

## INTRODUCTION

Primarily bhakti is the loving adoration of some person by others, but secondarily it is the deep, affectionate and mystic devotion for some personal deity who is the principal object of worship to his devotees (bhaktas). The Bhakti Movement which started in Tamilnadu in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. C.E., perhaps, was one of the radical socio-religious movements challenging the caste system and claiming for a world of love and selfishness. According to Havell, *“Bhakti comprehends all the three cardinal virtues-faith, hope, and charity. Dr. Grierson, summarizing the aphorism of Sandilya, says that “it is not knowledge, though it may be present in them. It is simply and solely affection devoted to a person, and not belief in a system. There is a promise of immortality to him who ‘abides’ in him. A wish is selfish; affection is unselfish. It is not a work, and does not depend upon an effort of the will. The fruit of ‘works’ is transient; that of bhakti is eternal life. Works, if they are pure are a means to bhakti. To be pure, they must be surrendered to him; i.e. the doer must say, ‘whatever I do, with or without my will, being all surrendered to thee. I do it as impelled by thee. Good actions, done for the good results which they produce in a future life, do not produce bhakti, but are a bondage.”*<sup>1</sup>This paper tries to analyze the lives of some of the early bhakti poets in Tamilnadu and Bhakti Movement. By this paper I intend to examine how bhakti has dealt with caste and gender as a new movement. Also this paper studies the Chola bronzes to understand the importance of these poets. Commissioned by the Imperial Cholas, the Chola bronzes reflect the lives and customs of the time. Because of the popularity of these works I am also trying to argue about the influence of bhakti poems and poets on their making.

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<sup>1</sup> E.B. Havell, ‘The Ideals of Indian Art’, Indological Book House, Varanasi, 1972. p107.

Kosambi gives one of the earliest examples from the Upanishad on personal devotion where Indra says, *“Know thou Me alone; this indeed do I deem man's supreme good—that he should know Me. I slew the three-headed Tvastra, threw the Arurmagha ascetics to the wolves, and transgressing many a treaty, I pierced through and through the Prahladyans in the heavens, the Paulomas in the upper air, and the Kalakanjas on this earth. - Yet such was I then that I never turned a hair. So, he who understands Me, his world is not injured by any deed whatever of his : not by his killing his own mother, by killing his own father, by robbery, killing an embryo, or the commission of any sin whatever does his complexion fade” (Kaus .Brah. Up. 3.2)*<sup>2</sup>. Indeed one of the earliest religious schools centering upon a personal god is that of the Bhagavatism. According to epic and puranic tradition Bhagavatas (devotees) worshipped Vasudeva Krishna. This religious cult was designated as proto-Vaishnavism by historians and it has proved decisive in the origin of Vaishnavism in the North India.

Regarding the origin of bhakti in the later period Romila Thapar notes, *“The Bhakti sects....arose at various times over a span of a thousand years in various parts of the subcontinent. They were specific in time, place and teacher but were limited by the language which they used. They did not evolve out of some original teaching or spread through conversion; rather, they arose as and when historical conditions were conducive to their growth often intermeshed with the need for particular castes to articulate their aspirations. Hence the variation in belief and practice and the lack of consciousness of an identity of religion across a sub-continental plane. Similarities were present in some*

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<sup>2</sup> , D.D. Kosambi, 'Myth and Reality' (Malayalam); (ed) P. Govindapilla, Rajan Gurukkal, R. Bhasurendra Babu; Mythri Books; Trivandrum; 2006; pp 63.

*cases but even these did not lead to recognition of participation in a single religious movement.*"<sup>3</sup>

H.S. Shivaprakash believes that bhakti is the first and greatest pan Indian literary and cultural movement which traveled across languages and regional barriers<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore A. K. Ramanujan observes bhakti as "*a great, many-sided shift [which] occurred in Hindu culture and sensibility between the sixth and ninth century.*"<sup>5</sup>

### **THE ORIGIN IN TAMILNADU**

This movement had its origin in the 6<sup>th</sup> c CE Tamilnadu and the major participants in this movement a group of saint-poets, known as the Nayanmars and the Alwars, the former the devotees of Siva and the latter, the worshippers of Vishnu. Both were popular gods in South as well as in North India, and became the most powerful deities in Tamilnadu. Complementing this fact is the widespread movement of two sects- Vaishnavism and Saivism. Their glory was inhibited for a long time by the two heretical religions- Buddhism and Jainism. But by the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> c C.E., Sisir Kumar argues Brahmanism and its puranic gods appeared with a new splendor and started asserting themselves in the religious realm of TamilNadu.<sup>6</sup> These saint-poets created a new corpus of devotional poetry of supreme literary achievement.

In the earlier centuries of TamilNadu, Buddhist authors and monks enjoyed royal patronage under the rulers of Kalabhra dynasty. They followed a religious policy of anti Brahmanism during their regime. Buddhism and Jainism flourished during this period.

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<sup>3</sup> Romila Thapar, "Syndicated Moksha?" Seminar 313 (September 1985), p16.

<sup>4</sup> H.S. Shivaprakash, 'Transmutations of Desire and Power in Bhakti Expressions' International Conference on Dravidian linguistics, CIIL, Mysore, 2005. p 1.

<sup>5</sup> Norman Cutler, 'Tamil Bhakti in Translation', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 111, No.4 (Oct-Dec 1991), p 768.

<sup>6</sup> Sisir Kumar, 'A History of Indian Literature: From Courtly to the Popular', Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005. p 27.

They were also intolerant towards the Tamil concepts of literature chiefly the *Aham* form of poetry and arts like music and drama and the religious beliefs of the inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> At last Kalabhras were defeated by Pandyas, Pallavas, and Chalukyas of Badami ending three hundred years of religious persecution. There was an atmosphere of religious harmony before 6<sup>th</sup> c. C.E. among devotees of Siva, Krishna, Vishnu and others. The situation begins to change and it was reflected in the strong touching bhakti and the expression of a profound hate for Buddhists and Jains. They engaged in public debates with the Buddhist and Jain monks which included performance of miracles. Significantly, the saints started traveling from temple to temple, singing and dancing with their devotees. And slowly it became a mass movement and the activities of Alvars and of Nayanmars is identified as the Bhakti movement.<sup>8</sup>

### **BHAKTI LITERATURE**

After a close analysis of the Bhakti movement, Manavalan observes that the contemporary society of Tamilnadu did not call the body of literature as Bhakti literature or the movement as Bhakti movement. It was only during the period of the later Cholas it came to be known as Bhakti movement. According to him Bhakti literature means poetry caused by or dealing with a human emotion called Bhakti; it does not simply designate any eulogy or praise as one.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore he lays down the characteristics of Bhakti poems, they are:

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<sup>7</sup> A. A. Manavalan, 'Bhakti Movement in Tamilnadu', 'Dimensions of Bhakti Movement in India', (Ed) H.M. Marulasiddaiah, Akhila Bharatiya Sharana Sahitya parishat, Mysore, 1996. pp 75.

<sup>8</sup> Sisir Kumar, 'A History of Indian Literature: From Courtly to the Popular', Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005. p28.

<sup>9</sup> A. A. Manavalan, 'Bhakti Movement in Tamilnadu', 'Dimensions of Bhakti Movement in India', (ed) H.M. Marulasiddaiah, Akhila Bharatiya Sharana Sahitya parishat, Mysore, 1996. pp 73-74.

1. It is, at least most part of it, occasional in composition, the occasions being more or less similar.
2. It has a definite end in view which is a more socio-political than literary.
3. It has a distinct and uniform structure, though the anthologists have classified them differently in terms of their religious principles or priorities.
4. It is choric in character and hence most of this body of poetry is sung attuned to patterns of popular music.
5. It is historical in that the period and the places of composition have imposed temporal and spatial dimensions on these poems. That is to say it is a movement of literature.
6. In view of this successive ideologies that governed the movement, the earlier compositions are protestant in tone and hence socio-political in aim whereas the later compositions are more spiritual and persuasive towards psychic participation in the blissful experience.<sup>10</sup>

These poems were canonized in the later periods and played an important role in Vaishnavite and Saivite traditions. Tamil, vernacular language, was used in the bhakti poems in order to speak to the lay man instead of Sanskrit. The bhakti literature produced in Tamilnadu comprises of three important books- *Tevaram*, *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*, and *Srimat Bhagavata*.<sup>11</sup> Using Subramaniam's example, Shivaprakash

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<sup>10</sup> A. A. Manavalan, 'Bhakti Movement in Tamilnadu', 'Dimensions of Bhakti Movement in India', (Ed) H.M. Marulasiddaiah, Akhila Bharatiya Sharana Sahitya Parishat, Mysore, 1996. Pp74-75.

<sup>11</sup> The first two works are in Tamil and the third in Sanskrit. *Tevaram* is a collection of anthologies written by the triumvirates of Bhakti literature: Sambandhar, Appar and Sundaram; compiled by Nampi-Antar-Nampi during the period of Rajaraja Chola. *Nalayira Divya Prabandham* is an anthology of all the twelve Alwars compiled by Nathamuni or Ranganatha Muni. *Srimat Bhagavata* was composed in the 10<sup>th</sup> c, C.E. Sisir Kumar, 'A History of Indian Literature: From Courtly to the Popular', Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005. p30.

argues that the practices of both Saivite and Vaishnavite are indebted to *Aham* and *Puram* conventions of Sangam poetry. Vaishnavite poetry of Azhwars use the transformation of human love-centered *Aham* conventions while the Saivite poetry of Nayanmars is based on Puram convention of praising the valor and generosity of earthly kings. Nevertheless there is constant overlap of these conventions in bhakti poems.<sup>12</sup> Cutler points out certain similarities in the poems and sectarian environments of the hostile atmosphere of Vaishnavite and Saivite sects, which is:

(1) In their hymns the saints incorporated conventions of classical Tamil poetry in both its erotic and heroic forms, and also features of the Sanskrit *stotra*, often adapting both to the more subjective tone of bhakti poetry. Vaisnava and Saiva bhakti poets also share a common repertoire of prosodic and rhetorical techniques.

(2) The saint's expression of his (or in a few instances, her) own feelings serves as a paradigm for the relationship between devotee and divinity and thus as a medium for bringing devotees together as members of a community of bhaktas.

(3) The saints and their poems are closely linked with the worship of iconic forms of Siva and Vishnu in temples and with a religious sensibility that emphasizes God's presence in particular sacred places. On the one hand, the Tamil bhakti corpus includes visual descriptions that closely correspond to particular iconographic representations of Siva and Vishnu, descriptions of ritual acts of worship, and hymns in celebration of particular temples and/or their environs. On the other hand, by the eleventh century the saints' poems were recited as part of the ritual performed in temples, a practice which continues

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<sup>12</sup> H.S. Shivaprakash, 'Transmutations of Desire and Power in Bhakti Expressions' International Conference on Dravidian linguistics, CIIL, Mysore, 2005. p 2.

to this day. Thus the saints' poems document the growth of the temple as the preeminent worship environment in the Tamil country, and they also became an important element of that environment.

(4) The saints' poems contain numerous allusions to Vaisnava and Saiva myths. Many of these are documented in the Sanskrit puranas and are widely disseminated throughout the subcontinent, but others are documented only in Tamil sources and/or are set in local Tamil landscapes.

(5) The canonized poems of the saints are spoken of as the "Tamil Veda," a designation which not only is indicative of the authority they command among Tamil Vaisnavas and Saivas, but also suggests that both sectarian traditions value, and indeed celebrate the Tamil language as a fit medium for the expression of revealed truths.<sup>13</sup> Therefore bhakti literature assimilated the Sanskrit poetic conventions along with the existing Sangam tradition. The Sangam poetic tradition went to a recession during the Kalabhra period reemerged at this moment.

## **BHAKTI POETS OF TAMILNADU**

### **KARAIKKAL AMMIYAR**

Melting in love will I cry and loudly sing  
Even my bones to melt, will I pray night and day,  
My ornament of Gold, My God and My Lord,  
Him will I prepare, eat and masticate.

-Tirumantiram.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Norman Cutler, 'Tamil Bhakti in Translation', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 111, No.4 (Oct-Dec 1991), p 769.

<sup>14</sup> A.V. Subramanian, 'Literary Genres in Tamil', Institute of Asian Studies, Madras, 1993.p 289.

These melancholic and painful lines belong to a woman poet Punithavathiar, famously known as Karaikkal Ammaiyar. Her life incidents are mentioned in the *Periyapuranam*. From her childhood she developed a love of God and studied religious literature. She was married to a rich merchant Paramadattan. The anecdote of the mango is very famous one which tells about her divine gifts and sadly reveals how her husband left her. The story goes like this, once Paramadattan handed two mangoes to Punithavathiar from his friends. She gave one to a hungry devotee of the Lord. When her husband came for lunch she served him the other one which was very delicious. He asked for the second one and she prayed to the lord. Lord gifted a mango to her which she gave it to Paramadattan. He found it very tasty and asked where she had got it. She told him what happened and he forced her to get another one. She prayed and got another mango but this time it vanished from his hands. Scared by her divine powers he left her and married another woman. Shattered by this incident she renounced the worldly pleasures and decide to dedicate her life to the god. She shed her flesh and took the form of a demoness. She then composed her first poem called *Arpudha Thiru Andhadhi*, which evokes wonderful beauty and pathos and love that permeates these verses. She was blessed by the lord to see his cosmic dance.<sup>15</sup> Her other important works are *Irattai-manimalai* and *Muttatiruppatikarikal*. After becoming a bhakta the only solace she had in her life was the hope of salvation.

### **APPAR OR TIRUNAVAKKARASAR**

Lord Siva's praise-my wisdom lore,

Lord Siva's praise-the art I know;

Lord Siva's praise-my tongue proclaims;

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<sup>15</sup> A.V. Subramanian, 'Literary Genres in Tamil', Institute of Asian Studies, Madras, 1993. pp287-290.



Lord Siva's praise-the right way shows.

This extreme humility and selfish devotion of submitting everything to god can be seen only in Appar's poem. About his life Subramanian elaborates, "Tirunavakkarasar who is better known as Appar was a convert to Jainism who got reconverted to Saivism mainly through the efforts of his elder sister, Tilakavatiyar. She herself is counted one among the 63 saints of Saivism.

Appar has an extraordinary humility which prompts him to regard God as the master, himself being one of His humblest servants. While this master-servant relationship forms the main motifs of his hymns, there are a number of *patikams* (the genre of short verses in units of ten started by Appar) based on man-to-woman love."<sup>16</sup>

I will produce another example of his selfless devotion from his poem. His dedication to the lord was such that he was always ready to worship him.

The lord that gave us mouth to praise

A head to bow, and mind to think,-

To Him not praying, at His feet

Not laying flowers, lovely, sweet,

Why wasted I long years of life?

### **SAMBANDAR**

He was born in the first half of the seventh century when the worship of Siva was gone to obscurity. As happens with all the legends he is also associated with lore of myths. The most well known one is where as a child he was suckled by Parvati, Siva's wife and

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<sup>16</sup> A.V. Subramanian, 'Literary Genres in Tamil', Institute of Asian Studies, Madras, 1993. p108.

immediately he sang fifteen stanzas of poems. He got the epithet *Jnana* since he acquired all the wisdom by the blessings of Siva.<sup>17</sup>

He has put on the white crescent moon over his  
crested locks that bear the spreading waters;

He is the deceiver who steals away my heart so that  
the white rows of beautiful bracelets slip off from my arms;

So that this is named the one great metropolis of earth with its many cities,

He hath come to priama-puram, name renowned; our mighty one is he!

Is it not so!

He grew into an extremely talented man and a pilgrim poet. The poet-saints at that time used to travel from temple to temple with large number of devotees. Kumar says that, "The great triumph of the life came when he defeated vast number of Jains in the presence of the King Madhwa, who renounced Jainism and became a devotee of Siva."<sup>18</sup> One legend narrates his hostility towards Jains, where at his instance eight thousand Jains were impaled alive. I believe that this may be a later construction of the rival groups. He is regarded as the greatest leader of the revival of Saivism in Tamilnadu.

### **SUNDARAR**

As the name suggests he was beautiful and he was a most lovable character. He was the embodiment of the perfection of beauty of body and mind.<sup>19</sup> He, together with Appar and Sambandhar are regarded as the three powerful leaders of Bhakti movement.<sup>20</sup> He was

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<sup>17</sup> Sisir Kumar, 'A History of Indian Literature: From Courtly to the Popular', Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005. p32.

<sup>18</sup> Sisir Kumar, 'A History of Indian Literature: From Courtly to the Popular', Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005. p32.

<sup>19</sup> A.V. Subramanian, 'Literary Genres in Tamil', Institute of Asian Studies, Madras, 1993. p320.

<sup>20</sup> Sisir Kumar, 'A History of Indian Literature: From Courtly to the Popular', Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005. p32.

born in the second half of the eighth century. Even though born into a Brahmin community he married a girl from the dancing community. His second wife is from the Vellala community. Legend goes that Siva appeared in the guise of an ascetic and prevented his marriage to a Brahmin girl. Sundarar abused the ascetic. But Siva came in his dream and revealed his identity and from that instance Sundarar submitted himself to the god. Kumar observes that his hymns pulsate with intense emotion of total surrender to god, expressed in a simple style.<sup>21</sup> He calls Siva a madman (*pitta*) in his poem,

O madman with the moon-crowned hair,

Thou Lord of men, thou fount of grace,

How to forget thee could I bear?

My soul hath age for thee a place.

Venneyallur, in "Grace's shrine"

South of the stream of Pennai, there

My father, I became all thine,

Here Sundarar portrays Siva as he benevolent father figure who bestows fountains of grace on the devotee. Siva is a father for the poet. Sundarar adds a touch of humor to his poem which is rare in the bhakti genre.

Thou art half woman. Thyself

Ganga is in thy long hair,

Full well canst thou comprehend

Burden of woman so fair.

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<sup>21</sup> Sisir Kumar, 'A History of Indian Literature: From Courtly to the Popular', Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005. p33.

Here Sundarar is referring that both Siva and him have two wives. And he asks god funnily that doesn't you know to fulfill the needs of his nagging wives. He was also a staunch critic of the poets who wrote eulogies and praises for the kings.

Sing, O bards, our holy God

While with ash, in Puhalur.

In the deathless one's abode

Ye shall reign for evermore.

This poem throws light over the issue of patronage in the medieval period. Kumar argues that the medieval India resembled the feudal system of Western Europe, where the poet or the musician enjoyed the patronage of kings and chieftains. For some others the patronage came from temples. By this temples in South India burgeoned into strong financial institutes. But the living standards of these poets were highly miserable.<sup>22</sup>

### **MANIKKAVASAHARA**

Manikkavasahara's real name is not known but we know that he was born into a Brahmin family near Tiru-Vadarur near Madurai. There is an uncertainty about the early part of his life but it is clear that he was initiated to Saivism at a younger age. He spent the rest of his life wandering from temple to temple confronting Buddhists and Jains and defeating them in arguments.<sup>23</sup> *Tiruvacakam* is regarded as his spiritual autobiography. Subramanian calls it a 'Pilgrim's Progress' which is the personal record of the various

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<sup>22</sup> Sisir Kumar, 'A History of Indian Literature: From Courtly to the Popular', Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005. p34.

<sup>23</sup> Sisir Kumar, 'A History of Indian Literature: From Courtly to the Popular', Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005. p44.

phases of his spiritual experience.<sup>24</sup>The poem's of Manikka Vasahar is full of humility and tenderness and deep emotional fervor and a strong philosophical temperament. Sir Charles Eliot has praised *Tiruvacakam* saying, "In no literature with which I am acquainted has the individual religious life-its struggle and dejection, its hopes and fears, its confidence and triumph-received a delineation more frank and profound."<sup>25</sup>

The mother's thoughtful care her infant feeds: Thou  
deign'st with greater love to visit sinful me,  
Melting my flesh, flooding my soul with inward light,  
unfailing rapture's honied sweetness Thou  
Bestowest,-through my every part infusing joy!  
My wealth of bliss! O, Siva-Peruman!  
Close following thee- I've seized and hold thee fast!  
Henceforth,  
Ah, whither, grace imparting, would'st thou rise?  
Manikkavasahar's poem is distinguished by three prominent characteristics. The first and important one is the sense of sin and touching modesty which is echoed in the above poem. The second feature is the frenzied devotion for Siva.  
Ah, give thy grace to me!  
Though dost create, thou dost preserve,  
Father, I praise! My king, I praise  
Mount of Shinning crystal-praise  
Monarch to thee be praise!

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<sup>24</sup> A.V. Subramanian, 'Literary Genres in Tamil', Institute of Asian Studies, Madras, 1993. p321.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p321.

The third and final characteristic is the realization of the unfailing presence of a personal god and his relation with Him. Kumar believes that these poems are expressions of his own emotions, frustrations, sorrows, agonies, expectations, longings, and wonderful moments of joy and exhilaration.<sup>26</sup>

### ANDAL

Andal was the voice of the women during bhakti period. Andal was the adopted daughter of Periyalwar. Kumar observes that, “As a very young girl, she would adorn herself in a bridal garb and wrap around her hair the garland that had been prepared for the evening worship of Krishna.”<sup>27</sup> With the increase in her age the love and devotion for Krishna also begin to grow subsequently. She decided to marry him only. The *Divyaprabandham* includes Andal’s 173 poems among them 30 verses are famously known as *Tiruppavai*. Her poems have the beautiful description of the break of a dawn, buffalo moving out to graze and cowherds going to field call fondly their calves. She tries to recreate a Gokulam, birth place of Krishna in her poems.

We humble cowherds

eke out our days

roaming the forests,

grazing our herds.

Little learning ours,

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<sup>26</sup> Sisir Kumar, ‘A History of Indian Literature: From Courtly to the Popular’, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005. pp45-46.

<sup>27</sup> Sisir Kumar, ‘A History of Indian Literature: From Courtly to the Popular’, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005. pp48.

but ours the fortune

that you took birth

in our clan.

*Tiruppavai* presents the cowherds and rituals, and Andal depicts her as one of the maidens. The maiden who is in love with Krishna.

### CHOLA BRONZES

In the 7<sup>th</sup> c C.E. under the patronage of Chola dynasty a school of metal sculpture evolved. These images were made by the lost wax process are outstanding from an aesthetic and religious point of view. Temples were adorned with these marvelous sculptures and they also added the delight to festival processions. Sculptures of Siva, Parvati, Vishnu, and Krishna were very popular.<sup>28</sup> Apart from the representation of the deities in the Chola bronzes, a number of Tamil bhakti poet-saints are also depicted<sup>29</sup>. These sculptures transcend the spirit of bhakti poets. Importantly, the presence of this genre of sculptures indicates the popularity and the respect given to these poets by the masses. Nonetheless their caste backgrounds they are placed inside shrines and worshipped and depicted as ideal examples of devotion. Havell was so astounded by the representation of bhakti poets in bronzes that he produced some examples in his book 'The Ideals of Indian Art.'<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The most popular of these sculptures is the image of Siva as *Nataraja*. For further reading on Chola bronzes read 'The Art of Ancient India Buddhist, Hindu, Jain' by Susan Huntington (1999), 'Sensuous and the Sacred: Chola Bronzes from the South' and 'Slaves of the Lord: The Path of the Tamil Saints' by Vidya Dehejia.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Huntington 'The Art of Ancient India Buddhist, Hindu, Jain' (1999)

<sup>30</sup> E.B. Havell, 'The Ideals of Indian Art', Indological Book House, Varanasi, 1972.

A 12<sup>th</sup> c bronze image from Tamilnadu from Atkins Museum portrays Karikkal Ammaiyar in a dramatic and devotional way. Unlike the voluminous fleshy Chola bronzes she is emaciated which is shown by the absence of flesh in her body. It signifies the severe penance she undertook as part of her devotion to see Siva dancing. She is holding a pair of cymbals and is engrossed in her devotion. The absence of clothe, depiction of fangs and frail body suggest the denial of the physical beauty.<sup>31</sup>

Havell cites example of Appar from the Colombo Museum in which he is depicted as playing with hands folded and the weeding implement resting on his left shoulder. It is said that to testify his devotion he went about weeding the courtyards of temples. He was a contemporary and friend of another Saivite saint, Tiru-Gnana-Sambandha Swami.<sup>32</sup> In some cases he is also depicted as holding a pair of cymbals.

Another important poet Manikka Vasahar's 12<sup>th</sup> c. image is displayed in the National Museum of India where he is standing in a relaxed way and the artist has taken great care to emphasize the smooth contours of the body. He is holding a manuscript in his hand and blessing with the other hand. He is wearing only a lower clothe and also importantly having a flowing sacred thread which is fallen into a curvaceous way.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Susan Huntington 'The Art of Ancient India Buddhist, Hindu, Jain' (1999), p 537.

<sup>32</sup> E.B. Havell, 'The Ideals of Indian Art', Indological Book House, Varanasi, 1972 p114.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Huntington 'The Art of Ancient India Buddhist, Hindu, Jain' (1999), p 538.





Manikka Vasahar, 12<sup>th</sup> c. C.E., Tamilnadu, National Museum.

Andal, the author of *Tiruppavai*, is depicted in the sculpture as a beautiful young woman holding a parrot. Sometimes she is portrayed having a lotus in her hand. Her hairstyle, the knot placed to one side of her head, is typical of her iconography.<sup>34</sup>

Her poetry becomes so popular that by the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> c a bronze image was installed within the shrine of Srivilliputtur temple. Her poems are filled with love and desire to unite with Vishnu.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Vidya Dehejia, *Slaves of the Lord: The Path of the Tamil Saints*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, Pvt. Ltd. 1988. p129

<sup>35</sup> Sisir Kumar, *A History of Indian Literature: From Courtly to the Popular*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005. p50.

For e.g.

So great is my desire  
to unite with the lord  
who rests upon the milky ocean  
that emotions chokes my breath,  
my breasts rise and fall  
and quivers in joy

- (Nacciyar Tirumudi)<sup>36</sup>

Bronzes of Sambandar and Sundaramurti are also found. According to Dehejia' "Sambandar is most frequently depicted in a standing posture, usually uncrowned, with an empty cup held in his left hand and the index finger of the right hand pointing upwards."<sup>37</sup> He is also depicted in dancing because of the importance given to dance and song by him. And regarding Sundarar she says, "Bronzes of Sundarar. "The beautiful one," is most frequently depicted as the handsome young bride-groom, are among the most exquisite of Nayanmar images. Standing in a relaxed elegance, he holds a lotus flower in one hand and rests the other hand on a staff."<sup>38</sup>

Thus, the analysis of Chola bronzes of the bhakti poets helps us to understand the importance given to them by the community. Nevertheless their caste and social backgrounds; some of them were women too, restricted the worshippers to install and worship them. This definitely reflects the eclectic nature of the all encompassing Bhakti

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<sup>36</sup> Sisir Kumar, 'A History of Indian Literature: From Courtly to the Popular', Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005. p50..

<sup>37</sup> Vidya Dehejia, '*Slaves of the Lord: The Path of the Tamil Saints*', Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, Pvt. Ltd. 1988. p51.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p59.

movement and this will be dealt in detail in the coming section. Furthermore Havell comments, *“These saintly legends sufficiently explain the devotional spirit by which these statuettes are animated. The spirit of bhakti, the simple, child like faith which finds full and complete satisfaction of all worldly desires in the worship and service of God, is perfectly expressed in the rapt face, the unstudied reverential attitude, and in the deliberate exclusion of all petty technical details which might divert attention from the all absorbing motif. It is an art, with perfect control of technical methods, which is from its intense sincerity and depth of religious conviction makes no parade of virtuosity; it aims straight for truth, and hits the mark with effortless ease. The personality of the artist is merged in his own creation.”*<sup>39</sup>

## **BHAKTI AND CASTE**

Manavalan opines that contrasting to a literary work which emerges from a society, bhakti literature creates a society. It is unique as it has reshaped the contemporary society's ideology and continues its influence for more than three or four centuries.<sup>40</sup> In the ancient period of Sangam Age the society was stratified into some kind of social hierarchy but the notion of “upper” and “lower” caste is absent. But with the aggression of Kalabhras this fabric was broken. A rigid caste system was implanted and women were regarded as worthless. As mentioned earlier poetry, music, drama and other arts were looked down upon as something evil and disagreeable engagements. It is natural such a repressed society should break out of the chains and revolt strongly against the

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<sup>39</sup> E.B. Havell, 'The Ideals of Indian Art', Indological Book House, Varanasi, 1972. p115.

<sup>40</sup> A. A. Manavalan, 'Bhakti Movement in Tamilnadu', 'Dimensions of Bhakti Movement in India', (ed) H.M. Marulasiddaiah, Akhila Bharatiya Sharana Sahitya Parishat, Mysore, 1996. pp76.

oppressor. Bhakti Movement started its trajectory from this point. It successfully ousted the antisocial perspectives of human life. And this strong political and social movement cut across barriers of caste and creeds. Also one of the important gospels of the Nayanmars and Alvars is the meaninglessness of caste in the eyes of the lord. Therefore Manavalan believes, “Though it looks like a rising against the Jains and the Buddhists, essentially it was spear-headed towards achieving a social amelioration, besides bringing about the inevitable change in the rulers as well.”<sup>41</sup>The leaders of such a mass movement included people from diverse socio-political arenas- kings, chieftains, ministers, military-generals, farmers, merchants, potters, weavers and so on. The poets also contributed in their own way. The poet-saints wrote poem in Tamil so that the lay man can comprehend it and understand. Yocum cites an example from Manikka Vasahar’s poem which is part of his series of poems to be sung during daily mundane tasks. Furthermore he elaborates, “While bathing in the tank in the morning, while preparing an aromatic bathing compound with mortar and pestle, while picking flowers, and even several hymns for accompanying the playing of popular village games.”

O you good ladies

who have wide eyes

like the paanal flower

let us pound the gold dust

and sing

and incessantly praise

Him who is the pure clear essence

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<sup>41</sup> A. A. Manavalan, ‘Bhakti Movement in Tamilnadu’, ‘Dimensions of Bhakti Movement in India’, (ed) H.M. Marulasiddaiah, Akhila Bharatiya Sharana Sahitya Parishat, Mysore, 1996. p77.

of the sugar cane of knowledge,  
the syrup  
whose goodness is difficult to obtain,  
the honey of which we can never get enough,  
the savor  
of ripe fruit,  
the mighty King  
who enters the mind  
and remains sweet,  
the Dancer  
who cuts off rebirth  
and makes us His own [attukonta].<sup>42</sup>

If classified in the Varna tradition the movement was represented by Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Farmers, besides the scheduled castes and tribes such as *parayas*, *chandalas* and the hill tribe of hunters<sup>43</sup>. Manvalan also produces a chart which helps to understand the caste and professional affiliation of the 63 Nayanmars and the 12 Vaishnavite Alwars which reflects the confluence of the mass that constituted the Bhakti Movement<sup>44</sup>.

GROUP	Nayanmars	Alwars
Brahmins	16	4

<sup>42</sup> Glenn E. Yocum, 'Shrines, Shamism, and Love Poetry', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Oxford University Press, Vol.41, No.1, (Mar 1973), p6.

<sup>43</sup> A. A. Manavalan, 'Bhakti Movement in Tamilnadu', 'Dimensions of Bhakti Movement in India', (ed) H.M. Marulasiddaiah, Akhila Bharatiya Sharana Sahitya Parishat, Mysore, 1996. pp77.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, pp77-78.

Kshatriyas	12	2
Vaishyas	5	-
Farmers	14	1
Shepherds	2	-
Fisherman	1	-
Oilmonger	1	-
Hunter	1	-
Washer man	1	-
Potter	1	-
Weaver	1	-
Untouchables	2	1
Caste not Known	6	4
Total	63	12

But Zvelebil has countered the argument of all encompassing tradition of Bhakti Movement and she calls it a 'spiritual' democracy but not social. She has also rejected the argument that all the poets came from the depressed class and has produced statistics on this<sup>45</sup>. The figure shows that 35% were Brahmins (Sambandhar, Sundarar, Periyalwar etc.), about 35% were Kshatriyas (Kulasekhara Alwar, Tirumangar Alwar etc.), about 20% of Vella origin (Appar, Nammalwar) and about 5% are unknown origin (Andal, who was found as a baby in the garden of Periyalwar).<sup>46</sup> Even so the saints spread a new

<sup>45</sup> Somasundaram Pillai, 'Two Thousand Years of Tamil Literature. An Anthology with Studies and Traslations,' The South India Saiva Siddhanta Words Publishing Society, Madras, 1959.

<sup>46</sup> Sisir Kumar, 'A History of Indian Literature: From Courtly to the Popular', Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005. p50.

message of love and hope for the common man and the saint-poets because of their social behavior were outcaste.

And also there are lot of anecdotes circulating on Gods refusing to accept the worship and offerings of the upper caste bhaktas unless and until they embrace and recognize the lower caste bhaktas. Yocum brings in an important point, “Anyone could become a devotee of God, i.e., of Visnu or Siva, and no severance from the world was required. Bhakti was compatible with the everyday worldly tasks of the common villager. Pilgrimage, the practice of austerities, and the learning of sacred texts were not necessary. The only requirement was a mind at all times fixed on God. Perhaps this is nowhere better expressed than in four short verses by Tirunavukkaracu, a prominent Saivite of the early seventh century:

Why bathe in Ganga's stream, or Kaviri?

Why go to Comorin in Konigu's land?

Why seek the waters of the sounding sea?

Release is theirs, and theirs alone, who call

In every place upon the Lord of all.

Why chant the Vedas, hear the Sastras' lore?

Why daily teach the books of righteousness?

Why the Vedangas six say o'er and o'er?

Release is theirs, and theirs alone, whose heart

From thinking of its Lord shall ne'er depart.

Why roam the jungle, wander cities through?

Why plague life with unstinting penance hard?

Why eat no flesh, and gaze into the blue?  
Release is theirs, and theirs alone, who cry  
Unceasing to the Lord of wisdom high.  
Why fast and starve, why suffer pains austere?  
Why climb the mountains, doing penance harsh?  
Why go to bathe in waters far and near?  
Release is theirs, and theirs alone who call  
At every time upon the Lord of all.”<sup>47</sup>

### **BHAKTI AND GENDER**

The patriarchal nature of Buddhism and Jainism treated women as not worthy of salvation and women suffered a lower status in these religions. Bhakti opposed this view and women were equal partners in this movement. Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Mangayarkarasiyar, Andal were the leading figures in the movement. It is extremely significant to understand the rising of Andal to the status of a lady saint wedded to lord Krishna. It reflects the respect and the veneration shown by the community for her by raising her as the wife of Krishna. Also important is the freedom enjoyed by the women poets in this time. This can be understood from their poems and lives.

In Andal's poem Nacciyar Tirumodi she is the heroine. In another poem, mentioned earlier she expresses her erotic desire for the lord. The lines are sensuous and sacred at the same time, very similar to a Chola bronze. For Andal, Vishnu was her lover, and she wanted to merge herself in his divine love. Her worship was similar to Radha's love for

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<sup>47</sup> Glenn E. Yocum, 'Shrines, Shannism, and Love Poetry', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Oxford University Press, Vol.41, No.1, (Mar 1973), p7.



Krishna. She separated the distance between a devotee and god. Also important is to speak about the courage of Karaikkal Ammaiyar to break her marriage because of her husband's oppression rather suffering it. These were the early feminists. Her poems are filled with the description of her unattractive body. She is celebrating this ugliness through her poems and trying to overcome the physical by metaphysical. In one of her poems she describes her deep devotion and love for the lord Siva,

Ever since I was born and learned to lisp,

I have loved you. Today I have taken

refuge at your feet. Oh, radiant, blue-

Throated god of gods, when will that day

Come when you will release me from all

the agonies of life.

She is not afraid of openly stating her love and craves for the god. The adoration of the god was the way of salvation for her.

## **CONCLUSION**

By examining these poems we can understand the tectonic shift taken place in the religious and social sphere between 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Bhakti provided the impetus for this change. Either Saivite or Vaisnavite they used music, dance and singing as their medium to preach. They used Tamil poetic conventions efficiently to create poems which the lay man can relate to. Glancing into the lives of these poets will help us to understand the social backgrounds they belonged to. Many of them belong to low caste, and many are Brahmins. They always annulled caste and preached equality before god. The high castes were ousted from their communities because of the breaking of the laws of orthodox

religious stratification. Sundarar married a dancing girl and then a woman from Vellala community. This shows that they were not afraid to practice what they preached. I have added a section on Chola bronzes of these poets which enable us to understand the esteem of these poets in those times. The bronze images of Andal and Karaikkal Ammaiyar were also prominent. The status of these female poets in a patriarchal society can be understood. Also important is to understand that bhakti came as taking into all castes into its fold and it got mass following also. I would like to conclude with Yocum's remark, *"As opposed to the Brahmanical tradition, the early bhakti poets laid no emphasis on caste. One could not be disqualified from becoming a devotee because of caste. In fact, several of the twelve Alvars were of low caste and one was a woman. At least thirty of the sixty-three Nayanars were from non-twice-born sections of society, and one was even a pariah and two others were women. But it should be noted that the bhakti movement had only minimal effect in terms of social reform. Its goal was otherworldly-devotion to God, and within that context social status was deemed unimportant. It did little to alter the secular social status quo. If, on the one hand, the Alvars and Nayanars were able to develop a form of religious expression within the great tradition of the Brahmanical gods that was accessible to all segments of society and that was compatible with worldly pursuits, on the other hand, they neither tried to change the society nor alter the worldly pursuits."*<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Glenn E. Yocum, 'Shrines, Shamanism, and Love Poetry', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Oxford University Press, Vol.41, No.1, (Mar 1973), p7.

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**ART THEORY I**

**THE BHAKTI POETS OF TAMILNADU:**

**AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER, CASTE AND**

**CHOLA BRONZES.**

**SUBMITTED TO**

**DR. PARUL DAVE MUKHERJEE**

**SCHOOL OF ARTS AND AESTHETICS**

**SUBMITTED BY**

**PREMJISH**

**SCHOOL OF ARTS AND AESTHETICS**

**DATE**

**4/12/08**