

# Mysticism and Madness: Hindu Women Saints

Vijaya Ramaswamy  
Jawaharlal Nehru University

*Mysticism and Madness: Hindu Women Saints looks at the phenomenon of what society perceives as irrational behavior on the part of saints, both male and female. While there is an underlying connectivity in the 'unusual' behavioral pattern of saints across cultures and boundaries, my presentation will observe and focus on what has been termed mystical or incomprehensible tantamount to 'mad' behavior of many of the women saints within the broad trope of Hinduism.*

Trances, visions, speaking in many tongues, irrational social behavior including the discarding of clothes have been widely interpreted by psychoanalysts as a psycho-pathological condition. However, para-psychologists are increasingly looking at the grey zone that blurs the rigidly held distinctions between madness and spirituality. Stanislav Grof in his remarkable book *Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death and Transcendence in Psychotherapy*, published in 1985<sup>1</sup>, goes beyond these neat divides between psychiatry and spirituality to take a fresh look at the phenomenon of "spiritual emergence." To quote Grof:

*In principle, Western mechanic science tends to see spiritual experiences of any kind as pathological phenomena. Mainstream psychoanalysis, following Freud's example, interprets the unifying and oceanic states of mystics as regression to primary narcissism and infantile helplessness and sees religion as a collective obsessive-compulsive neurosis...The great shamans of various aboriginal traditions have been described as schizophrenic or epileptic, and various psychiatric labels have been put on all major saints, prophets, and religious teachers. While many scientific studies describe the similarities between mysticism and mental disease, there is very little genuine appreciation of mysticism or awareness of the differences between the mystical world view and psychosis...These psychiatric criteria are applied routinely and without distinction even to such great religious teachers of the scope of Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, Sri Ramana Maharishi or Ramakrishna.*

(Grof: 1985: 334)

There is a long and arduous path that lies between the stage of a spiritual novice and the ultimate state of transcendence where all boundaries of caste, class and sex get eroded and the distinctions between rational and irrational behavior, between sanity and madness get blurred. This study looks at the special place held by 'divine madness' in the spiritual realm and mysticism as the language of unintelligibility which spiritual figures use to shatter the liminalities of political and social authority.

It is in relation to the spiritual path rather than spiritual goals that one has to situate the whole issue of gender and spirituality. Canonical exclusions, patriarchal controls and biological and physical limitations have made this path far more difficult for women than it is for men. I shall endeavor to argue in this presentation that recourse to 'madness' and 'mysticism' were two of the most important ways in which women challenged authority whether patriarchal or

political, and transgressed social boundaries in their quest to fulfill spiritual goals. I would like to clarify at the onset that this is not a phenomenon exclusive to woman saints since the 'unmaththa' ("mad") male avadoota (naked saint) is equally well recognized by society for his deviant behavior.

This presentation looks at the conjunctions and disjunctions between the domain of spiritual emergence and the morphology of madness as well as the phenomenon of mysticism in women saints.

A variety of meanings can be attached to the term 'spirituality.' They can range from occultism, possession (which may or may not be ecstatic) and shamanism, to the highest levels of asceticism, mysticism and transcendence. In the present context, all these possible dimensions of spirituality will be taken into account. Religion as "established faith" however excluded from the spiritual spectrum because of its links with the community, society and cultural-ritual specificities in contradistinction to 'spiritual emergence' which is essentially individualistic. This is however not to say that religion and spirituality are two mutually exclusive categories since spirituality very often may emerge out of religion as its most exalted expression.

Mysticism, a closely related dimension of spirituality, is a phenomenon that cuts across time, space and religions. Mysticism in simple terms has been defined as the immediate feeling of the unity of self with God. Mysticism, going beyond religion, aspires to an intimate union with the divine (Underhill in Woods: 1980:26-41). This union has 'love' at its core. The mystic Plotinus defines the Absolute in terms of the icy method of negation (similar to the Vedantic 'neti' 'neti', 'not this, nor that'). But in speaking of the mystical ecstatic experience, in contrast to the 'frigidity' of his definition he describes the 'veritable love, the sharp desire' and appeals to the experience of fellow mystics who have 'caught fire, and found the splendour there.'

## **The Feminine and the Irrational in the Spiritual Domain**

The 'feminine' has a very special place in the spiritual realm. Devotion itself is portrayed in the form of '**virah**,' the separation of the woman from her beloved. In the Nayaka - Nayika bhava, the individual soul (jeevatma) is almost always feminine and the supreme soul (paramatma) is masculine. Since this intense spiritual urge which imitates the sexual urge can come only if one is a woman (according to a particular ontological construct), it is fairly common to find male saints like Kabir in the north, or Nammalvar, Tirumangai Alvar and Manikkavachagar in the south, gendering themselves as feminine in the bhakti mode. The identification of woman as body-centred and the close association of unbridled sexuality and desire with the feminine is again essentially a male epistemological construct.

This paper explores the myriad ways in which the spirituality of women saints forms an interface with varieties of psychosis such as possession, hysteria, schizophrenia, and even insanity.<sup>2</sup> How important and complicating a factor gender is in woman's journey along the spiritual path was made clear to me by the saintly lady Mathioli Saraswati who lives in Chennai. Her behavior in her childhood and youth was perceived by her parents as being abnormal. This included non-eating or overeating, either insomnia or excessive sleep, the tendency to shun company, the inclination to bathe too often complaining of excessive body heat or the contrary tendency to go without a bath for days altogether etc. Her entire behavior was perceived as one of deviance or of mental imbalance and she was taken to various sages in search of a cure till the seer of Kanchipuram, Chandrasekhara Saraswati, told Mathioli's parents "Leave her alone. Hers is a state of divine madness."<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the history of women's spiritual history, saints like Bahina Bai and Meera had to face humiliation and hostility for the same reason. Women could respond to their spiritual calling only by risking their reputation and being termed deviant or mad. Meera loudly proclaimed that dancing with anklets on her feet and keeping company with (holy) men, she had given up shame.<sup>4</sup> In our own times, Andavan Pichchi Amma (pichchi means mad in Tamil) told me that her husband had locked her up in her room since her spiritual behavior seemed like a classic case of madness. It was once again the seer of Kanchipuram Sri Chandrasekhara Saraswati who told the exasperated husband that his wife was not 'pichchi' or 'mad' but 'Andavan Pichchai:' literally 'The Gift of God.'

A spiritual female was therefore, almost by definition 'deviant' 'hysterical' and a rebel. This set her apart from a spiritual male who could function to a large extent within the established religious and cultural mode.

In their external manifestations psychic disorders can appear strikingly similar to divine madness or the state of God intoxication. It is significant that many of the women saints have been labelled as 'mad' — Meera 'divani', Lalla 'mats' etc. although their condition would be better understood as a state of inspiredness rather than madness. Maragatham Ammal was called Andavan 'pichchi' ('pichchi' in Tamil means mad). Anandmayi Ma, one of the greatest women saints of all times, was a matronly dignified Bengali who spent two years doing cartwheels in her front yard, unaware that her sari had slipped from her waist. Even in her old age Ma, in a state of 'bhava' could be seen turning cartwheels in a blissful mood but in complete oblivion of social norms! It was however well recognised that hers was a state of "god intoxication" rather than insanity and her acts of divine madness only increased the reverence of society towards her<sup>5</sup>.

Anandmayi Ma was very often found in the ecstatic condition. Her disciple told me that during her ecstatic moments, Ma, who was otherwise an orthodox Bengali widow, would insist on wearing bridal clothes and jewelry. When Swami Sitaram Onkarnath, a revered male saint, asked her why as a widow she still continued to wear sandals she asked him, surprised, "Am I a widow?" Possession in the case of Andavan Pichchi Amma<sup>6</sup> is however unique. In her fiftieth year, her dying body was penetrated by the spirit of Pinnavasal Svamigal, the male disciple of the nineteenth century mystic Sadasiva Brahmendra. Male possession of a female body as in Amma's case has led to biological problems for her. However, it has also given her an in-depth knowledge of Vedanta and the Upanishads, which Amma as an illiterate wife had no acquaintance with. Similar instances of bodily possession have been postulated in the case of Shankaracharya as well as Tirumoolar Nayanar. In the instances of Anandmayi Ma and Andavan Pichchi, possession (although they represented two very different kinds of possession) was of a transcendental quality and in fact distanced them from all social bonds.

Simulated trance, ecstasy or possession, which is often a stock in trade of charlatans as also miracles which characterise some low-level spirituality, raises the question whether possession or ecstasy or trance can be regarded as 'spiritual' manifestations? A recent study by Mary Hancock titled 'Sainthood Careers Among South India's Urban Middle Classes' (Man: V-25: No.3: 1990), which dubs them as 'spiritual technicians' is a case in point. However, my present study, despite my awareness of the wide gulf that lies between spirituality and spiritualism manifested in 'possession', nevertheless deliberately situates ecstasy, occultism and possession in the range of 'spiritual' experiences. Trances and ecstasy, it is, I think, instructive to realize, have been at least as characteristic of well-known saints and mystics as they have been of dubious spiritual careerists. In medieval Europe Christian mystics and visionaries like Joan of Arc were burnt at the stake as 'witches' since Christianity failed to distinguish between

witchcraft and divine trances. Joan of Arc was tried in 1430 for practicing witchcraft since she claimed that she was obeying the commands of visionary voices. Juliana of Norwich and Theresa of Avila among Christian women saints, Rabia in Sufi Islam, Lallesvari of Kashmir and Karaikkal Ammaiyar among the Bhagavatas and Anandmayi Ma in our own times, constantly went into trance or ecstasy, beheld visions and heard unseen voices. The Russian woman mystic Pelagia was also referred to as 'the divine fool Pelagia<sup>7</sup>.' These manifestations have been equally common among male saints like Chaitanya and Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

Since both spiritual technicians and truly spiritual persons share manifestations that are strikingly similar, it becomes important to bring together possession, ecstasy, occultism and clairvoyance under the overarching concept of spirituality, which includes both mysticism and transcendence. Many mystics look upon clairvoyance, clairsaudience, spiritual healing (shamanism) etc. as early stages of spiritual evolution, which are best ignored if an aspirant wants to achieve salvation or transcendence.

The most interesting interconnection between 'irrational behavior and spiritual phenomena was made by William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, first published in 1902<sup>8</sup>. Here he distinguishes between higher and lower forms of mysticism. The lower form of mysticism comes very close to schizophrenia and insanity and he terms this "diabolical mysticism. In contradistinction, mysticism in its most exalted form is reflected in abnormal social behavior accompanied by highly metaphorical, mystical language. The statement by William James is worth quoting:

*The same sense of ineffable importance in the smallest events, the same texts and words coming with new meanings, the same voices and visions...the same controlling by extraneous powers...It is evident that from the point of view of their extraneous logical mechanism, the classic mysticism and these lower mysticisms spring from the same mental level, from that great subliminal or trans-marginal region of which science is beginning to admit the existence, but of which so little is known.*  
(William James: 1958: 326)

In terms of its external manifestation, schizophrenia and spiritual mysticism bear an uncanny resemblance to each other. In both, the individual experiences herself and the world about her in a manner distinctly different from other members of civil society. Her behavior is often socially inappropriate and strange, and both incomprehensible as well as unacceptable to 'others.'

## **The Naked Saint**

One of the strongest manifestations of this socially unacceptable behavior is the practice among some mystics to discard clothes and roam naked. While Buddhism codifies this practice in its sectarian organization of the Digambar saints, Saiva ascetic orders like the Naga cults lay emphasis on 'being naked' with neither possessions nor social behavioral patterns like shame or self-consciousness. While male monastic orders like the Digambar monks or the Saivite Nagas excluded women on the grounds that they were incapable of shedding their body awareness, it was precisely in the context of nakedness that spiritual women made their most powerful statement. The fourteenth century Kashmiri saint Lal Ded who was addressed as "Lalla Mast" meaning "The Mad Lalla," danced naked and when admonished by her father-in-law that men

were staring at her, Lalla is said to have remarked: “Where are the men, I see only sheep around me.”<sup>9</sup> She sings in her *Vak*:

*Lalla, think not of things with are without,*

*Fix upon thy inner self thy thought.*

*So shall thou be freed from doubt*

*Dance then, Lalla, clad but in the sky*

*Air and sky, what garment is more fair?*

*Cloth, says custom [but]*

*Does that satisfy?*

(Bazaz, Prem Nath: 1959: 133)

Lalla’s flagrant violation of social norms led to her alternate veneration or abuse by different sections of Kashmiri society. When she was walking or dancing naked on the streets in a semi-conscious state, a local cloth dealer was sought to have her abusers driven away, and offered her a piece of cloth. Lalla cut it into two equal lengths and placed each length on either of her shoulders and went on tying knots on either side when people prostrated before her or when they abused her. In the evening Lalla went back to the cloth dealer and asked him to weigh both the lengths of cloth and to his amazement they weighed exactly the same. Lal Ded is said to have smilingly told him that both praise and blame were equal to her<sup>10</sup>.

This same combination of social transgression and spiritual transcendence is visible in the twelfth century Virasaivite saint Akka Mahadevi, who’s only covering for her body was her long hair<sup>11</sup>.

Akka Mahadevi justified her nakedness by saying:

*To the shameless girl*

*wearing Mallikarjuna’s light, you fool, where is the need for cover and jewel?*

(Ramanujan: 1973: 129)

## **Bridal Mysticism**

Within the entire tradition of love for God, the practice of bridal mysticism transcends geographical boundaries and cuts across race, religion and caste. From St. John of the Cross and Catherine of Sienna in Christianity to Manikkavachagar, Kabir, Meera and Andal within the broad band of devotional movements in medieval India, bridal mysticism has a crucial presence within mystical traditions. Bridal mysticism, which many saints, both male and female, adopt, results in transgressive social behavior and in androgynous psychological behaviour including transvestism. Folkloristic hagiographies narrate an incident in Meera Bai’s life when she met the Gosain of Mathura. Meera was told that as a woman she could not enter the all-male *ashram* of the Gosain. Meera retorted sharply, “I see only women around me. Lord Krishna is the only male.”

The Sufi Aulia, and both the female Sufis like Rabia and the male Sufis like Habib Al Ajami or Hasan of Basra, wrote erotic love poetry on the divine. In Christianity, Mechthild of Magdeburg described her amorous encounters with her heavenly bridegroom; Catherine of Siena showed the wedding ring her spouse Jesus had given her, and St. Theresa of Avila spoke of her wounds of love.

It is necessary to add that bridal mysticism cuts across gender divisions and male saints also regard themselves as the brides of the Lord. When male saints adopt the path of mystic love to

attain union with the godhead, they often resort to transvestism. Therefore, although the language of erotic love is common to both male and female saints, men in the adoption of this mode resort to the female voice in order to assume what patriarchal society dubs the feminine qualities of erotic love and passion.

. In the context of Hindu devotionism, the best-known examples of bridal mysticism are Andal, Meera and Akka Mahadevi. Andal likens her body to a receptacle into which God has poured his molten passion:

*My beautiful lover.*

*It is as if*

*he has put clay around me*

*and poured wax into my heart.*

(Nachchiyar Tirumoli: X decad: v: 8).

Andal remained an obedient daughter of Vishnu Chittar (Perialvar). She also did not eschew the patriarchal social norm of marriage and wifehood. However **Nachchiyar Tirumozhi**, and in it specifically the **Varanamaviram**, celebrates her marriage to the presiding deity of Srirangam. Although the verses seem a girlish expression of romantic love, the sub-text reveals her subversion of patriarchic norms. She chooses to remain unmarried because to her marriage means union with the divine, not physical love and conjugal happiness, which is the desired destiny of women within a patriarchy.

The bridal mysticism of Ramana Maharshi is in line with the concept that the potent creative force alone is male and all creation is female. The *Aksharamani Mala* has quite a few verses in which Bhagavan speaks in a female voice, as the bride of the Lord.

*If after abducting me, now you do not embrace me*

*Where is your chivalry, Arunachala!*

*Does it become thee to sleep when*

*I am violated by others, O, Arunachala!*

*Enfold me, body to body, limb to limb,*

*Or I am lost, O, Arunachala!*

*Let us enjoy one another in the house of open space*

*Where there is neither night nor day, O, Arunachala!*

(Aksharamanimalai: tr. by G.V. Subbharamayya).

The state of union with the divine is expressed by both men and women saints in erotic mysticism. The imagery of erotic mysticism in women saints seems however to be more powerful than in male saints.

A verse from the *vachana* of Akka Mahadevi illustrates this point:

Akka Mahadevi writes in one of her *vachanas*:

*I love the handsome one:*

*he has no death*

*decay or form*

*no place or side*

*no end, nor birthmarks.*

*I love him, O mother, listen,*

....

*So my Lord, Chenna Mallikarjuna*

*is my husband.*

*Take these husbands who die,  
decay, and feed them  
to your kitchen fires!*  
(Ramanujan: 1973:v:283:134)

In another vachana that uses mystical imagery which is terrifying in its starkness and in its total tone of defiance, Akka Mahadevi writes:

*On a frame of water, raising a roof of fire,  
Spreading the hailstones for the bridal floor-bed,  
A husband without head,  
Married a wife without legs,  
My parents gave me to an inseparable life,  
They married me to Lord Chenna Mallikarjuna”*  
(Tipperudraswami: 1982: 222-23)

Along with Akka Mahadevi, Ayadakki Lakkamma, a married Shiva Sharane in the Virasaivite movement, provides sexually explicit examples of the sati-pati (wife-husband) relationship in the language of bridal mysticism:

*When the seed is falling  
on the face of the blossom  
can there be a back and front  
to the blossoming face?  
If you forget it and  
if I realize it, can  
there be different bodies?  
When the root vanishes  
The blossom remains.  
For this union can there be  
Any other name but sati-pati?*  
(Hiremath: 1968: verse 89: page: 44)

The implications of bridal mysticism effect a radical alteration of epistemological constructs. The giving of oneself which comes naturally to the female is no longer a sign of weakness or dependence, which it would be within a patriarchal framework of values, but a spiritually loaded term indicating the surrender of the individual ego and the expanding of the individual self into the infinite. This idea is most beautifully expressed in one of the vachanas of Akka Nagamma:

*My body united with Chenna Basavanna  
in the field.  
My mind dissolved  
into Sanganna Basavanna's truth.  
My life-breath merged  
with Allamma Prabhu's intellect.*

*Since I have given all of myself  
to these three,  
having nothing, being nothing,  
my true dwelling place  
is the lotus heart of  
Chenna Sangayya, beloved of Basavanna.*  
(Ramaswamy: 1995)

However, the association of women with erotic mysticism is only a partial truth. Spiritual women do not necessarily fit this ideological construct, which is a creation of gender politics. Karaikkal Ammaiyar, the seventh-century Nayanar saint, rejected all gender attributes and assumed a skeletal form. Her stark compositions, which glory in the cosmic dance of Siva in the cremation ground, are far removed from erotic love and the so-called feminine passions. It is therefore important to note that although erotic love is a significant aspect of mysticism, it manifests essentially in dual mysticism and not in monotheistic mysticism, which exemplifies the state of ultimate union with the divine. In monotheistic mysticism, gender constructs are naturally transcended.

Equally, it is important to note that mysticism and mystical language in its monotheistic manifestation could go beyond the language of love, which is still within the realm of human comprehension, and into the language of unintelligible symbolisms and metaphors, what psychoanalysts would equate with the 'semiotic,' the language of 'mother desire.' In a world structured in patriarchal language, the language of love used by mystics would be equated with the 'gibberish of the mad, the retarded and the schizophrenic.'

### **Holiness, Madness, Poetry**

The language used in the state of divine communion is a language that could well belong to the realm of schizophrenia or insanity. Why did the language of spirituality have to be couched in the language of mysticism? Julia Christeva, the well-known feminist and psychoanalyst used the interesting phrase "Holiness, Madness, Poetry" in her analysis of the subjectivity in religious poetics<sup>12</sup>. The language of madness and mysticism transcends gender and the symbolic language structure. The mystical experience (in the case of both men and women) is beyond the experiential field of physical existence and thus becomes a transcendental/metaphysical moment which no language can unlock. However, the mystics, in their urge to communicate this incommunicable experience, are compelled to use the existent language structure although their vocabulary is dominated by 'the semiotic,' the pre-Oedipal language of signs and sounds rather than by the 'symbolic' language system emerging out of the socially acceptable language structure grounded in patriarchy. In this whole process of communication of mystical experiences, both male and female mystics sound mad, unintelligible and yet strangely enough, repetitive in their use of metaphors.

### **From Bridal Mysticism to Transcendental Mysticism**

Many of the ecstatic songs of these mystics go beyond the language of bridal mysticism into a realm that is wholly unintelligible. The best example of this are the abhangs of Muktabai, one of



the saints of the Maharashtrian Warkari panth and the sister of the well-known saint Jnaneshwar. She sings:

*The ant flew in the sky  
and devoured the orb of the sun;  
Here is a great miracle.  
A barren woman gave birth to a son.  
A scorpion went to the nether world  
and the sheshnaga saluted  
the feet of the scorpion.  
A fly delivered  
and the child is dhar [a bird]  
Seeing this, Muktai laughed.*  
(Sakala Sant Gatha: No.42: p.324)

In a world structured in patriarchal language, the language of mystics would be equated with the “gibberish of the mad, the retarded and the schizophrenic.”

In deeply spiritual women, ecstasy gets linked with mysticism and transcendence. South India in the late nineteenth century produced a truly great woman mystic - Avudai Akka - who is however almost forgotten except in folk memory. Some of her songs I gathered by taking them down from Tamil women (especially widows) from Tirunelveli district, who describe her compositions as songs of ‘vairagya’. Variragya is understood in common sense terms as dispassion or non-attachment but deriving from its literary Sanskrit root it means the ‘paling of the world’ proportionately as one moves towards spiritual transcendence.

The self-realized woman transcends caste, class and gender. It is precisely at the point of transcendence that spirituality ceases to be male or female, a state beyond sublimation and transvestism where the pure spirit unites with the godhead. Goggavve one of the Virasaivite Shivasharane puts it succinctly:

*When one develops breasts and braid  
one is called woman.  
when one gets mustache and beard  
one is called man.  
But this knowledge of duality  
is it male or female,  
Nastinatha?*  
(Ramaswamy: 1995)

## Select Bibliography

Daheja, Vidya. *Antal and Her Path of Love: Poems of a Woman Saint from South India*. New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992.

Hart, George. “Women and the Sacred in Ancient Tamilnadu.” *Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 32, no. 2 (1973): 233–50.

Hiltebeitel, Alf. *The Cult of Draupadi: Mythologies from Gingee to Kurukshetra*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Obeyesekere, Gananath. *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Ramanujan, A.K., *Speaking of Siva*, Penguins, London, 1973.

Ramaswamy, Vijaya. *Divinity and Deviance: Women in Virasaivism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996.

Ramaswamy, Vijaya 'Anklets on the Feet: Women Saints in Medieval Indian Society', *The Indian Historical Review*, vol. XVII, No.1-2 (July 1990 & Jan. 1991), pp.60-89.

Feldhaus, Anne, 'Bahinabai: Wife and Saint' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 1982, Georgia, pp.87-100.

Feldhaus, Anne, ed. *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Literature and Religion*, Fourth International Conference on Maharashtra: Culture and Society, Tempe (Arizona) 1991, published by the State University of New York Press, Albany, 1996.

Heesterman, J.C. 'Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer' in *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society*, OUP, 1985, Chicago University Press, New York, 1985.

Jaini, Padmanabha, *Gender and Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation on Women* (with an introduction by Goldman, Robert, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1991.

Ramaswamy, Vijaya. *Walking Naked: Women, Society, Spirituality in South India*. Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1997.

Shaw, Miranda, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994.

Thapar, Romila, 'Renunciation: The Making of a Counter Culture?' in *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1978.

---

<sup>1</sup> Albany: State University of New York Press, Suny Series in Transpersonal and Humanistic Psychology.

<sup>2</sup> A significant book, Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis, edited by Stanislav and Christina Grof (Los Angeles: 1989), discusses various manifestations of 'spiritual emergence' and the need to distinguish it from mental illness or plain faking of spirituality. The contributors to Spiritual Emergency bring together mystical, occult, and magical/paranormal experiences among which they include "spiritual" and group them under the category "transpersonal experiences" since they transcend the ordinary boundaries of individual perceptions.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Matholi Amma on 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> The composition of Meera bhai in fact begins with the words: "pag gunguru bandh Meera nacha re" (Meera danced with anklets on her feet).

<sup>5</sup> This point is discussed in an interesting essay titled 'When Insanity is a Blessing: The Message of Shamanism' by H. Kalweit in Stanislav Grof and Christina Grof edited. *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis*, Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> 'Een Pichchi Aanen' (How did I become mad), the autobiography of Aandavan Pichchai, Madras, Published by the devotees of Aandavan Pichchai, 1980.

<sup>7</sup> A hagiographical account of the divine fool Pelagia is to be found in Timothy Convey, *Women of Grace and Power: Nine Astonishing Inspiring Luminaries of Our Time*, Wake Up Press, California, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Introduction by Jacques Barzun, New York: New American Library, 1958.

<sup>9</sup> Jayalal Kaul, Lal Ded, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1972, p.15.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.17.

---

<sup>11</sup> This aspect of the naked saint and its social backlash has been dealt by me in two books — in *Divinity and Deviance: Women in Virasaivism* (OUP, 1996) in which I have discussed this in relation to Akka Mahadevi in the chapter ‘Gendered Spirituality and the Naked Saints’, pp.38 to 43 and in a more general manner in my book *Walking Naked: Women Society, Spirituality in South India* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Revolution in Poetic Language*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1984.