



Avudai Akka of Chengottai

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It was a cold January afternoon in 1946. A perturbed questioner, Mr. Joshi, said to Bhagavan, “I am a beginner. How should I start?”

Bhagavan replied in his characteristic way, “Where are you now? Where is the goal? ... the Self is not somewhere far away to be reached. You are always that...”

This prompted Lokamma, a lady in the audience, to sing a Tamil song that Bhagavan immediately recognized as one by Avudai Ammal.

Bhagavan then reportedly said, “Mother used to sing this song very often. This repeats the very same thing we have been talking about now...”

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Bhagavan continued, “Avudai Ammal has composed a great many songs. They are very popular in those parts [Madurai and other nearby districts]. Some of them have been published. Still, so many remain unpublished. They have been handed down orally from generation to generation, mostly through women, who learn them by heart, hearing them from others and singing them along with those who already know them.”¹ Some years ago, as I randomly browsed through Tamil books at the Shivananda Ashram Library, Rishikesh, reputed for its range of rare books in English, Tamil, Sanskrit and various regional languages, by sheer accident — and to my immense good fortune — I came across an old and brittle book of songs composed by Avudai Akka, this great woman Vedantic seer of the eighteenth century. The text left me electrified. Never had I come across works by any self-realized woman seer so driven to communicate the powerful Vedantic truths that lead ordinary mortals to the path to liberation.

It took me some time to come to terms with Akka’s simple, direct, uncompromising, intense and profound songs. They are composed in simple spoken Tamil, carrying the Advaitic message of *sarvatmabhava*, (Oneness of Being) and the eternal bliss of final liberation. Anyone familiar with even colloquial Tamil can access these powerful utterances. Akka’s poems are public songs that address Tamil women as a community. Her song *Vedanta Pallu* was published as early as 1896 by Sarada Vilasa Publication in Tamil Nadu. In 1910, further attempts were made to publish her work. In 1953, a major endeavour was made by A. Venkatarama Sastri to personally collect some songs from widows of Chengottai (Akka’s birthplace) and print them. Many more extant songs were later collected by Gomathi Rajankam who sporadically published them in the Tamil spiritual journal *Sri Ramakrishna Vijayam*. Swami Nityananda Giri of Gnanaanda Tapovanam, Tamil Nadu, has published most of Akka’s songs under the title *Chengottai Shri Avudai Akkal Padal Tirattu* (2002).

¹ Mudaliar, Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, 2002, pp. 95-97.

For over two hundred years, Akka’s songs were sung, circulated and preserved for posterity by women, especially widows, who gained immense solace, comfort and knowledge from the lyrical compositions, and from the awareness that the sage herself had undergone the grim life of a child-widow prior to initiation by her guru. Akka explains the terse metaphysical truths of Vedanta in a simple yet unique way, using familiar motifs rooted in the daily activity of the women of those times.

Who was Avudai Akka? What took her to the great teaching of Advaita? Gomathi Rajankam, a prolific Tamil writer on spiritual issues, spent an extended period in Chengottai and other nearby villages gathering information about Akka’s life and songs from the local women. The following brief account of Avudai Akka’s life draws upon my conversations with an erudite scholar and school headmaster, Mr Janardhan, a resident of one of the *agraharams* in Chengottai village. I have also drawn from Gomathi Rajankam’s introduction to the work *Chengottai Shri Avudai Akkal Padal Tirattu* (2002).

The name ‘Avudai’ is the Tamil form of Gomati Amman, the presiding goddess of the temple Sankaran Koil, some 40 kilometres from Chengottai. This massive temple is dedicated to Shiva, his consort Gomati and Shankaranarayanan. Akka was born into an orthodox Brahmin family of the Chengottai *agraharam*, and her parents raised her with love and care. In keeping with tradition, she was married off at a very young age to a neighbour’s son; so young as to not know who her groom was, her formalised relation to him, or what marriage itself implied. Soon there was weeping in the house, and when she asked about the cause of the gloom and tears she was told that the neighbour’s child had died. Her immediate reaction was, “Why cry so much for a boy who has died in another house?” With her first menstruation she was initiated into the numbing rites of widowhood, such as tonsure, breaking of bangles, mandatory white sari, and relegation to a dark interior room, unending chores, and lifelong stigmatisation as an inauspicious woman. She was inconsolable at the thought that such claustrophobic subjugation was to be her destiny.

MOUNTAIN PATH

The famous scholar Tiruvisainallur Shridhara Venkatesa Ayyawal, who belonged to the tradition of *namasankirtan*, was invited by the then king of Travancore to conduct the worship of Shiva on Shivaratri day. The master set out with a group of disciples, walking from Kumbhakonam. On the way he passed through Chengottai, and was welcomed by the brahmins of the *agraharam*. As he passed Akka's house, where the threshold was neither swept clean nor decorated with the customary *kolam* because of the inauspicious presence of the child-widow, his legs became transfixed. He stood there singing the name of God. Akka flew out of the house like an arrow leaving the bow of a deft archer, fell weeping at his feet and begged him to save her from her fate as a widow. Ayyawal compassionately told her not to worry but to come to the riverside *mantapam* in the evening to receive initiation.

The onlookers were outraged at Akka's audacity, and pushed her back into the house. They confronted Shridhara Ayyawal and rebuked him for encouraging the child-widow, saying that she was not eligible to receive any initiation from anyone, much less from a saint.

Ayyawal is supposed to have retorted, "If she is not eligible, then no one in this village is eligible for anything. Desire to know the truth is the only criterion for knowledge, and not the nature of embodiment, male, female, widowed or married."

Unhappy at this reply, the brahmins of the *agraharam* threatened Akka's parents with dire consequences if their daughter obeyed Ayyawal's instructions. Heedless of all this, Akka managed to escape the house in the evening, went to the *mantapam* and received the Upanisadic *mahavakya* from her guru. Needless to say, she was ostracised from the *agraharam*, but the master allowed her to accompany him to Travancore. The women of the palace objected to a young child-widow being part of his all-male retinue. But Ayyawal insisted that Akka was a *jnani*. He demonstrated this publicly by making her perform the Shivaratri worship. The king provided ceremonial golden *bilwa* leaves for the *puja* that Akka performed with great concentration. The next morning she collected the golden leaves along with the faded flowers and cast them all into the flowing waters of the nearby river. The fact that Akka made no distinction between



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Mantapam where
Akka received diksha

ordinary flowers and priceless golden leaves was proclaimed by Ayyawal to be an instance of her absolute dispassion.

Akka is supposed to have lived near her master by the holy river Kaveri for many years, experiencing the supreme Advaitic truth. She began singing songs about this experience of sublimity. Her state of deep *samadhi* is legendary. Once, while meditating on the Kaveri bank, there was a flash flood; many of Iyyawal's disciples ran for their lives. Akka, however, stayed totally oblivious to her surroundings; reportedly the surging river piled mud around her in a circular heap, forming an island so she could continue her meditation uninterrupted.

Akka was called an *unmattha* (one who wanders like a madwoman), spiritually intoxicated; she composed her songs while in this state. Her lament *Anubhogaratnamalai*, composed when she heard of the passing away of her master Ayyawal, stuns the readers with the heart-wrenching intensity of its pathos. A few women devotees, probably widows, attended to her when she was in the state of divine inebriation; they followed her, learnt her songs and passed this treasure on to other women. Slowly her songs became known in every local brahmin household. There may have been a time, perhaps, when the women of all brahmin households in Tirunelveli district sang her songs.

The story about Akka's departure from the world claims that she told her three intimate disciples to accompany her to Kuttralam; and when they all climbed the cliff by the Shenbaka *aruvi* (waterfalls) she gestured to them not to follow her further. She walked on, never to return. Her disciples waited for a long time and then searched for her, but there was no trace of Akka or her remains. All that was left was the priceless legacy of her songs, which were taught to younger women and thus kept in circulation.

I offer here a translated excerpt of Akka's song *Paraparai Kanni*.

Worshipping and offering flowers to Him,
Who emerged from the pillar,²

² This refers to one of the incarnations of Vishnu who took the form of half-lion, half-man to save his devotee Prahlada. See Pandeya Ramtej Shastri (ed.), 'Sri Badarayana Vedavyasavirachitam' in *Srimat Bhagavat Maha Puranam*, VII: 12-39 (Kashi: Pandit Pustakalaya, 1952), pp. 620-23.

I became free from ego and the three impurities,³
Paraparame.⁴

Adoring my Guru and venerating his lotus-like feet,
I performed penance to (know) my self, Paraparame. (1)

Mother, Saraswati, constantly honouring you,
I became Saccidanandam⁵ itself, Paraparame.
The restless mind that surged like incessant waves,
Now rests unmoving in bliss, Paraparame. (2)

The gigantic tree stump of ignorance uprooted,
And devastated,
I stood as conscious witness,
As all-encompassing space, Paraparame.
With the weapon of Self destroying the ego⁶
I attained the indivisible state, Paraparame. (3)

³ Akka uses the Saiva Siddhanta term *mummalam* or 'three passions', i.e., those generated through ignorance, action and pride.

⁴ This is also the title of the song. Akka's passion and intensity is affirmed throughout the autobiographical composition. The song is addressed to the *Paraparam*, the Absolute Being that transcends the duality of both *param* (Supreme) and *aparam* (non-supreme). The Tamil saint Tayumanar, probably Akka's senior contemporary, has also composed *Paraparakkanni*, a widely-read work. This address to the Absolute is used to describe the spiritual journey of the author as well as to detail the nature of the world and its illogical social norms. While Akka uses the *Paraparakkanni* to express her spiritual attainment, she also relentlessly and powerfully criticizes the oppressive prevalent brahminical value systems that she understood well from personal experience as a child-widow.

⁵ Satchitanandam, or existence, knowledge and bliss, is the nature of the non-material Self that, even though present in the body, remains unaffected by it. According to Advaita Vedanta, this is the essential nature of one's self; however, we identify ourselves with the composite body-mind-intellect, mistaking this to be the self. This persistent fundamental error is what creates, reinforces and perpetuates existential suffering.

⁶ The knowledge of the higher Self annihilates the ego-generated illusion of regarding the transient and defective body-mind complex as our true Self. Hence knowledge of the Self is a weapon that destroys the ego and its creations.

MOUNTAIN PATH

Understanding the Truth through the tortuous grief of the heart,
And from the words of the Master,⁷
I lost the mighty force of both sin and merit, Paraparame.
Having annihilated the series of interminable births,
Severing the entanglements,
I crossed the city of delusion,⁸ Paraparame. (4)

Swimming across the ever-flowing ocean of birth and death,
And ascending the shore,
I became timeless eternity, Paraparame.
Diving deep into the ocean of sorrow, reaching the other shore,
I shunned shame and disgrace,
And abandoned births, Paraparame. (5)

The idle gossip, falsity and delusion of the world disappeared
And I became like the sky
Vast, indivisible, Paraparame.
All the scriptures I had read became tattered and
Worn out like an old cloth,
While I became shoreless and immeasurable infinity, Paraparame. (6)

Renouncing the self-conceit of 'I am the body',
I understood 'I am That',
And I stood forever mute and resolute, Paraparame.
One glimpse was enough to recognise
the treacherous ocean of *pravritti*,¹⁰ as I stood
As the beacon light
To those on the path of *nivritti*, Paraparame. (7)

⁷ Probably this is a reference to Akka's tortuous early widowhood and the subsequent arrival of the master who initiated her and gave her teachings on Vedanta.

⁸ Akka here uses the term *mayapuri* (the city of delusion).

⁹ Giving up the false knowledge 'I am this form' gives rise to the knowledge 'I am That', where there is a recognition or discovery of the true nature of the Self.

¹⁰ *Pravritti* is the path of indulgence, relating to worldly attainments. *Nivritti* is the path of the renunciation of worldly pursuits.



The Banyan tree behind the Mantapam

The idols no more alluring, the three *gunas* hammered to *nirguna*,
 The desires resolved,
 I became forever exultant, Paraparame.

Those immersed in *nada* and *bindu*¹¹ and other cosmic details
 Will never know this omnipresent Being, Paraparame. (8)

While wide awake I slumbered (to the world),
 As though in deep sleep,
 Thus liberated from pollution and purity, Paraparame.
 On arriving There, anger and desire destroyed, I was alone,¹²
 No-one to talk to, Paraparame. (9)

The (three) states¹³ and their false support now having perished,
 I remain the witness
 Ever alone and one, Paraparame.
 After the demise of the six enemies¹⁴
 I conquered death, Paraparame. (10)

Explain how the Infinite goes wandering
 As though enclosed in six measures of length,¹⁵ Paraparame.
 Like celestial beings enjoying sense-pleasures,¹⁶

¹¹ *Nada* is the first movement of Siva-Sakti towards movement. The term is also used for ovum and sperm. *Bindu* is the undifferentiated point which is ready to manifest as the universe.

¹² With the attainment of the non-dual Absolute Self there is nothing more to be achieved; there is nothing other than the Self present everywhere. Hence Akka's declaration: "I was alone, none to talk to."

¹³ According to Advaita, the states on which we rely in this world for all existential transactions are three: waking, dreaming and deep sleep. We cannot conceive of a world or of social involvement in any mode other than these three.

¹⁴ The six enemies are passion, anger, covetousness, delusion, pride and hatred. With the destruction of the six enemies, one becomes immortal.

¹⁵ Perhaps Akka is evoking the paradox of the Infinite assuming human embodiment and moving about subject to physical limitations.

¹⁶ Celestial beings, such as Indra, are believed to be perpetually in search of sensual experience.

I too wandered for a while,
 But then seeing the Truth I stood still, Paraparame. (11)

Feeding the hungry, feeling content,
 I became sated, Paraparame.
 Silencing the mind, becoming one with every other,
 I now rejoice in the spring of my Being,
 Paraparame. (12)

Father, mother, daughters and sons became
 A crowd in the market place,
 Just like a herd is no more than a number
 For the cowherd, Paraparame.
 Just as an object slips from the palm of a sleeping man,
 despondency slid away from me, Paraparame. (13)

Ignoring the rivers venerated by the uninformed fools,¹⁷
 I dived deep into the perennial river of the Self, Paraparame.
 Did the crazy crab, the bulky whale, frog, tortoise,
 All attain liberation thus,¹⁸ Paraparame. (14)

When the house called the body became
 Another object (worthy of rejection),
 I forgot the cows, calves and relatives, Paraparame.
 The delusions of *jati-linga* (caste and gender) gone,
 I set my eyes on and worshipped
 the *jyoti linga* (engulfing light), Paraparame. (15)

¹⁷ Akka is referring here to the ritual of bathing in holy rivers like the Ganga or Kaveri.

¹⁸ This verse satirises the religious belief that bathing in holy rivers will bring about liberation. Akka points out that if this were indeed the case, all amphibious creatures would automatically attain moksha.

As the lower doors closed, the middle one opened,
The upper door¹⁹
Became great Space, Paraparame.
That Truth became all forms, and all forms became me,
I knew that “every form is but Your”,
So I became compliant, Paraparame. (16)

In the centre of the upper region I raised the *dhvani* OM,
Lingering alone, I became the melody OM, Paraparame.
Through worship, at the very core of breath,
I was initiated
Into the sublime by Manonmani,²⁰ Paraparame. (17)

II

Oh men! You lament *ecchil-ecchil*,²¹
But there is no place without *ecchil*, Paraparame.
The forms of gods are *ecchil*,
The honey is the *ecchil* of the bee,
And is not all nourishing mother’s milk also *ecchil*,
Paraparame? (18)

¹⁹ This refers to the three chakras: the *muladhara* at the pelvic region, the *anahata* at the heart and *sahasrara* at the cranium. The *muladhara* is activated for base sexual propensities; the *anahata* for the intensification of exalted emotions like devotion to the Supreme; and the *sahasrara* for the final beatitude. All spiritual explorations is made possible only with the closing of the lowest chakra and the opening of the middle chakra. The final union with the Absolute is enabled through the highest centre.

²⁰ Manonmani is the name of Sakti the consort of Sadasiva in South Indian Saivism. In the Tamil Siddha systems, Manonmani is the supreme goddess who reveals the truth of alchemical transmutation. Hathayoga texts such as *Gheranda Samhita* posit Manonmani as a state of transcendental bliss. See Rai Bahadur Srisa Chandra Vasu (trans.), *Gheranda Samhita* VII, 14-15 (Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1975), p.58.

²¹ *Ecchil* is pollution caused by saliva, anything defiled by contact with the mouth, the refuse of food, leavings, excrement, urine, semen, the residue of sacrificial oblations or pounded rice offered in pots, etc.

The *ecchil* of the fish is in the holy waters,
the holy Brahmins who dive into rivers are *ecchil*,
Are not (pecked) fruits the *ecchil* of parrots, Paraparame?
The *ecchil* of the insect bores and blights the coconut,
The excreta of little cats is everywhere, and I know
That space too is covered by *ecchil*, Paraparame. (19)

The *nadam* is *ecchil*, the *bindu* is *ecchil*,
the four Vedas of the Brahmins are *ecchil*,
Is not the tongue that chants the Vedas *ecchil*, Paraparame?
The macrocosm and the microcosm, the worlds,
are all withdrawn into *ecchil*.
Do the dogmatic, frenzied religious men now even dare
To open their mouths to complain, Paraparame? (20)

While their mouth and body are *ecchil*,
Simply washing their feet every now and then,
How will they be cleansed,²² Paraparame?
Only the Lord, the Truth is not *ecchil*,
Because that Light can never be expressed
through language²³ Paraparame. (21)

I thank Smriti Vohra for her editorial help.

Many of Avudai Akkal’s songs are found in the personal notebooks of elderly women. If any reader is in possession of Akka’s songs or essays, kindly contact the author at the following email address. kanchana237@gmail.com This is to enable us to gather and preserve all her songs for posterity. ▲

²² Akka is satirizing the customary practice of washing the feet before entering the house, as the feet might have become polluted by *ecchil*.

²³ The Supreme Self is beyond language, image, and metaphor, beyond the realm of symbol, beyond all discourse.