarnation. It strengthened the power to resist the later appeal to Christian conversion, and it enriched Tamil literature as a vehicle for preserving the abundant celebration of its regional saints by wandering minstrels.

The bhakti movement in Hinduism spread northwards and surfaced as representations of the mystically sensuous and powerfully pervasive Krishna, in Indian painting, sculpture, dance, song and literature in 12<sup>th</sup> century Bengal.

The Persian mystical cult known as Sufism reached India at just the point where it could find some common ground with the bhakti devotional movement. In Bengal and Bihar, Jayadeva's poetical celebration of the Radha-Krishna theme was followed between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries by Vidyapati, Chaitanya and Chandidas. Agra produced the blind poet Surdas; Rajasthan the wandering Princess Mirabai; in Maharashtra there were Muslim converts to Hinduism among the Bhakti devotees. Of the twelve disciples of Ramananda who brought Ramanuja's teaching from the South to Banaras, spreading it in the Hindi vernacular, one was a barber, one a shoemaker, and one, Kabir (c. 1440-1518), a weaver (Watson 85,94,102).

A.K. Ramanujan points out that love had long been a central metaphor for religious experience. He cites a well-known passage in the *Brhadāra nyaka Upanishad* which likens the ultimate attainment of freedom and fearlessness to the sensation a man feels in the embrace of his wife: so does a person, "when in the embrace of the intelligent soul, [know] nothing within or without... [H]is desire is satisfied, in which the soul is his desire, in which he is without desire and without sorrow" (*Brhadāranyaka Upanishad*, 4.3.21).<sup>6</sup> Philosophers continued the tradition through the ages, and in *bhakti* poetry

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<sup>5</sup> The dualism between *prakṛiti* (primordial matter which translates into the material universe, and thus the female principle) and *puruṣa* (spirit) was an atheist one. This atheistic dualism had been adapted to theistic philosophical needs in the later Vedas. In the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* the distinctions between the Lord and the individual soul are articulated but both are subsumed in the divine absolute. (See Coburn in Hawley & Wulff 153-165).

<sup>6</sup> *Brhadāranyaka Upanishad*, 4.3.21, trans. R.E. Hulme, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, Oxford University Press, 1931. Quoted by A.K. Ramanujan in Hawley & Wulff 316-326.

one finds new expressions of this old awareness. *Bhakti* itself is a celebration of the feminine principle, which pre-dates the Aryans in India, thereby pre-dating the rigorous Brahmanic codes which made *varna* – hierarchization by colour – a social norm. The chief mood of *bhakti* verse is *sringāra* or the erotic. Erotic love is expressed entirely from the woman's point of view, in a phase of separation or union.

Mirabai, the famed Rajputani, who was married into a royal family, is a renowned *bhakti* poet. Celebrated for the evocation of the *sringāra* in her verses to Lord Krishna, Mira sings:

I am pale with longing for my beloved;  
 People believe I am ill.  
 Seizing on every possible pretext,  
 I try to meet him "by accident".

[...]

The sweetness of his lips is a pot of nectar,  
 That's the only curd for which I crave;  
 Mira's Lord is Giridhar Naagar,  
 He will feed me nectar again and again. (Tharu & Lalita 92)

The poems of Rami, the mid-fifteenth century Bengali washer-woman, speak of a more earthly love for her lover, the Brahmin poet Chandidas who was ostracized from his village for his intimate relationship with the lower-caste woman. The much later 19<sup>th</sup> century Tarigonda Venkamamba, also a poet-saint, similarly writes of earthly love, although it is about Satyabhama and Krishna:

Gently he lifts me up  
 Wipes the stream of tears from my eyes  
 Trails his fingers softly through my twisted hair  
 Braids my tresses and decks them with flowers  
 Gently requests I change my crumpled clothes  
 Into a flowered raiment of his choice  
 And adorns me with trinkets of gold and silver.  
 On my forehead he places the  
 vermilion mark of fidelity and artfully  
 Darkens my reddened eyes with *kajal*  
 And on my breasts with his own hands  
 Playfully rubs a sandal salve to  
 Cool my burning flesh... (Tharu and Lalita 125)

There are thus numerous examples of Indian women writing poetry and literature through the ages, women of all castes and classes, even low caste women such as Atukari Molla (early 16<sup>th</sup> century), who belonged to the potter caste and who wrote the Ramayana in Telegu.

It was only in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, under British rule, that the response to women's writing underwent an ideological change. With



the now-famous ban on the 18<sup>th</sup> century Telegu poet Muddupalani's erotic epic, *Radhika Santwanam*, the government considered women writing on the subject of desire and sex objectionable, improper and obscene. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century critic Bangalore Nagaratnamma's judgement of *Radhika Santwanam* was that the work met the strict demands of classical aesthetic theory which required a skilled work of art to balance all the nine *rasas*.<sup>7</sup> In contemporary western terms, the sexual inversion practised by Muddupalani on the traditional relations between male and female lovers—making the woman's sensuality and sexuality central to the poem which also speaks of her taking the initiative in love-making, making her satisfaction and her pleasure the focus of the work of literature—may seem startling, but is well in keeping with the ancient tradition of Indian women poets' verse of pleasure and sexual freedom. However, the foreign ideology which dominated this period in India silenced the centuries-old voices of women intellectuals who had written of freedom, love, desire and sexual *jouissance* from ancient times with no censure from their societies. Instead they had commanded respect as scholars and artists in their own right. It was with the imposition of a rigidly Victorian sexuality that they lost their independent status, as court patronage was withdrawn under the new rulers, throwing women artists into poverty and homelessness. Lalita and Tharu record the political and ideological change in Indian society:

As the British established their commercial and military authority over India in the second half of the eighteenth century, the old rulers were overthrown or marginalised, and the earlier centres of trade and administration lost their importance to the new port cities. By 1799, all revenues from the Thanjavur kingdom went to the British. Those driven to destitution as a result of these changes were principally artisans and craftspeople, but poets, musicians, architects, scientists, indeed scholars and artists of all kinds who depended on the patronage of courts were deprived of a means of sustenance. Large numbers of women artists, mainly folk singers and dancers, who depended on wealthy households for patronage, but also court artists like Muddupalani were driven to penury and prostitution. (7-8)

Muddupalani's opening to *Radhika Santwanam* is a celebration of her own personal attributes, which may appear arrogant, but is perhaps well deserved in light of her many intellectual accomplishments.

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<sup>7</sup> Nagaratnamma reprinted *Radhika Santwanam* in 1910. (See Tharu & Lalita 1-2).

The nine *rasa* are *sringāra* (romance and eroticism); *hasya* (comic); *karuna* (compassion); *raudra* (fury); *veer* (heroism); *bhayanka* (the fearful); *vibhatsa* (disgust); *adbhuta* (amazement or wonder); *shanta* (peace). See Bharata's *Natya Shastra*.

Which other woman of my kind has  
 Felicitated scholars with gifts and money?  
 To which other woman of my kind have  
 Epics been dedicated?  
 Which other woman of my kind has  
 Won such acclaim in each of the arts?  
 You are incomparable,  
 Muddupalani, among your kind. (Tharu & Lalita 116)

In the section of her epic in which Radha teaches Krishna how to make love, Muddupalani writes in the aesthetic mode of *śringāra rasa*:

Move on her lips  
 The tip of your tongue;

Do not scare her  
 by biting hard.

Place on her cheeks  
 A gentle kiss;

Do not scratch her  
 With your sharp nails.

Hold her nipple  
 With your fingertips;

Do not scare her  
 By squeezing it tight.

Make love  
 Gradually;

Do not scare her  
 By being aggressive.

I am a fool  
 To tell you all [this].  
 When you meet her  
 And wage your war of love  
 Would you care to recall my do's and don'ts, [sweetness]?  
 (Tharu & Lalita 118)

Krishna complains that he no longer wishes to make love to Radha in this passage which, though written in the male voice, asserts the sexual agency of the woman:

If I ask her not to kiss me,  
 Stroking on my cheeks  
 She presses my lips hard against hers.

If I ask her not to touch me,  
 Stabbing me with her firm breasts  
 She hugs me.

If I ask her not to get too close  
 For it is not decorous,  
 She swears at me loudly.

If I tell her of my vow not  
 To have a woman in my bed,  
 She hops on  
 And begins the game of love.

Appreciative,  
 She lets me drink from her lips,  
 Fondles me, talks on,  
 Making love again and again.  
 How could I stay away  
 From her company? (Tharu & Lalita 120)

Women's erotic and sensual writing such as this, which had a rich historical tradition in India from pre-Vedic times, came to be viewed differently during the British Raj as the norms of Victorian society were imposed in a reform movement which separated women into the western opposition of virgin and whore. The previously unrestrained social intercourse of women from different caste- and class-back-grounds with each other was now restricted, as the sexuality of the middle-class housewife was created by the opposition that the "unbridled licentiousness" of the low-caste Vaishnava women provided. Thus was the newly created respectable middle-class housewife's sexuality progressively formulated and contained.<sup>8</sup>

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***Dedication: This article is for my friend Seema Edwards Kormoczi.***

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<sup>8</sup> See Dimple Godiwala, "Language, Experience, Identity: Contemporary Indian women poets writing in English,' *forthcoming*. Also see Tharu & Lalita.

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