

## Indian Feminism in the Light of Ammaiyar and Akka Mahadevi

**Dr. Venkata Ramaiah Gampa**

Associate Professor

Department of M.I.L.&L.S., Faculty of Arts

University of Delhi, Delhi -110007

Email - gvramaiah@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *The concept of Indian Feminism or Classical Feminism is different from the concept of Western Feminism. Some of the characters from Indian mythology are presented as independent and trend-setters. The characters like Tara from the Ramayana and Satyavati from the Mahabharata represent potent women with their voices. Similarly, female characters from the southern Bhakti movement are portrayed as strong and independent women. We can discuss this aspect from a Feminist point of view. In this present paper, Ammaiyar and Mahadevi Akka are discussed as instances of Indian Feminism.*

**Key Words:** *Indian Feminism, Classical literature, Mythology, Bhakti, Ammaiyar, Akka Mahadevi.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

The idea of Feminism started a debate about 'equality' amongst genders; now that there are many genders, the debate has varied, but starting with the crux of the idea, we can try to trace back where inequality started. Many theories describe the beginning of human civilisation depending on myths and facts. Talking about facts, one theory which the basis of today's discussion of science and other studies is that, given by Charles Darwin and myths altogether are a more bottomless ocean to dive in. On the one hand, this reflects the ever-changing nature of nature itself; on the other hand, it describes how maybe concepts as deeply rooted in us as religion, patriarchy or Feminism, for this matter, became indispensable in human nature. Regardless, the time has always shown us how significant concepts, ideas, and theories have degraded their ways to extinction and how little topics or discussion or even mention of thought had amplified their way to becoming so intrinsic in human society that it became hard to imagine one without them. Feminism in modern times seems amplified and hence entangled in its manner where it has excess to a broader range of issues today than ever but also has too many interpretations like what it stands for and what it stands as. Here let's try to detangle it and start to understand the basics.

In India, the idea of Feminism can be read along the same lines while discussing the equality of women folks or empowering women. Still, it is also very different in context, time, acceptance( by both men and women ), etc.

Let us start by understanding the position of women in India since the time we know it.

### 2. Position of Women in India: Pre-Vedic, Vedic and Medieval Southern India:

#### Pre-Vedic Period :

The earliest source of Indian history is believed to be the Pre-Vedic period. According to developed concepts /theories, India's society during the Pre-Vedic period was matriarchal.

According to historians from the south, Pre -Vedic period was before Aryans came to southeast Asia. Aryans with them brought class division and hence the division of labour, which was no more choice based. Without class division, societal equality existed based on professions and gender equality. Many scholars who had tried to study Pre-Vedic society had concluded that women's position was equivalent to men's. Society back then is expected to be simple in terms of conduct. The workload was majorly divided into food and sustenance. Either gender chose to take up jobs not because they knew a lot about biology back then as we know now but based on who could handle the job better naturally, which turned out that it fitted to man better to hunt and women better to gather—time amplified this to something as more significant as it became work titles for each gender permanently. Theories and myths further emphasised it, calling it to be naturally actual authentic language development be anything between proper and doable. Still, the primary discourse was about general struggles, not man's or woman's work. According to a famous belief widespread, mainly southern Indian ancient society, i.e. Pre-Aryan society was matriarchal, which in belief and exercise still exists.

### Vedic Society:

Vedas are the oldest texts. These are stories that majorly depict stories and are unfiltered sources of history. We can read that women during the Vedic period were marked by the migration of Aryans who, with them, brought a four-fold varna system and such division of power not only economically but also gender-wise. Vedic society evolved with the idea of power. Now when people knew to fulfil their basic needs, they wanted more. This began with the idea of capturing, which no sooner became the concept of *Rajya* (Kingdom or Power). Men took up the physical role of guarding, managing and expanding territories. At the same time, women fell into positions of assistance like helping in the field and managing household jobs so that men could do their work though it was not forced at first. No sooner were these titles naturally expected to be accepted by both genders. This is where we can start studying the bifurcation of power and roles regarding gender, etc.

We must understand the difference between gender and varna system discrimination and their respective impacts. Vedic society was partial in giving more importance to women, whom they glorified as a goddess of the house. It was another critical factor that centuries later was seen as one of the reasons for the suppression of women. If we look into the texts available to us and try to draw an image of society from their perspective and not from the contemporary one, they lived peacefully with the structure of society; everything was so general that raising a question was never in the picture. Another reason for this can be read that from all the information we got from texts, there was no significant major discrimination as such; any which existed was because of either the godification of women or because of the efficiency of either gender for doing specific works or the major was four-fold varna system.

Daughters during the Rigveda period had funeral rights, and property rights, too, in case they had no brothers in some other societies where no such right was given to women instead to their husbands. Even the concept of marriage was different from what our modern minds have expected it to be.

### Medieval Southern India:

The position of women was degraded gradually all over India for many reasons. But during the Bhakti moment in the medieval period, we can see a stream of self-awareness mainly among a few women poets. The present paper shall try to discuss two prominent women saint-poets, i.e. Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Akka Mahadevi, from South India and how Feminism can be analysed from Indian perspectives.

### Karaikal Ammaiyar:

When we see Feminism through the prospect of history, we aim to find out stories about characters (female or not) who realised the worth of females and, despite giving up to societal pressure or general customs and hence reacted out of the box to do "what they want" and not "what they should". According to society, in her situation, Karaikal Ammaiyar was supposed to be restricted in her household and explain to every spectator what happened and why and how she was not responsible for whatever happened with her husband. From what can be expected, she was either a good woman or blamed as a witch (if the great court of the audience was not satisfied with her reasons). She was to be with her husband or be miserable without him. What ever we had discussed so far, all the judgements were given in the hands of everyone except herself. Our protagonist instead chooses to do what she likes.

Ammaiyar is said to be one of the Namayanmars who devoted their lives to Lord Shiva and spread Shaivism. She lived in Karaikkal, Tamilnadu, during the seventh. Her hagiography is found in Sekkizar's *Periya Puranam*, written in the twelfth century. She had written four works, i.e. "Arputattiruvantati with 101 verses; Tiruvirattai Manimalai with 20 stanzas in ventaand Kattalaik Kalitturai; and the two Patikams called Tiruvalankatu Mutta Tirupatikankal with 11 verses each and probably wrote the very first Prabandha literature" (Elaine Craddock, *The Anatomy of Devotion: The Life and Poetry of Karaikkal Ammaiyar*. P.5).

The story of Ammaiyar is unique in hagiographical tradition. Dhanadatta and his wife had no children for a long time. After worshipping Lord Shiva, they had a girl named Punitavati. She grew up to become a devotee of Lord Shiva. Punitavati's father arranged her marriage with an established trader, Paramadatta. A trader had to travel for long days. One day. He sent two mangoes to his house for dinner, which his wife received. Later that day, a Shaiva devotee visited her; he was starving. Not having prepared a meal by then, she offered him a mango which he received and left. While enjoying the meal, Paramadatta asked for the mango he had sent earlier.

Lord Shiva gifted her a mango. Having consumed one, he asked for more. The confused wife asked for her Lord's help and prayed to him. Paramadatta, having consumed the mango, was astonished by the taste of it and hence asked his wife where she had got it from. He knew that it could not be the mango he had sent. Punitavati told him everything, only for him not to trust her story, for which he asked her to show how Lord gave her the mango. She repeated the process, and Paramadatta was shocked when she received one in her palms right before his eyes. She transferred the fruit to him, which disappeared from his palms. Having witnessed all this, he was left astonished. He realised that his wife was not ordinary and that it would only be a sin for him to hold the title of her husband. One day,

he informed Punitavati that he was leaving for the Pandya dynasty for trade. He left for the same and reached the Pandya dynasty. He married other women who bore him a child too.

To many minds who might consider this story superficially underline the topic of Feminism, we first need to decode the type of society we are discussing. The female member considered an honour of the family is age-old; Punitavati likewise carries the burden of her husband's name. Any lady who would like to choose for themselves would not do it because that might harm their spouse's or father's reputation. Our protagonist chose without bounding herself to such limitations. Generally, ladies might let the issue go only to bear the societal blames or taboos; instead, she chose to reverse the effect, and thus We can also read it in lines of revenge, such as it would be more humiliating for Paramadatta to listen to society blaming him for his wife's actions and in this way Punitavati choose to take up this path to fulfil her vengeance. \_

The theory of beauty is confined to women who are bound to look or behave in a certain way to be accepted by society on various levels. Even after being aware of this very prominent nature of society, she willingly loses her beauty to gain power over social norms and likewise challenges them. Her choice of renouncing her beauty would make her face the cruelty of society, and knowing all that, she made such a demand from her Lord, who could have granted her husband back if she had wanted. Still, she chose never to pine or depend on those men or any man, which makes her choice worthy of standing out.

Ammaiyar is a prominent figure during the bhakti movement. It was believed that no human with its body and flesh could reach god; only pure souls could. Punitavati received the honour of being titled 'amma' by her lord shiva and was among the only human who could reach Kailash in body and flesh. This is symbolic that primarily gods do not have a gender bias. We can compare this conclusion as a happy ending to the success story of Punitavati, who began her journey by making odd choices, being determined and stuck to it, thus getting to where she always wanted to be and thus becomes the right choice for women to learn from. **More importantly, only when one chooses to take action can one expect to succeed. Let's read this in simple lines of materialism.**

#### **Akka Mahadevi:**

Mahadevi or Akka Mahadevi is a Veerashaiva saint from Karnataka who lived in the twelfth century. She composed several Vachanas in the Kannada language. There are different versions of Akka Mahadevi's hagiography. A Jaina king Kaushika was the ruler of Udatadi. The Shaivite couple Sumati and Nirmalashetti had no children for a long time. After visiting several Shaiva temples, Sumati conceived and delivered a girl child. They named the child Mahadevi. She grew up as a bright girl with unsurpassed beauty, a devotee of Chenna Mallikarjuna. One day king Kaushika, while returning from the ground, saw Mahadevi sitting in front of her house. Upon that sight, he fell in love and informed his ministers that he wanted to marry Mahadevi. Ministers approached Nirmalashetti and informed him of the king's decision. Mahadevi's parents, Nirmalashetti and Sumati, got scared initially but informed their daughter of the king's decision. Mahadevi declined the proposal, saying that the king was a non-Shaivite. Mahadevi was a devotee of Chenna Mallikarjuna from her childhood and decided to marry only him, not any human.

Kaushika, upon learning of Mahadevi's decision not to marry any earthly husband, was immediately disappointed and ordered them to 'offer her anything that she wants or bring her by force to me.' Again, ministers went to Mahadevi's home to inform them of the king's order. The parents of Mahadevi knew that if they refused, they would be put to death. Dreading by the situation to come upon her parents and to save them, she decided to marry the king. But she had three primary conditions that the king had to agree upon before they were married. The conditions were that he should not interrupt her in her worship of Shiva, touch her without her permission, and allow her to serve her guru as she likes. She said that should king Kaushika violate the three rules, she would leave the king and the palace. King accepted her conditions, and eventually, Mahadevi married king Kaushika and lived with him as his wedded wife. However, Mahadevi devoted her full-time to Lord Shiva's worship while Kaushika eagerly awaited her. Kaushika visited Mahadevi's place several times but was completely submerged in her Lord's worship and serving her guru. Kaushika, frustrated, even ordered Shaiva gurus to be stopped from entering the palace. One day Kaushika entered his wife's room only to be disappointed that she was in puja again; he, being drunk, lost his patience and tried to embrace her, interrupting her Pooja. She tried to protect herself. However, physically strong Kaushika undressed her forcefully. Post this traumatic episode, and distressed Akka Mahadevi then announced that she would immediately call off all her wedding vows given for the fact that the king had violated all the three promises he had agreed upon before marriage and hence violated her body that was dedicated to Lord Shiva, left the room. She threw away her clothes and modesty. From there, she moved to Kalyana Pattanam, the centre of Virashaiva saints. In Anubhava Mantapa (the halls of experience), Allama and Basavanna ran a school for kindred spirits. The Anubhava mandapa head Allama did not accept her at once. A remarkable conversation ensued between the sceptic and love child, becoming a catechism between guru and disciple. (Ramanujan, A.K. speaking of Shiva. P. 112). There was a dialogue between Allama Prabhu and Mahadevi on several religious issues and gods. "When Allama asked the wild-looking woman for her husband's identity, she replied she was

married forever to Cennamallikarjuna. He asked her the obvious question: 'Why take off clothes as if you could peel off illusions by that gesture? And yet robe yourself in tresses of hair? If so free and pure in heart, why replace a sari with a covering of tresses?' Her reply is honest":

Till the fruit is ripe inside, the skin will not fall off.  
I felt it would hurt you  
if I displayed the body's seals of love.  
O brother, don't tease me  
needlessly. I'm given entire  
into the hands of my Lord  
white as jasmine."  
(Ibid. p. 112)

On listening to her views on various issues, the mandapa head was convinced, and she was accepted into the Shaiva saints company. After spending some time there, she moved towards Srishailam at the suggestion of Allama Prabhu and others. She experienced several things on her journey. She had written numerous Vachanas in Srishailam. Later, she took Samadhi (buried alive) into the oneness of Lord Shiva at a young age.

### **Ammaiyar and Akka Mahadevi's Lives: Patriarchal Suppression and Revolt against it**

The saints under discussion were suppressed by their family members. In Ammaiya's life, her husband left her without information and married another woman in another kingdom. Paramadatta, as a husband, was supposed to feel happy about her great devotion. Unfortunately, it did not happen in her life. He was scared of her devotion and felt he might be under her control if he continued living with her. Ammaiya may curse him. It is a humiliation to him in the patriarchal system.

In devotional history, all women worshipped and imagined the Lord as their husbands but not as fathers. They enjoyed their love in separation (Viraha). However, when it comes to men, they worshipped the Goddess as a mother. They never imagined the Goddess as a lover lest they should get cursed or punished if they imagined her as a lover. It is a purely psychological fear.

The husbands of the saints were also scared of their wives' great devotion. They might have thought that they were an avatar of the Goddess. Therefore, Goddess should be worshipped as a mother and never imagined as a wife; because of that, when Paramadatta came to know about Ammaiya's arrival at his place, he immediately took his wife along with him to Ammaiya and fell at her feet. That is the only way to keep away from her. However, it is a punishment to Ammaiya, as it is so for any woman to live alone without her husband. Society thinks that it is Ammaiya's mistake that he left her. It has created a system that if any husband leaves his wife, it is the mistake of the woman rather than her husband's, and unfortunately, a man can marry a second time, but a woman cannot. In those conditions, the woman cannot leave the physical world. Ammaiya also followed the same method. She prayed to Lord Shiva and requested him to transform her beautiful physical body into a skeleton form.

In Mahadevi Akka's life, the patriarchal system suppressed her. The parents of Mahadevi were scared of the king's order and wanted to accept the king's decision. Though Mahadevi was not interested in the marriage with Kaushika, she accepted it for the life of her parents. There are several versions of her life story. In one version, Mahadevi's father was interested in wealth and a relationship with king Kaushika and readily accepted the proposal. Thus, because of the king and the family, she lost her freedom, spirituality, and life. Several Veerashaiva people were in the kingdom, but there was no resistance against the king's decision. Mahadevi's story tells us that Basaveswara and Allama Prabhu took the initiative to spread Veerashaivism in Karnataka. When she went to participate in Anubhavamantapa, Allama Prabhu did not accept her in the beginning and asked questions about her nakedness. It shows that though there is no class, caste and gender discrimination in Veerashaivism, there are some hurdles for women to enter Veerashaiva's Anubhava Mantapa.

### **3. CONCLUSION:**

Though women saints were suppressed more by family and society, they showed anger against the social system. It is reflected in their lives and writings. Ammaiya showed anger toward her husband and society by leaving human form and acquiring a skeleton form. She won over her husband through her decision. Lord Shiva himself called her amma (mother). It was a great honour to her.

Mahadevi, too, showed her anger by rejecting marriage and walking naked. She had broken the cultural tradition by leaving her husband and clothes. However, she explains her nakedness by saying:  
"To the shameless girl

Wearing Mallikarjuna's light, you fool,

Where is the need for a cover and jewel? (Ramanujan, A.K., 1973, 129)”

In her Vachanas, she questions society, especially males. "do breasts alone make a person a female, and a moustache, a male? (Leela mullatti, 1989, 7) She further declares, "I may be female in form, but I am male in spirit". (Ibid)

Future, she questioned the male: "she ridicules the accusations regarding woman as 'Maya' or temptation. She explains: 'if a woman is a temptation to man, so is the man to woman... temptation is thus in a person's mind and not in the sex of a person.' (Leela mullatti, 1989, 7)

Both the women poets broke the culture of writing in Sanskrit. Ammaiyar and Akka Mahadevi wrote in Tamil and Kannada, respectively. They broke the writing style also. They had written in simple desi style. Their target readers were illiterate women whose spiritual message should reach them. Women saints went beyond caste, class, and gender. Both the poetess become trend setters in Bhakti Movement for future poetess.

#### REFERENCES:

1. Elaine Craddock, The Anatomy of Devotion: The Life and Poetry of KaraikkalAmmaiyar.
2. (accessed in Google on 10/12/2015).
3. Leelamullatti.(1989).The Bhakti Movement the status of women. New Delhi: Shakti Malik Publishers.
4. Ramanujan, A.K.(1985). Speaking of Shiva. Great Britain: Penguin books.