

Sengottai Āvudai Akkāl - Life and Works

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Introduction

In our Bhārāteeya Tradition we have had many saints and wise persons who happened to be women. In the Rig Veda, several women are recognized as Rishikas, meaning female seers or sages to whom hymns were revealed. Some prominent examples include Romasha, Lopāmudra, Apāla, Vishvavara, Ghosha Kakshivati, Indrāni, Yami and Vāgambhrini. In Tamil Nadu we have had prominent women saints like Āndaal, Avvaiyār, Tilakavati and Kāraikkāl Ammaiār. In this illustrious list we have to also add Sengottai Āvudai Akkāl, who was an advaitin and a saint from Sengottai in south Tamil Nadu. She lived in the late 17th century and the early 18th century and composed many songs with profound wisdom in simple everyday language of the people around her, which are particularly popular among the women folk in Tenkāsi and Tirunelveli districts.

Early Life of Āvudai Akkāl

Sengottai (or Chengottai) is a beautiful village on the border of Tamil Nadu and Kerala which was part of the Travancore kingdom. This was a land, where Shiva devotees were numerous and this village was known as Shivankottai, which changed over time and became Sengottai. The Harihara River flows here and the breeze blows pleasantly from the Pothigai hills. In this village in the Veerakeralavarmapuram street, which is adjacent to the Harihara River bank and hence known as Āttankarai street, a girl child was born in a house on the east side. The child was named Āvudai and grew up as a girl who loved to run and play. The name 'Āvudai' is the Tamil form of Gomati Amman, the presiding goddess of the temple at Sankaran Kovil, some 40 kilometres from Sengottai. This massive temple is dedicated to Shiva, his consort Gomati and Shankaranarayanar.

At a young age as a child, Āvudai was married to a boy in the neighbourhood as was the custom in those days. Unfortunately, soon after her wedding the boy who was her husband passed away and she was left as a child widow. Āvudai's mother and those around her gathered and cried. Āvudai stood confused and stunned. When she saw the people around her crying... she asked her mother... "Why are you all crying?"

Her mother said "The boy is dead"

She replied "If the boy from the neighbour's family is dead... why should you cry?"

The mother, who then stopped crying out of wisdom, hugged the girl. She understood the meaning of what the child was saying. The one who thought who we were to cry for this, started taking care of the child carefully from that day on. She combed the child and decorated her and made her beautiful. She also arranged for her education even though there was opposition in the village and in her family from those who thought what was the use of education for a widow who had to spend her time by the stove?

As the days passed and Āvudai attained puberty, the child, who had spent her childhood happily, was devastated when the world forced her to take up the life of a widow at a young

age. The mother cried and cried. Āvudai, who now understood her situation, spent her days in tears and grief, and somehow accepted her condition in her mind.

It was in such an environment that one day the entire village of Sengottai was in a festive mood. The villagers had decorated their houses and the streets. The elders had gathered at the gate of the Bhajanai Matham with garlands to welcome the one who was about to come, the great saint Thiruvīsainallur Sridhara Venkatesa Ayyavāl, a sage who made the sacred Ganga flow in the well of his house. The villagers were waiting for his darshan. The elders were discussing among themselves what facilities to provide him. The famous saint Sri Ayyavāl, who belonged to the tradition of nāmasankirtana, was invited by the then king of Travancore to conduct the worship of Shiva on Shivaratri day. The saint set out with a group of disciples, walking from Kumbhakonam and on the way was passing by Sengottai.

Sri Ayyavāl entered the Sengottai village along with the sounds of jhalras and bhajan songs which captivated those who had gathered. Ayyavāl stopped in front of each house and accepted the offerings given by the householders before moving on. In one house in the street there was no decoration and there were sounds of crying coming from inside the house, while there was a roar of joy all around. Those who had accompanied him moved away, thinking it was inappropriate to stand at the door of that house. But Sri Ayyavāl stood for a while at the door of that house and started singing bhajans with great enthusiasm.

As Āvudai heard the singing from inside her house, a ray of light appeared to her, whose life inside the house was in emptiness and darkness. She got up from the room and even as those who were present tried to stop her, she opened the door of the house and fell at the feet of Sri Ayyavāl, who was singing at the door. Seeing a sixteen-year-old girl in the form of a widow, Ayyavāl stopped singing. He looked at Āvudai with tenderness and said, "Child, do not be sad! Bhagavan is here. Come to the riverside mantapam (hall) during the twilight hours," and gently stroked Āvudai's head. Sri Ayyavāl's touch made Āvudai feel that the grace of the Guru had reached her at that very moment.

Even though Āvudai was forbidden to meet Sri Ayyavāl, she managed to go to the riverside hall in the evening. As Sri Ayyavāl finished his Sandhya rituals in the river and stepped ashore, Āvudai fell at his feet and worshipped him. Ayyavāl took some holy water in his hand and sprinkled it on Āvudai's head and said "Child! Open your eyes. Take me as your guru and contemplate on the Upanishadic mahāvākya that I am going to teach you. The door of wisdom has opened for you. Don't worry about the world! I will come often and take care of you. Be strong".

Āvudai's eyes opened. The wise teaching of Sri Ayyavāl made Āvudai immerse herself in the knowledge of the Self. She kept contemplating on the mahāvākya in her mind and was always absorbed in the truth of oneself. Seeing her condition, the villagers ostracized her from the society. On the orders of her Guru, she left the village of Sengottai and went on a teertha yātra.

The Self Realized Saint and Poet

Āvudai Akkāḷ spent many years with her Guru Sri Ayyavāl on the banks of the Kāveri. There are many stories which inform us of her dispassion and knowledge of the Self. Once she accompanied her Guru to Travancore where the women of the palace objected to a young child-widow being part of his retinue. But Ayyavāl insisted that Akkāḷ was a wise person and a saint.

He demonstrated this publicly by making her perform the Shivaratri worship. The king provided the ceremonial golden bilwa leaves for the puja that Akkāl performed with great devotion. 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 Āvudai Akkāl made no distinction between ordinary flowers and priceless golden leaves was proclaimed by Ayyavāl to be an instance of her absolute dispassion.

Once, while meditating on the Kāveri bank, there was a flash flood; many of Iyyaval's disciples ran for their lives. Akkāl, 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. Akkāl was called an unmattha (one who wanders like a madwoman), spiritually intoxicated; she composed her songs while in this state.

One day, Akkāl arrived at Māyavaram to take a bath in the Kāveri River during the month of Tula. A mango leaf soaked in saliva was floating in the Kāveri waters. Akkāl who was immersed in joy of the Self and was oblivious to the surroundings, took it and brushed her teeth. On seeing this the women bathing around her made fun of her. But Akkāl ignored them and walked away with a smile. On seeing this, Sri Ayyavāl, who was sitting under a peepal tree there, wrote the Bijakshara on Āvudai Akkāl's tongue with a darbha grass and blessed her. "You have attained the state of liberation. No matter where you are, karma will no longer touch you. Go to your own village," he advised.

Āvudai Akkāl returned to her village after many years. The villagers welcomed Āvudai, forgetting the old and embracing the new. They paid her respect. They accepted and admired her for her knowledge. Akkāl lived there for a long time and composed many songs. Her Advaita songs were sung by many women in the village. A few women devotees, probably widows, attended to her when she was in the state of divine absorption; 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.

One new moon day during the month of Aadi, Akkāl told her three intimate disciples to accompany her to Kuttralām; and when they all climbed the cliff by the Shenbaga 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 Akkāl 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.

Starting from Sengottai, which is on the border of Tirunelveli district, Akkāl's songs spread widely in the villages on the foothills of the Western Ghats such as Sundarapāndiyapuram, Pāvur, Sāmbhavur Vadakarai, Kadayam, Ambur, Āzhwārkurichi, Kallidaikurichi, Nāgercoil, Vadiveeswaram, Munneerpallam, and Munjirai. Akkāl's songs were the mainstay for young widows of that time. After breakfast, ten to fifteen women used to gather in the afternoon and find solace by singing Akkāl's songs.

Akkāl in her songs has used language and similes which are similar to those used by Shiva Vākkīyār, Pattinathār, Pāmbātti Siddhar and other saints before her. She has also been an inspiration to others who became familiar with her songs later.

Mahākavi Bhārathi had Āvudai Akkāl's songs as an inspiration for his Vedānta songs. Bhārathi was very interested in knowing the history of Akkāl and in her songs. Subramania Bhārathi, was deeply moved by the songs of Āvudai Akkāl while living in Kadayam, which was the village of his wife Chellammāl Bhārathi. He has used Akkāl's ideas and poetic words here and there in his songs. Akkāl's Kanni¹, Kummi², Sindhu³, and Pallu⁴ have all naturally entered Bharathi's poetic form. Like Akkāl, Bharathi also wrote explanatory verses on the Bhagavad Gita and it became a poetic reinterpretation of Akkāl's work. In that sense, Sengottai Āvudai Akkāl can be said to be the forerunner of the great poet Subramania Bharathi.

Akkāl's songs used to be sung at the Ramana Ashramam in the presence of Bhagavan Ramana. Once 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 Āvudai Ammāl. Bhagavan then reportedly said, "Mother used to sing this song very often. This repeats the very same thing we have been talking about now...". Bhagavan Ramana continued, "Āvudai Ammāl 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."

Swami Sivananda Saraswati of Rishikesh has also mentioned Āvudai Akkāl as one of the Women Saints in his book "Lives of Saints". He writes "The general belief among the devotees of the Lord is that Lord Siva Himself incarnated in this world as Sri Jagadguru Adi Sankaracharya of Kaladi; and that Mother Parvati incarnated Herself as Sri Avadayakkal of Shenkottai, apparently to prove that women, too, could attain Self-realisation even in this Kali Yuga."

Works of Āvudai Akkāl

In our tradition of knowledge in Tamil Nadu, Sengottai Āvudai Akkāl holds an incomparable place in the ranks of sages who lived a few centuries ago, like Pattinathar, Sadaashiva Brahmendrar, Thaayumaanavar, and Vallalar. She has left behind for us a variegated body of work. In the autobiographical song "Pandithan Kavi", she talks about her Guru and the secret of her initiation. Many of her songs can be set to a raga and a tāla, but some can be rendered only as viruttam or vacanam. Amongst her songs which are on self-knowledge, 74 musical works are structured in pallavi, anupallavi and charaṇa format.

¹ "Kanni" refers to a style of verse or song structure. It's characterized by couplets (pairs of lines) that employ "Ethukai" (a poetic device where the initial sounds of words in a line are repeated rhymingly). This style is particularly common in devotional songs.

² "Kummi" is a folk style song which is sung as an accompaniment to the Kummi Dance where women stand in a circle and sing while clapping their hands. Kummi songs are often about gods, festivals, or daily life.

³ "Sindhu" is a type of song in Tamil Literature which has five parts and typically has 3 lines in each part.

⁴ "Pallu" is a folk song or a patriotic song that expresses joy and happiness, often used in celebratory contexts

Furthermore, her songs, including Advaita Meijnāna Āndi, Vedānta Ammānai, Vedānta Āche Poche, Manam Buddhi Samvādam - Anne Pinne (Vedānta Sāra Prathyothirak Kummi), Soodālai Kummi, Vedānta kummi, Soodālai Kathai, Kolātta Pāttu, Vedānta Jnāna Rasa Kappal, Vedānta Kappal, Kilik Kanni, Kuil Kanni, Parāparak Kanni, Sri Dakshināmurthy Patanam, Advaita Elelo, Vedānta Pallu, Vedānta Nondi Sindhu, Jnāna Kuravanji Nātakam, Vālāmbigai Pandu, Srividya Sopānam, Anubhoga Ratnamālai, Vedānta Vandu, Advaita Thālāttu, Thottil Pāttu, and Oonjal, took on many forms and stood out in many ways. Akkāḷ also composed the Bhagavad Gita Vachanam (also known Gita Sāra-sangraham) and the Srimad Bhagavad Gita Sāram.

Akkāḷ's Kolātta songs, which beautifully expresses Advaita, is still sung today. On the occasion of Deepāvali, women and children in Sengottai Agraharams make a cow and calf image, place it in the Sapparam (A vehicle to carry idols in procession) and celebrate. They dance Kolāttam in front of the Sapparam, sing Bhajans including Akkāḷ's songs, and go to the fields in the early hours of the morning to dissolve the mulaipāri and the cow-calf images. This festival is still being held today.

Akkāḷ has also authored many folk-styled compositions like 'vēdānta kummi'. Vēdānta kummi invites young girls for a dance called 'kummi'. The song initiates the girls into 'sādhana catuṣṭaya' which prepares them for receiving this knowledge of the Self and helps remove attachment to children and spouses. This is an extraordinary text which introduces the girls to various vedāntic terminologies and concepts.

Even mundane rituals like extracting castor oil from castor seeds and the rules associated with menstruation were connected to Advaita by Akkāḷ through songs composed on them. Two long songs, Vēdānta ammānai and Śrīvidyā śōbhanam, are sung, even today during menstruation in Sengottai.

Akkāḷ simplified the terse text for women by using domestic metaphors. She explains the rigour of Vedānta through the process of producing castor oil. Castor seeds are highly poisonous. To produce the oil, the seeds have to be treated, boiled and filtered again and again. Like castor seeds you process avidya by repeatedly reasoning and then recollecting. Then you can destroy the avidya (poison) and attain vidya (oil).

Her song *Vedānta 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 Sengottai 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 Gnanananda Tapovanam, Tamil Nadu, has published most of Akkāḷ's songs under the title *Sengottai Shri Avudai Akkal Padal Tirattu* (2002).

Akkāḷ also introduced the essence of Vēdānta into the daily activities of her followers through other means. She had devised a board game for women called 'Pañcīkaraṇa viḷaiyāṭṭu' based on Ādi Sankara's Vēdāntic text Pañcīkaraṇa, which describes the Vēdānta doctrine of creation and dissolution of the cosmos. The game was played every ekādaśī by women and used to take about 6 to 8 hours to complete.

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