

BECOMING THE BELOVED THE *BHAKTI* MOVEMENT'S QUEST FOR THE DIVINE THROUGH THE SECULAR

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The *bhakti* movement transformed people's relationship with god. The abstract god of the Upanishads, the distant, fearsome gods of the Vedic times, the god that told you how to lead your life in the Bhagavad Gita - all these vanished. They were replaced by a god so personal you could scold him, plead with him, flirt with him, abuse him, and love him. And all this could be done in the language you spoke every day, instead of Sanskrit. It brought god closer to his *bhaktas* than ever before. The *bhakti* movement began in Tamil, and extended over the centuries through the other Indian languages, changing both the literature of those languages and the landscape of religion in India forever.

Some of the most beautiful poetry and music came from the *bhakti* tradition. It is still alive today in Indian dance and music of the classical, folk and popular traditions. In many ways, it is an inescapable part of the language of the home, of the mother tongues we all learn first. The *bhakti* songs are songs that sing children to sleep, and the stories of the poet-saints and their gods are stories that we grow up with. Part of the reason why this literature speaks to us is because it takes the transcendental relationship between human and god, and transcribes it into a language we can all understand – the language of earthly love in all its forms.

In this paper I will discuss three pieces of *bhakti* writing. The first is a portion of *Hymns for the Drowning*, Tamil poems by Nammalvar, translated by A.K. Ramanujan into English. The second is a collection of Kannada *vachanas* written by Akkamahadevi, and the third is the *Gitagovinda*, written by Jayadeva in Sanskrit and translated by Barbara Stoler Miller.

Nammalvar wrote his *Hymns for the Drowning* in around the 8th century of the Common Era. In Nammalvar's poems, the lover is a young woman, and the beloved is Krishna. Some of the poems are in the voice of the young

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woman, and others are in the voices of the people close to her – her mother or step-mother, her friend, or her husband. In the poems, god is at once an all-powerful deity and a tender, playful lover. The soul's quest for enlightenment is equated with a lover's desire to be one with the beloved, and the lover's total identification with her beloved is a metaphor for the soul's oneness with the divine. Some poems make this connection literally, like the following one.

"I'm the earth you see," she says.

"I'm all the visible skies," she says.

"I'm the fires,

the winds,

and the seas," she says.

Is it because our lord dark as the sea
has entered her and taken her over?

How can I explain my girl

to you who see nothing

but this world?

(Ramanujan 1993: 72)

In the poem, though what is being said is metaphysical, the form is secular and familiar. Rather than making it a discourse about god's power, Nammalvar has given his words a familiar form, the fearful fretting of a loving mother over her air-headed daughter. The poem above is one which is pretty straightforwardly religious. However, there are other poems which, if one did not know the beloved was Krishna, could be read as completely secular love poems. A good example is the following one.

Is that you, little bird?

When I asked you to go

as my messenger to the great lord

and tell him of my pain,

you dawdled, didn't go.

I've lost my looks,

my dark limbs are pale.

Go look for someone else

to put sweet things

in your beak,

go now.

(Ramanujan 1993: 52)

Birds as messengers of love is a common motif in secular literature about love, so if one were to remove the phrase "the great lord", the poem above

could very well be a girl complaining about how far away her lover is. Her suffering, her paleness, her beauty wasting away – all these are things that are common to secular poetry as well. Nammalvar here has taken common motifs easily recognised by listeners and used them to speak of god. In doing so, he has given them new meaning, creating metaphors where once only images existed, and making the images all the more beautiful and poignant.

The soul's yearning for god, so beautifully expressed in the poem, is placed in counterpoint to the bewilderment of the world when it comes to religious devotion. The opposition that Nammalvar must have faced in his quest for god is translated into poems that speak from the point of view of anxious and querulous mothers (as in the poem above). Yet aside from these somewhat serious emotions, there is also playfulness and intimacy, two emotions that would have been unthinkable in the context of man's relationship to god before the advent of *bhakti* tradition. Longing and awe, even identification with god, are things that existed in religious expression before *bhakti*. The religious transformation came with the introduction of the secular aspects of love – shyness, quarrelling, playfulness, scolding, and others – into the depiction of divine.

The poems that express these emotions are some of the most accessible poems Nammalvar has written. They continue to be danced and sung to this day, like this one.

Look here:

being naughty,
grabbing our dolls
and doing wild things
won't get you anywhere;
we know you
from old times,
how can we stand your pranks,
your airs?

There are any number
of lovely women,
queens of the three worlds;
so don't torment
this plain crowd.

Such stuff is childish,
even for you.

(Ramanujan 1993: 22)

The poem makes reference to Krishna's playfulness, to well-known stories of the pranks he played on the cowherd-girls in Vrindavan. The speaker in this poem becomes one of those girls, scolding Krishna but also flirting with him. The poem allows the singer be playful in the eyes of god, at the same time that it acknowledges the deep intrinsic relationship between the soul and god ("we know you/ from old times"), and expresses the unworthiness of all human beings in front of god ("don't torment/ this plain crowd").

Thus Nammalvar's poems become vehicles for people to connect with god on a deeply emotional level, very different from the intellectual or ritualistic connections that they had before. His poems were some of the first of the *bhakti* tradition. By the time we come to Akkamahadevi in the 12th century CE, the writing has become much more personal and therefore all the more compelling.

Akka's poems are addressed to Shiva, whom she calls Chennamallikarjuna. A K Ramanujan translates this as "lord white as jasmine". In her poems, Akka writes with clarity, precision, and astounding lyricism. Unlike Nammalvar, who uses the persona of a young woman in love as a metaphor for the devotee, Akka writes as herself. Her relationship with god is deeply personal, completely direct and without pretence. She sees Chennamallikarjuna as her husband and lover both, and addresses him as such. She waits for him, and in one of her *vachanas*, begs him to come and be her bridegroom. "Come, man, come, you pearl of goodness, after having bathed in turmeric powder,/ Having put on golden ornaments and dressed yourself in silk" (Dabbe and Zydenbos 1989: 43). In another, she tells her listener that she has dreamt of Shiva as "a mendicant with short braids of hair and shining teeth," (ibid 43) coming to her in her dream.

A lot of her imagery, however, is nowhere near as innocuous as that in the *vachanas* above. Many of the *vachanas* are downright disturbing, like this one. "Take these husbands who die,/ decay, and feed them/ to your kitchen fires!" (Ramanujan 1992: 11). Akka's poetry is not strictly love poetry, either. Her love for Shiva is absolute, so much so that she cares little for the rest of the world. She has little use for adornment, and in fact in her daily life she went about completely unclothed, covered solely by her long hair. A lot of her poems are scathing indictments of worldly life and of the way human beings, especially men, view it.

You have come seeing the beauty
Of rounded breasts and the fullness of youth, brother.
Brother, I am not a woman!

Brother, I am not a whore!
Brother, seeing me again and again
For whom have you come?
Look, brother, any man
Other than the lord who is as white as jasmine
Is a face I can't stand.

(Dabbe and Zydenbos 1989: 41)

Akka's manner of writing often takes traditional imagery of love poems, like the "rounded breasts and the fullness of youth," and turns it on its head. There is nothing prudish about her poems – in that sense, her words reflect her deeds. Her *vachanas* shock and provoke in their disdain for social norms and their palpable longing for the divine. Her words are a raw appeal to god, and she is willing to accept any hardship in her quest for union.

The ascetic imagery of many of the *vachanas*, and her own life's story, in which she gave up everything, including clothing, in her quest for Chennamallikarjuna, perhaps reflect the nature of the god she worshipped. Shiva is portrayed usually as an ascetic and a mendicant, unlike Vishnu who is seen in his avatars as someone who lived in this world and enjoyed it. Akka's love, therefore, is deeper the more she denies herself worldly pleasure. In one poem, she expresses this desire to forgo everything so she can attain Shiva.

Make me beg, lord, stretching out my hands and not missing a house;
Make them not give anything when I beg, lord;
If they give anything, make it fall to the ground, lord;
If it falls to the ground, then before I pick it up
Make a dog come and pick it up,
Lord who is as white as jasmine.

(Dabbe and Zydenbos 1989: 42)

In the above *vachana*, the intensity of love she feels for Shiva as Chennamallikarjuna is portrayed by the vivid images she evokes. Secular love has its own imagery of deprivation, where a girl wastes away, not eating, not sleeping, as she pines for her beloved. But Akka takes this imagery to a wholly new level, not allowing the listener to become complacent.

The vividness of Akka's writing draws readers in even today. The lyricism of sound in her *vachanas* only adds to their impact. The few that I have heard recited to me had me riveted, even though I could not understand quite a bit of what was being said. The sounds alone were captivating. This experience was somewhat similar to hearing Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* being sung. The words rhymed and flowed, meant to be sung right from the time they were written.

Listening to them, we were reminded of the fact that most of the literature that we were reading had been written to be recited, sung, danced and acted. It made us feel how much we were missing when we just read the words – which were by themselves beautiful and rich beyond compare, especially in Jayadeva’s work.

The *Gitagovinda* combines the frankness of Akka’s words with the ornamentation of Nammalvar’s poems, creating a world that is both intimate and intricate. The songs in the *Gitagovinda* are written from the point of view of Radha and Krishna, the ideal lover and the ideal beloved, or the perfected soul and the perfect god. The relationship is described in all its complexity, in all the moods of love - separation and longing, anger, fear, and jealousy, playfulness and intimacy, eroticism and joy. Each song has its own raga, its own tala, and each song is meant to be danced in devotion to Krishna.

The beauty in the *Gitagovinda* is that we hear both the devotee and god, but in a manner totally different than the one, say, in the Bhagavad Gita. In the *Gitagovinda*, Krishna does not give advice or direct human affairs. Instead, he speaks as a lover, as attached to his beloved as she is attached to him. He curses himself for letting Radha leave. “Damn me! My wanton ways/ Made her leave in anger” (Miller 1997: 82). God, in Jayadeva’s poem, is not some difficult to attain ideal, as he is in both Akka’s and Nammalvar’s poetry. Instead, he is as close as anyone can possibly be, as human as the rest of us. He is divine not in spite of his human qualities, but perhaps because of them. In Jayadeva’s songs these very qualities are elevated to the highest art. The human emotions are perfected to their essence, and this is what is portrayed as divine.

In this sense, it is only through experiencing these emotions as deeply as Radha does that we, the listeners, can attain the same position in Krishna’s arms. “If your heart hopes to dance to the haunting song of Jayadeva,/ Study what her friend said about Radha suffering Hari’s desertion” (Miller 1997: 87). This instruction at the end of the eighth song is repeated in different forms throughout the *Gitagovinda*. The *sanskrit* of the *Gitagovinda* is not complicated with obscure grammar, and the form of the songs follows those from the commonly spoken languages. Besides, these songs were designed to be danced to, so the listeners had not just the words but also visual representation of the words to guide them. Above and beyond all that, however, is the sheer intensity of the emotions in these poems, made even more intense by the music. So, even though the *Gitagovinda* was not written in the language of the common people, it is possible to see how they could have followed Jayadeva’s injunctions.

To this day, Jayadeva's words have not lost their power. Even though they were written in the 12th century CE, they continue to be danced and sung to this day, in pretty much the same musical format that he gave them. They continue to be performed in devotion to Krishna, especially in the place where Jayadeva most likely wrote them, in Puri at the Jagannath temple. They are a major part of every Odissi dancer's repertoire, gaining their place by the depth and variety of the emotions that they express. So it is that one of the most intensely erotic, intensely human pieces of writing has also become one of the most highly revered expressions of divine love.

This duality I think encapsulates what the *bhakti* tradition is about. God in the *bhakti* tradition is not divine because he is removed from human life. Instead, he is divine because he is the one who has perfected the human emotions. His devotees, to be close to him, need not lose their humanity or their frailty. Instead, they can approach him through their emotions; make him their friend, lover and confidant. He will be whatever they wish him to be because he loves them just as much as they love him. What they must strive for is a perfection of their love, which is ultimately what Nammalvar, Akka and Jayadeva are all writing about. The world may interfere in their relationship with their god, but they must leave the world behind and immerse themselves totally in love. It is then that god becomes the lover and the devotee the beloved, and the secular love of man is transformed into the divine love of god.

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