The Discipline of Mahādevī and Lalla:
Religious Ambiguity in the Gendering of Ascetic Female Hindu Saints

“When women saints like Mahadevi and Lalla Ded of Kashmir throw away clothes … it is also the ultimate defiance of society, the casting away of every façade…”1

“Women like Lallesvari of Kashmir or Akka Mahadevi of Karnataka walked out of an oppressive marriage and opted for an ascetic path.”2

“Saints like Lal Ded and Akka Mahadevi who walked naked and flouted established conventions, were naturally disapproved of by the medieval orthodoxy.”3

Defiant and independent. Proud outcasts. Mystics par excellence and poets unequalled. For many, Mahādevī and Lalla serve as premodern feminist role models from which strong women can draw inspiration and invoke precedent in the righteous battle against patriarchy. Indeed, their legacies today seem almost tailor-made for such purposes, and the need to confront patriarchy in all its oppressive forms—especially in religious spaces—is as important today as ever. Yet, how have we come to think of these two women from nearly a millennium ago in this way? We are all too aware that seldom (if ever) are well-known and widely circulated stories about revered figures from so long ago transparent, objective accounts of actual women and the actual lives they led. Rather, we know that popular legacies of saints have been multiply refracted and reshaped, reframed and rewritten, generations after generation to serve the needs of communities who continued to invoke them. It is tempting to talk about these saints, what they did, what their inner experiences may have been like, and—when multiple saints’ stories are brought together—whether something unique about women’s spirituality can be revealed.

3 Ibid., 237-238.
However, unless one can definitively prove that the words attributed to such figures were truly their own or the descriptions of their lives came from those saints themselves, such studies—if focused on analyzing the people and times described in the texts rather than the contexts in which the texts were produced—at best demonstrate ways in which we today can (re-)interpret for our contemporary needs stories most likely written by men for very different ends. This is not to say that such efforts are inherently flawed or futile—reclaiming symbols or attempting to use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house has been a tactic actively used by activist scholars for quite some time. However, we should be careful not to fool ourselves into thinking we can speak about or know the saints themselves through such mediated literature.

Taking such caution into account, we are led back to the questions: how have we come to think of these saints of ages past in the ways we think about them today? Why have we so often put together saints like Mahādevī and Lalla who lived centuries and thousands of miles apart? What can an analysis of the chains of hagiographical reinscription reveal about how our images of the past have been constructed? And how can those insights serve us today?

In this paper, I engage in a close textual and social-contextual analysis of two sixteenth-century hagiographical texts—one for each saint: Mahādevī in the Śūnyasaimpādane and Lalla in the Tazkirat al-ʿArīfīn. In each of these instances, the writings about these particular saints comprise but one section or chapter in the larger text, each of which is a compendium of saints. Through this analysis, I argue that the particular parallel features found in accounts of these two saints (e.g., family-relational terms being addended to their names and a constant focus on denigrating their bodies in their poetry) are a product of similar processes of (re-)inscribing narratives of the lives and/or poems of these two saints. These processes rendered potentially subversive (or at least gender-norm-challenging) female saints like Mahādevī and Lalla safe,
acceptable, and useful for the communities of predominantly male religious elite who produced these commemorative texts or for the publics/laiity to whom they ministered. Through such parallel processes narrative re-inscription, Mahādevī and Lalla’s legacies were made more similar, being shaped to reinforce the norms and power structures of the commemorative communities. However, not all traces of these saints’ potentially antinomian behavior can be erased; such drastic revisionist reshaping would seem too obvious and insulting to the saints so revered and stripping these saints of what made them unique, renowned, and popular in the first place. Thus, later hagiographers carefully retained yet reappropriated and reinscribed the potentially antinomian features of Mahādevī and Lalla’s words and legacies so that they could be redirected to serve the norms of the mainstream or male-elite communities of sixteenth-century Vijayanagara and Kashmir—communities whose gender and religious norms were indeed quite consonant, whereas Mahādevī and Lalla themselves may have been quite distinct.

**Brief Description of the Saints’ Lives**

Before beginning my analyses of two specific sixteenth-century hagiographies, I provide here a brief description of these saints’ lives condensed from many studies and an overview of how recent scholars have tended to approach them.

First, Mahādevī (a.k.a. Akkā Mahādevī or Mahādevīyakkā, i.e., “Sister Mahādevī”) lived in twelfth-century Southwest India in what are the current states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. She is revered today by the Vīraśaivas and Lingāyats, both of whom are considered by most to be Śaiva (or Śiva-worshipping) sects of Hinduism. In her youth, Mahādevī was already a committed devotee of Śiva. She was therefore profoundly dissatisfied when she was arranged to marry a non-Śaiva groom. Whether she was made to go through with this marriage is debated; however, her ultimate rejection of him led her to abandon not only her marriage and home but
also participation in any normal, domestic social life. Instead, she entered the wilderness as a wandering, naked, ascetic poet. Her life ultimately ended when in the mountain forests of Śrīśailam she attained union with her Lord Śiva.

Second, Lalla (a.k.a. Lal Ded (“Granny Lalla”), Lallamāji (“Mother Lalla”), Lalleśvarī (“Divine Lalla”), Lallayogeśvarī (“Divine Female Yogi Lalla”), or Lalla ʿĀrifa (“Lalla the Wise Woman/Female Mystic”)) lived in a region of fourteenth-century Kashmir currently claimed by both India and Pakistan but at present occupied and administered by India. Both Hindu and Muslim Kashmiris revere Lalla. While some scholars and devotees claim she converted to Islam and was a devout Sufi, most consider Lalla to have been a Hindu of the Trika Śaiva sect. Her early life is less agreed upon. Some say she too suffered in an abusive marriage before leaving both it and normative householder life. Others argue that little to nothing is known about her early life; she may very well have been pursuing ascetic isolation from the very start. The adult Lalla is said to have lived as a wandering, naked ascetic, spending her many years in austere devotion and mystical practices while periodically encountering other religious figures of her day to whom she revealed her spiritual superiority. Lalla’s legacy is almost always tied to that of Nund Rishi, the Muslim founder of the Rishi Order of Sufis; Nund Rishi claimed he was Lalla’s spiritual successor. In the volumes of poems attributed to Lalla, she expresses devotion to Śiva and an adversarial stance towards most institutional religious authorities. Some claim that at the end of her life, she knew that Hindus and Muslims would seek to honor her with the distinct funerary rites of their religious traditions. To curtail conflict between these groups, she stepped into a large pot and placed another inverted pot on top. When onlookers removed the top pot, they found only flowers. Hindus took half and cremated them while Muslims buried the other half.
Overview of Modern Scholarship

At first glance, bringing together Mahādevī and Lalla may appear to be a rather obvious and natural grouping: both are said to have been female Śaiva Hindu saints who practiced naked asceticism and produced poems of devotion to Śiva. Scholars’ urge to group them is even more pressing when one realizes that 1) the vast majority of Hindu saints are male, 2) among famous female Hindu saints, only a few practiced asceticism, and 3) almost none of the ascetic, female, Hindu saints practiced public nudity. Naked, male, Hindu saints abound, but most Hindus today would struggle to identify even one naked female Hindu saint. Those who could would likely identify these two. Furthermore, once this initial connection between these two is made, scholars identify a number of common traits beyond these broader similarities: both go by familial or family-relational terms, both cover themselves with their long hair, both consistently express disdain for the body and bodily pleasures in their poetry, and both openly and rigorously defend/champion their ascetic practices and accomplishments before male peers who challenge them—even pointedly correcting these challengers in the process.

However, trouble arises when scholars have sought to account for these superficial similarities beyond simple coincidence. One common conclusion drawn is that since Śiva is commonly considered the ultimate ascetic, then Śaivism must be predisposed towards asceticism and therefore Mahādevī and Lalla must have practiced naked asceticism because they were Śaivas. However, there are many female Śaiva saints who were not ascetics, let alone naked ones.

Both ascetics are revered today as poets. Scholars Jaishree Kak Odin, Vijaya Ramaswamy, and Michelle Voss Roberts engage a critical literary textual analysis of Mahādevī and/or Lalla’s poetry. Utilizing feminist psychoanalytic and cultural historical frameworks, they
read a particular kind of gendered female spirituality at work in their poetry that produces naked asceticism (and all the other similarities in praxis) as the embodied expression of that unique female spirituality in an otherwise patriarchal context.⁴

As compelling as these theories are, close historical analysis of the archive renders such readings strained at best. First, these scholars rely upon sources centuries removed from the saints themselves as relaying the true, authentic words and thoughts of the saints. Second, these scholars also read these sources—which themselves were written by different authors centuries apart from one another—as expressing one coherent, consistent, monovocal transmission of these saints’ vision of the world.

For example, the poetry attributed to Lalla that forms the basis of the vast majority of scholarship on this fourteenth-century saint are almost wholly based upon oral collections published in the 19th and 20th centuries.⁵ The earliest manuscripts in which we find poetry attributed to Lalla are from the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, these poems—portrayed as the authentic voice of Lalla due to pristine quality of oral tradition in Kashmir—are used as the basis against which hagiographical accounts of Lalla are tested for authenticity, and if a given hagiographical account is deemed true, the poetry is used to explain the hagiographical story about Lalla, for any behavior attributed to Lalla must be consistent with “her own words.” These methods of interpreting the meaning and significance of particular hagiographical accounts are used despite the fact that the hagiographical accounts are found in manuscripts separate—and centuries apart—from the poetry collections.

---


Likewise, scholarship on Mahādevī primarily focuses on the poetry attributed to her as the truest and foremost expression of the saint’s true, authentic self. This framework is assumed despite the fact that the vast majority of these poems are found in the Śūnyasāṁpādane, i.e., “The Attainment of the Void/Nothingness,” a massive hagiographical compendium of Vīraśaiva saints composed in the imperial court of Vijayanagara in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries—over 200 miles and 3-4 centuries away from twelfth-century Kalayana where most of saints celebrated in the compendium lived. At least in the case of the Śūnyasāṁpādane, the hagiographical accounts and poems attributed to a given saint appear side-by-side in the same text, warranting an analysis in which the two kinds of texts are interpreted in the context of one another. However, the stories and poems of Mahādevī of the Śūnyasāṁpādane are not read by most scholars literarily to unpack a character named Mahādevī who appears in the context of a larger text, the Śūnyasāṁpādane, as created by particular authors or read by particular audiences. Nor are they interpreted historically to inform us about textual production in the Vijayanagara court or the particularities of Vīraśaiva community of this sixteenth century imperial city. Rather, the stories and poems of Mahādevī of the Śūnyasāṁpādane are approached by most scholars as the stories and poems of the woman that lived centuries before, expressing her devotion, and reporting the life she lived. The flaws—and dangers—of such approaches to hagiographical literature should seem obvious, and there are certainly notable exceptions to such scholarship. However, the sheer magnitude of this kind of scholarship—comprising the vast majority of academic scholarship on these saints and the hagiographical literature surrounding them—cannot be left unremarked upon nor confronted.

---

In contrast, when the textual and social-historical contexts of the hagiographical literature are taken into account, one finds uniquely complex dynamics underlying each hagiographical account/text for each saint as well as how latter texts are conscientiously responding to previous accounts—whether it be bolstering via reiteration, reduction and expansion of different parts to alter the overall narrative arc and thus the aims of narration, or even eliminating or introducing completely new sections to contest prior accounts.

**Mahādevī and the Śūnyasampādane**

Turning now to close analyses of two specific hagiographies, the Śūnyasampādane is a massive hagiographical compendium or anthology written in the fifteenth- to sixteenth-centuries Vijayanagara court containing the life stories and poems of Vīraśaiva saints who lived in twelfth-century Kalayana and its environs. One of these saints is Mahādevī. However, neither she nor Basava—the founder of the Vīraśaivism—are the main saint highlighted in this text. Rather, the saint celebrated above all (literally first and foremost) is Allama Prabhu, the Vīraśaiva saint most known for being a wandering ascetic—albeit clothed—and widely held to be the figure upon which the jangamas ("wandering ascetic priests") and later viraktas ("militant renouncer monks") of the Vīraśaiva and Lingāyat traditions were built. So successful was this elevation of Allama Prabhu in the Śūnyasampādane and the pro-virakta community in the Vijayanagara court that composed it that A. K. Ramanujan, whose Speaking of Siva is arguably the most popular and widely circulated English text on the Vīraśaiva saints (which is also primarily based on excerpts from the Śūnyasampādane) states, “Basava was known as Ṭaṇṇa ‘elder brother’, Mahādēvi as Akka ‘elder sister’, but Allama was Prabhu or Master to everyone.”

---

7 Ramanujan, A. K. Speaking of Siva. 144
Compared to Allama’s top billing, the section on Mahādevī is the sixteenth out of the twenty-one chapters of the Śūnyasampañdane. Her chapter begins with the following verse:

How young Mahādēvi arrived
In absolute nudity, and having gained
Prabhu’s grace beyond doubt,
Was merged in Śiva: with love I tell.\(^8\)

Already this narrative of Mahādevī’s life is heavily overlaid with a particular framework previously absent or of otherwise minor importance to Mahādevī’s legacy. Nearly all Vīraśaiva saints are considered saints due to their “merging in Śiva.” However, Mahādevī is marked first and foremost by her “absolute nudity” and then the gaining of Allama Prabhu’s approval. As we shall see momentarily, these two components are deeply intertwined.

Following this initial verse, the chapter shifts to a condensed single page of prose of Mahādevī’s entire life narrative—from childhood to failed marriage to ascetic renunciation—all as a preface to her encountering the Vīraśaiva community in Kalyana, especially Allama Prabhu. The interaction between the Vīraśaiva community and Mahādevī, which constitutes the vast majority of the whole narrative, begins with Allama Prabhu sending a lesser disciple out to “greet” Mahādevī, which in fact involves his testing her by insulting her—claiming that she is not only a false renunciant and devotee of Śiva but also a bad woman due to her public nudity:

When there is tremor in the body, / Illusion in the soul, / 
What price your mind? / What price renunciation? // 
Mahālinga Tripurāntaka / Dubs you a worldling and / 
Disdains to take you by the hand / As a bad woman: hear that, fool! //\(^9\)

To this affront/challenge, Mahādevī replies:

Through joy of Linga\(^10\) I achieved / The body’s defeat; /

---


\(^9\) Ibid., 283.
By way of knowledge I achieved / Defeat of mind; //
Through God-experience I achieved / Defeat of soul; /
Donning the Light as garment, I subdued / The darkness of the senses. //\11

…

“To me who have burnt Kāma\12 to ashes, Linga is husband and you a brother.”\13

In short, Mahādevī defends her honor and status as a true devotee of Śiva by arguing a) that she has defeated her own body, desires, mind, and soul through her devotion to Śiva; and b) that now Śiva is her husband and all other men are at best her brothers.

This refutation utilizes a trope commonly found in Hindu hagiographical literature with regard to women saints. The assumption is that women are inherently excessively desirous and their desire is due to their excessive bodiliness. Innumerable scholars from the medieval period to the present have noted that this assumption regarding women is a thinly-veiled coding (or projection) of the problem of the female body—especially a nude female body—for (presumably heterosexual) male ascetics and their ongoing struggle to overcome sexual desire. This problem is solved (or at least circumvented or merely attenuated) by designating the woman saint as the wife of God, rendering her off-limits to other men. This curtailing of the dangerous desirous/desirable female body is further reinforced by designating the relationship between the woman saint and other male devotees as a brother-sister sibling relationship, stifling possible sexual relations. Of course, this amounts to reinscribing the potentially dangerous, antinomian female figure into the ubiquitous conventions, norms, and protocols of patriarchal familial social relations.

---

\10 Linga = the “mark” of Śiva represented as an ovaloid phallus. The Vīraśaivas and Lingāyats most famously bear a small black stone linga with them at all times, worshipping Śiva by praying to him while gazing upon it as it lays in the palm of their hand.

\11 Ibid., 284.

\12 Kāma = the god of desire, especially lust.

\13 Ibid., 285.
If there were any chance the lessons and implications of this initial interaction between Mahādevī and the Vīraśaiva community in Kalyana were lost on its audience, the Śūnyasampādane reiterates this interaction over, and over, and over again. It is noteworthy, however, that after this initial encounter, Allama Prabhu himself takes over the testing of Mahādevī, intensifying the interrogation in an increasingly aggressive manner. The text claims Allama Prabhu is aggressively challenging of Mahādevī to prove to all the other Vīraśaivas present that Mahādevī is indeed a fully realized, perfected saint. As the wisest guru among them, Allama Prabhu knew Mahādevī was perfect from the very start; he disputation is simply a means of allowing Mahādevī to prove herself beyond any doubt and manifest her full brilliance. Nevertheless, the protracted argument reiterates a) the challenge that Mahādevī is false due to the problems of female-body-desire exacerbated by her nudity, b) Mahādevī denigrating her body and arguing she has overcome it and its accompanying desires, and c) Mahādevī underscoring her exclusive focus, devotion, and desire for Śiva that renders all other men her brothers. Mahādevī’s denigration of the female body is given in visceral terms: as disgust, making one sick, and poisonous.

Mahādevī even confronts the possibility that these challenges may have more to do with male desire problems than female inferiority. She argues that she covers her nude body with her long hair not because she is clinging to remaining vestiges of female bodily shame but as a service to those of the Vīraśaiva community who may not have yet fully overcome their desires toward a nude female body:

Unless the fruit is ripe within, / the outer peel will never lose / Its gloss. … I covered myself / with this intent: // Lest sight of seals of love / Should do you hurt. / Is any harm in this?
Pray, do not tease me who am / In Cennamallikārjuna,\textsuperscript{14} God of gods. //\textsuperscript{15}

Finally, after spending 37 pages of this 95-page chapter on the reiteration of this argument, Allama Prabhu finally agrees with one of Mahādevī’s rebuttals. In return, Mahādevī “humbly submits” to him with the following verses:

Wherefore for me? I am / A puppet of this world, a vessel filled /
With Maya’s\textsuperscript{16} filth; / A worldly mansion by the passions torn. //
Why for this earthly house / Which leaks as through a water-pitcher’s crack? /
Is it possible to chew / The nut of a palmyra tree / If you squeeze it with your fingers? //
Whatever has been sown is soul; / Be mine the nature of the rind. /
Do you [i.e., please] condone my faults. /
You, brothers, you are yourselves / Cennamallikārjuna, God of gods!

You cut and saw and rub the sandalwood; / Does it, being burnt, refuse its scent? /
You cut and rub a piece of gold; / Does it, being heated, take in dross? //
You cut a sugarcane joint by joint, / Put it and squeeze it in a press; /
When heated, it gives sugar and jaggery; / Does it, being hurt, refuse its sweet? //
When you rake up my bygone sins / And cast them in my face, /
The loss is yours. //
O Father Cennamallikārjuna Lord, / Though you may slay me, /
I’ll never cease / To love the hand that slays! //\textsuperscript{17}

To this, Allama Prabhu replies:

The body is a woman’s form; /
The mind, one with / The spirit of the Thing. /
And yet you came down here / Because you had a reason to come, /
And this you have done! //
You have, dear sister, transcended the sense /
Of twain, in Guheśvaralinga,\textsuperscript{18} sister mine.\textsuperscript{19} //

What then follows is another 31 pages of such dialogue, now filled with exchanged poems in which Mahādevī directly praises the prominent members of the Vīraśaива with them

\textsuperscript{14} Cennamallikārjuna is the epithet of Śiva used in nearly every poem attributed to Mahādevī. A. K. Ramanujan translates this term as “Lord white as jasmine.”
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 299.
\textsuperscript{16} Maya = “deceptive illusion,” used here as an epithet for the material world.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 315-316.
\textsuperscript{18} Guheśvaralinga = “Linga (Mark/Phallus) Lord of the Cave,” Allama Prabhu’s preferred epithet for Śiva.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 317.
praising her in return. This section then ends with Mahādevī asking Allama Prabhu where she should go in order to achieve final ultimate union with Śiva, i.e., her death in Śiva, to which Allama Prabhu replies that Mahādevī should travel to the mountain forests of Śriśailam. The following 10 pages narrate their long goodbye tidings. The final 13 pages of the chapter narrates Mahādevī’s travel, search, and ultimate union with Śiva, concluding the chapter with the following verse:

Thus ends the sixteenth of the mystic discourses of the Śūnyasampādane / —chapter on Mahādeviyakka— held by Prabhu with the venerable saints. */^{20}*

That nearly the entire chapter on Mahādevī’s life in the Śūnyasampādane focuses entirely on this one interaction between Mahādevī and Allama Prabhu implies that Mahādevī’s life apart from Allama Prabhu is of secondary, or even negligible, importance. More than a third of the chapter consists of Allama Prabhu’s challenging of Mahādevī. When combined with the subsequent mutual praise between Mahādevī and the other Vīraśaivas present, nearly three-quarters of the chapter is completed. Add the final good-byes, and less than 15% of the chapter discusses Mahādevī’s life apart from this single encounter. Furthermore, Allama Prabhu is featured as the arbiter of Mahādevī’s sainthood. He is the one who challenges and then ultimately approves and validates her spiritual status. It is no coincidence then that the chapter ends with, “Thus ends the sixteenth … chapter on Mahādeviyakka—*held by Prabhu* with the venerable saints,” implying her sainthood is valid only when affirmed by Allama Prabhu.

Through this analysis, it appears that the Śūnyasampādane is appropriating Mahādevī and her life narrative to further its primary aim of praising and promoting Allama Prabhu above all other Vīraśaiva saints. How significant and distinct this framing and narration of Mahādevī’s life narrative? This question may best be answered through contrasting the sixteenth-century

\*\^{20} Ibid., 372.
Śūnyasampādane with the earliest hagiographical account of Mahādevī found in Harihara’s 13\textsuperscript{th}-century Ragaḷegaḷu. Drawing upon the excellent work of Gil Ben-Herut in his recently-published Śiva’s Saints: The Origins of Devotion in Kannada according to Harihara’s Ragaḷegaḷu (2018),\textsuperscript{21} we find Allama Prabhu among the collection of celebrated Vīraśaiva saints in this earlier hagiographical anthology. However, Allama Prabhu is a marginal figure at best in the Ragaḷegaḷu. Instead, the most extensively discussed Vīraśaiva saint in the Ragaḷegaḷu is Basava, the founder of the Vīraśaiva (23 chapters devoted to his life). Coming in second is Mahādevī (7 chapters), whereas Allama Prabhu’s life is a brief one chapter. Furthermore, Allama Prabhu’s life narrative in the Ragaḷegaḷu focuses primarily on a) his pre-birth infatuation with Surasati, a heavenly female dancer of Śiva’s divine court, b) both Allama Prabhu and Surasati being born on earth as a punishment for their desire, and c) their subsequent sensuous earthly love affair. The unexpected death of the young Surasati results in Allama Prabhu’s despair, which sends him into a life of ascetic religiosity that ultimately culminates in his union with Śiva. As Ben-Herut notes, this focus of the narrative on Allama Prabhu’s pre-ascetic sensuous life serves to highlight his humanness and thus how great his ultimate spiritual awakening is—perhaps implying that anyone with enough effort and devotion could replicate Allama Prabhu’s accomplishments.

Mahādevī’s story in the Ragaḷegaḷu is quite different as well. First, while the Ragaḷegaḷu affirms that Basava and Mahādevī are said to have composed devotional poetry, only a handful of poems are ascribed to each. In contrast, the Śūnyasampādane is primarily a collection of poems attributed to all thirteen saints described therein with only sparse prose narrative passages provided in between the poems. That many scholars today approach Mahādevī first as a poet and secondarily a saint—often evaluating the validity of hagiographical accounts of Mahādevī

against whether her poems appear to affirm such accounts—not only highlights the tremendous influence of the Śūnyasampādane on later traditions but also calls into question such evaluative methods.

However, what is most remarkable about Mahādevī’s story in the Ragaḷegaḷu is that five of its seven chapters on Mahādevī focus on the period of Mahādevī’s troubled marriage. This account presents Mahādevī as tragically oppressed: forced to marry and then to endure marriage to a non-Śaiva despite Mahādevī having been a profound devotee of Śiva from birth (or even pre-birth). Mahādevī could not endure such oppressive circumstances, so she left the marriage. Because leaving one’s husband is so socially unacceptable, she must leave normal society entirely, becoming a lonely, naked wandering ascetic, as this life was the only one left to her if she continues her devotion to Śiva. She is eventually rewarded with union with Śiva, but the entirety of Mahādevī’s post-marriage ascetical life comprises less than a chapter. Finally, in its largest contrast to the Śūnyasampādane, the Ragaḷegaḷu contains no account of Mahādevī ever visiting Kalayana let alone interacting with Allama Prabhu or other Vīraśaiva saints.

It is clear, then, that the Ragaḷegaḷu largely lacks any interest in asceticism. Allama Prabhu, the saint most known for asceticism, is a minor character, and he adopts an ascetic life only as a consequence of despair at the loss of his beloved, a loss that luckily refocuses his attention on Śiva, which in turn earns Allama Prabhu divine union. Mahādevī also adopts her famous naked asceticism only out of necessity, following the end of her marriage, when she had no other options. Thus, Gil Ben-Herut wisely asserts that Harihara’s aims in composing the Ragaḷegaḷu were, first, to tell common Vīraśaiva householders how to navigate the everyday struggles of life through their Śaiva devotion and, second, to warn the community that devotion
to Śiva is paramount. One should avoid or at least highly restrict social relationships with non-Śaivas, lest they lead you astray.

How then should we understand the drastically rewritten account of Mahādevī in the Śūnyasampādane? If we take Harihara’s thirteenth-century Ragaḷegaḷu as a baseline, or at least as representing one prominent perspective on Mahādevī and the Vīraśaiva saints centuries preceding the sixteenth-century Śūnyasampādane, some possible interpretations emerge. Since in the Ragaḷegaḷu Mahādevī is only second to Basava, the founder of Vīraśaivism, to eliminate Mahādevī from the celebrated Vīraśaiva saints in the Śūnyasampādane is nearly impossible; doing so risks alienating a significant portion of the Vīraśaiva community. Yet, keeping the life narrative of Mahādevī as it appears in the thirteenth-century Ragaḷegaḷu would work against the aims of the sixteenth-century authors of the Śūnyasampādane. Most scholars agree that the Śūnyasampādane was composed by either jangamas (“wandering ascetic priests”), the newer viraktas (“militant renouncer monks”), or a group of scholars strongly inclined towards these ascetic authorities in the sixteenth-century Vīraśaiva community. Furthermore, the sixteenth-century Vijayanagara court increasingly patronized all sorts of ascetic and monastic communities over other groups of religious authorities (e.g., householder temple officiants). Therefore, to reproduce Harihara’s thirteenth-century narrative of Mahādevī, which seems to serve as a didactic tale for common householders to maintaining devotion to Śiva despite everyday hardships, would not only promote something irrelevant to the militant ascetic lives of the viraktas (or pro-virakta) authors of the Śūnyasampādane (possibly even sidelining viraktas relevance and authority in the Vīraśaiva community), but it could also cost them their patronage from the royal court.
How could the pro-ascetic authors of the Śūnyaśampādana deal with Mahādevī if dropping her entirely from their hagiographical compendium is not possible? At first glance, the answer seems obvious. Mahādevī was already known to be a wandering naked ascetic; therefore, giving her a place of prominence in the Śūnyaśampādana could serve to bolster the authors’ pro-virakta ascetic agenda. However, prior to the Śūnyaśampādana, Mahādevī’s asceticism was a minor aspect of her life story. Therefore, to promote Mahādevī as a champion of their asceticism, the authors of the Śūnyaśampādan would need to emphasize the ascetic part of Mahādevī’s life disproportionately or even invent it entirely. Furthermore, ascetic communities in the sixteenth century were almost entirely male. It is no accident that Mahādevī’s ascetic life was conducted almost entirely alone; no cloistered, ascetic monastic community would accept a woman. Not only were ascetic communities male-dominated, they were also extremely patriarchal, often promoting certain kinds of hyper-masculinity as the ascetic ideal. Asceticism served to store and amplify virility and disciplined bodily strength for the pursuit of superhuman spiritual ends. Women were a threat to that world, both ideologically and in practice. If a woman were able to achieve the same heights of ascetic achievement as men, ascetic power based in masculinity would become problematic. Furthermore, the presence of a woman within such a hyper-masculine social group could result in male ascetics losing their discipline 1) on account of heterosexual desire that could break both their physical discipline and mental focus on the divine, or 2) desire for progeny could lead them to abandon cloistered life for that of a householder with family.

Therefore, to include Mahādevī among the celebrated Vīraśaiva saints in the Śūnyaśampādana and yet still promote the militant, masculine asceticism of the viraktas, the authors of the Śūnyaśampādana emphasized Mahādevī’s ascetic life but attenuated that
asceticism in a way that renders her no longer a) a sexual temptation or an enticement toward householder life to male ascetics, or b) an figure to be imitated by the average Vīraśaiva women. Therefore, we have in the Śūnyasampādane a narrative preoccupied with challenging Mahādevī, because of her public presentation of a naked, yet ascetic, female body. The Mahādevī of the must denigrate her female body, rendering it an impediment rather than a locus of strength and rendering Mahādevī an exceptional woman because she overcame her womanhood. The implication is that for most women such a feat was impossible. Mahādevī is rendered safe for the male Vīraśaiva community through her designation as a bride of Śiva and brother to all other men, off-limits to worldly sexual or domestic life. Finally, her interrogation ends when she humbly submits herself to the authority of Allama Prabhu—the chief male ascetic—who then validates her sainthood, models the praise she can be given, and guides her in achieving union with Śiva. The fact that Mahādevī was already a saint in her own right before ever arriving in Allam Prabhu’s presence, while acknowledged, is minimized to such a degree that one could imagine Mahādevī only achieved her true sainthood after abandoning her proud assertion that she was already a saint and submitting herself to Allam Prabhu as her guru. The lesson is submission. Thus, through the reinscription in the Śūnyasampādane, the potentially dangerous Mahādevī—as either an imitable figure of superior naked female asceticism or as simply a tragic ex-wife for whom asceticism was a necessary fall-back—is rendered safe. As a saint, she can be venerated by both male and female Vīraśaivas alike without disrupting the patriarchal structures of the sixteenth-century community.

**Lalla and the Tazkirat al-‘Arifin**

The circumstances of Lalla in the Tazkirat al-‘Arifin are differ significantly from that of Mahādevī in the Śūnyasampādane, although ultimately similar dynamics may be identified. First,
as mentioned in the introduction, Lalla is revered today by both Muslims and Hindus of Kashmir. Most identify her as a Śaiva Hindu poet-saint who wandered the fourteenth century Kashmiri countryside as a naked female ascetic. She respected both Hindu and Muslim commoners while criticizing religious authorities. She is known today mostly through her poetry, which is recited in many religious, cultural, and even political events in Kashmir. However, the earliest recorded poetry attributed to Lalla dates to the early eighteenth century or later. Similarly, while she is most commonly identified as a Śaiva Hindu, Lalla does not appear in any Hindu theological, hagiographical, or historical texts until after the eighteenth-century manuscripts containing poetry attributed to her. The earliest hagiographical texts about Lalla were written by Muslims in compendia of Sufi saints. The first of these compendia is Muhammad ‘Ali Raina’s Tazkirat al-‘Arifin (1587).  

The sociopolitical context of the Tazkirat al-‘Arifin is complex. Nevertheless, I will briefly sketch the significant elements. First, Muhammad ‘Ali Raina was a disciple of the Suhrawardi Sufi master and saint Sheikh Hamza Makhdum. By the late sixteenth century, the Suhrawardis were a well-known and respected Sufi Order outside the Kashmir Valley. Sheikh Hamza, however, was the first major Suhrawardi Sufi master inside Kashmir (he was a native Kashmiri of noble birth and was initiated by another Suhrawardi Sufi master who passed through Kashmir). Perhaps due to his family connections to the Kashmiri court, Sheikh Hamza established his base of operations (khanqah) on Koh-i-Maran hill located in the center of the capital city of Srinagar, the same hill that housed both the royal court and the royal graveyard. Hamza’s chief disciple was Baba Daud Khaki, the most prolific hagiographical writer of sixteenth-century Kashmir. Khaki’s hagiographies do not include Lalla. However, Khaki devotes

---

several of his longest hagiographies to Hardi Rishi, a Sufi saint of the Rishi Sufi Order who was a close friend and companion of Sheikh Hamza Makhdum. The Rishi Sufi Order was founded in the fourteenth century by Nund Rishi. He intentionally named his Sufi Order after the ancient “Hindu” ascetic rishi\textsuperscript{23} and declared himself to be Lalla’s spiritual successor. The Rishi Sufi Order, from Nund Rishi to Hardi Rishi, was renowned for extreme asceticism, close relationships with the hidden spiritual beings of the Kashmiri wilderness (e.g., spirits of the rivers, springs, mountains), and the miracles they could produce as a result. It is not surprising that Muhammad ‘Ali Raina (and then later Daud Khaki’s chief disciple Baba Nasibuddin Ghazi) included hagiographical accounts of Lalla among their compendia on Sufi saints of Kashmir, for those accounts traced the Rishi Sufis all the way back to the founder—Lalla’s purported protégé Nund Rishi.

Why did these Suhrawardi Sufi hagiographers write about the Rishi Order of Sufis, a distinct and potentially competing Sufi Order? One reason was the close friendship between Hamza Makhdum and Hardi Rishi. However, another motivation for writing about the Rishi Sufi Order is the emergence of asceticism as a central feature of both religious and political authority in Kashmir. The importance of asceticism in both spheres emerged in part due to the increasingly prevalent idea that asceticism led to the acquisition of spiritual powers. Through those powers, the devout ascetic could perceive and befriend powerful, hidden spiritual beings in the landscape and access spiritual masters of old who continued to contact the living in the medial spiritual planes. Both of these relationships as well as the asceticism itself (which cultivates closeness to

\textsuperscript{23} Many scholars contend that “Hindu” is a late, exogenous term for a plethora of distinct religious traditions in the Indian Subcontinent which was only adopted by those religious communities in the early modern or even modern period. Therefore, to refer to anything ancient as “Hindu” could be considered an anachronism. Furthermore, Nund Rishi, who explicitly identifies himself as a Muslim, clearly considers these ancient rishis part of his own religious tradition despite their predating the prophet Muhammad’s birth by over a thousand years. Therefore, while ancient rishis are most connected with Hinduism today, designating them as Hindus themselves is a complicated and contentious issue.
Accardi

Discipline of Mahādevī and Lalla

God) granted ascetics the ability to produce miracles. Miracles, in turn, could benefit devotees, whether commoners or nobility. Of course, for nobility, such miracles were a key resource for effective rule: the ability to produce a dense fog in key mountain passes or flood strategic river crossings was useful in war or civil disturbance. If a ruler did not secure such powers for his own use by courting powerful ascetics, enemies would use those miraculous resources against him. Because of the value of ascetics in both religious and political spheres, it is no surprise that hagiographers of the time, like Daud Khaki and Muhammad ʿAli Raina, went out of their way to claim the ascetic Rishi Sufis as their own, as doing so could attract more disciples and secure court patronage for their own Sufi Order.

This reasoning clarifies Suhrawardi hagiographical interest in the Rishi Sufis, but what about Lalla? Raina’s Tazkirat al-ʿArifin (1587) contains the earliest known account of Lalla but does not explain who she is, implying that the audience was already familiar with her. It is noteworthy that the Tazkirat al-ʿArifin was written in Persian, not Sanskrit or the Kashmiri vernacular of the time. Moreover, the text explicitly describes itself as a hagiographical compendium of Muslim Sufi saints of Kashmir. It is therefore unusual for Lalla, venerated today primarily as a Śaiva Hindu saint, to appear in the Tazkirat al-ʿArifin. We might conclude that Raina, the author of the Tazkirat al-ʿArifin, was asserting Lalla was not a Hindu but a Muslim. That is not the case. Despite the fact that she is the only saint included in the Tazkirat al-ʿArifin who was not a Muslim, Raina clearly identifies her as a fully enlightened mystic saint of the highest spiritual status before she ever encountered any of the prominent Sufis or other Muslims included in the text. Furthermore, nowhere in the text is she said to have converted to Islam, nor do any of the words she speaks imply that she was a Muslim. Neither does she utilize any terms that would mark her as a Śaiva or Hindu of any sort. Instead, her ultimate theological inclinations
or religious affiliations are left vague. Yet, she does communicate in the *Tazkirat al-ʻArifin* in ways suited to the circumstances in the story. Thus, Raina presents Lalla in the *Tazkirat al-ʻArifin* as a non-Muslim who, nevertheless, is conversant with, and useful to, the world of Sufi saints due to her incredible ascetical-mystical achievements.

What are the hagiographical accounts of Lalla in the *Tazkirat al-ʻArifin*? The section on Lalla totals less than twelve pages. The significance of these few short pages are immense nevertheless. The *Tazkirat al-ʻArifin* features eight distinct stories of Lal Ded, or Bibi Lallamauij (“Lady Mother Lalla”), as Raina calls her. Apart from six general accounts, two accounts describe Raina’s own personal, spiritual encounters with Lal Ded, who had died nearly two hundred years before Raina wrote. A summary of those eight accounts are as follows:

1. While contemplating the supremely masculine founder of the Qadiri Sufi Order, Nund Rishi encounters the naked, wandering Lalla. Nund Rishi stands to greet her. Lalla suddenly covers herself. [While it was social convention for women to cover themselves before men, Lalla had never previously covered herself before Nund Rishi or any other men.] Detecting confusion in Nund Rishi’s mind, Lalla states that when one engages in the mystical contemplation of a deceased Sufi saint, that saint in fact becomes present in one’s mind. Being therefore in the presence of the powerfully masculine Qadiri saint, Lalla felt obliged to cover herself. 

2. Despite her having spent her life in Kashmir, Lalla knew all spiritual masters of the past, present, and future and their relative spiritual rank [and would therefore respond appropriately in their presence]. Thus, when Lalla encountered the spirit of Sheikh Hamza on a higher spiritual plane before his birth, his masculinity and manliness manifested before her, and

---

24 Sheikh ‘Abd al-Qadir Gilani (1077-1166 CE)

25 This explanation implies Lalla had not abandoned gender norms, but instead held higher standards, veiling herself only in the presence of those with superior enough masculinity or spiritual status, which are inextricably linked in the *Tazkirat al-ʻArifin.*
she veiled herself just like it is done when contemplating the image of Sheikh ‘Abd al-Qadir Gilani.

2 & 4. Lalla runs out to meet the eminent Suhrwardi Sufi saint Saiyid Jalal al-Din Makhdum Jahaniyan. Showing kindness to Lalla as she prostrates before him, Makhdum Jahaniyan lifts her up and places her before him as an equal. Announcing the future coming of Sheikh Hamza Makhdum, Makhdum Jahaniyan and Lalla travel to Hamza’s future birthplace to observe the collection of stars that would appear on Hamza’s birth. Lalla then requests that Makhdum Jahaniyan join her in travels through the heavens to the throne of God. Ascending the heavens, Makhdum Jahaniyan notes that Lalla ascends further than he could. They return to Koh-i Maran hill [where Sheikh Hamza’s future shrine will be located], whereupon Makhdum Jahaniyan requests Lalla’s blessing, which she willingly bestows. In return, Makhdum Jahaniyan provides Lalla his instruction and initiation (*talqin muraqabat*) and license (*ijazat*) to teach his Suhrawardi Sufi practices to others. Before parting, Makhdum Jahaniyan foretells that Nund Rishi will be among the saints to receive instruction from her, as will the future Makhdum Hamza.

3. Lalla encounters a tiger in a forest. It is preparing to attack a herd. Seeing Lalla, the tiger abandons his plans and prostrates before her. In response, Lal Ded declares that the tiger is now a pious renouncer (*majzub*). From that point onwards he was so immersed in God that he no longer desired beasts of prey but instead shepherded them through the forest.

5 & 7. One day, Lalla appears to the author Muhammad ‘Ali Raina himself. She tells him of her spiritual interactions with his brother and Sufi master Sheikh Hamza Makhdum, although she had long since passed beyond the realm of the living [and thus must have interacted

---

26 The second and fourth stories overlap significantly, so I have summarized them together.
27 The fifth and seventh stories also overlap significantly, so I have summarized them together.
with him from or in a spiritual plane]. Fulfilling her promise to the now deceased Hamza, Lalla bestows upon Raina “the cup of desire for absorption” by which he will become the essence (‘ain) of Sheikh Hamza. Months later, in an isolated wilderness retreat, a frail woman appears to Raina and says to him, “Oh Muhammad ‘Ali Raina, are you not the brother of the Beloved of the World, Hazrat Makhdum Sheikh Hamza?” When Raina could not identify her, the frail woman reveals herself to be Lalla, Sheikh Hamza’s esoteric Sufi master, and thus Raina’s spiritual sister. She commands Raina to bring an image of Sheikh Hamza to his mind and to recite Hamza’s name in his heart day and night until she is satisfied. Raina engages for many years in this practice of “adoration of the image” (‘ashiqiyat surat) taught to him by Lalla. As a result, Raina’s heart becomes annihilated in the image of Sheikh Hamza Makhdum and, through that absorption into the essence of Hamza, Raina obtains the Reality of God.

6. Acknowledging that there are many stories about Lalla’s [lack of] clothing, Raina claims the most accurate one is that she always had a covering (sitr) unlike any mankind has. The stars remain hidden in the presence of sunlight. In the same way, Lalla did not wear the a woman’s covering (sitr-i ‘aurat), but no human has seen her blessed naked limbs.

8. Summarizing Lalla’s spiritual accomplishments and relationships with Sufi masters, Raina describes Lalla as a woman who had no equal among the greatest men of the Sufi path of her time. A saint of limitless miraculous powers and endless perfections, Lalla esoterically taught Sheikh Hamza like a Sufi master and showed him perfection of faith.

What are we to make of Raina’s hagiographical accounts of Lalla in the sixteenth-century Tazkirat al-‘Arifin? Raina depicts Lalla as a perfected mystic and ascetic saint even before her encounters with the greatest Sufi masters of her time and demonstrates her superiority to them. Her limitless miraculous powers make it possible for her to pass on spiritual teachings from
beyond the grave. Lalla thus serves as the conduit by which both Hamza and Raina obtained the Suhrawardi mystical teachings and spiritual license of Makhdum Jahaniyan, one of the most famous Suhrawardi Sufi saints. This lineage of discipleship is vastly superior to the one Hamza and Raina could otherwise claim—that Hamza simply received initiation and instruction from a lesser Suhrawardi master who happened to be passing through Kashmir in the early sixteenth century. Furthermore, arguing that Lalla was spiritually and mystically superior to even Makhdum Jahaniyan, Raina’s assertion that they obtain Makhdum Jahaniyan’s already powerful Suhrawardi Sufi teachings and license through the superior Lalla renders those teachings even more powerful due to their being touched by her own spiritual power. Therefore, Hamza and Raina’s branch of the Suhrawardi Sufi Order is thus rendered superior to all others.

The fact that Lalla was a naked ascetic woman is not lost on Raina either. Providing no background as to how Lalla obtained her elite spiritual status, Raina implies that Lalla was perfected from birth, or at least that such spiritual superiority is somehow in her essence. Thus, other women could not hope to replicate her achievements (although it is not clear whether the author Raina imagines any women among his intended audience). However, Lalla is not unsexed in this text either. Rather, Lalla being a woman is essential to other assertions Raina aims to make. For example, ascetic practices lead to the acquisition of miraculous powers as well as superior masculinity in the ascetic. Lalla, being perhaps the ultimate ascetic, wields significant miraculous powers, and it is implied that she could wander about naked due to the fact that her spiritual status (and thus her masculinity) was beyond all men of her time. However, when she sees the ultimate masculine saint Gilani in the mind of Nund Rishi, she covers herself. Raina’s fellow Suhrawardi Sufis were also expected to cover themselves before those of superior spiritual status/masculinity, both when such individuals are encountered in person as well as in
the midst of certain spiritual practices (e.g., visualization and recitation of their names). Raina’s story of Lalla covering herself thus serves to explain why Suhrawardis veil/cover themselves in certain circumstances when otherwise such a practice could seem to be a peculiar (if not harmful) adoption of women’s social protocols by a male community in an world otherwise dominated by hypermasculine ascetic competition. Raina’s story of Lalla covering herself also serves to highlight the masculinity of Raina’s own Sufi master Sheikh Hamza Makhdum. In that first account, Lalla says she covered herself when she encountered Hamza in the spiritual realm just like she covered herself before the ultra masculine Abd al-Qadir Gilani. This equivalent behavior by Lalla in these two circumstances implies an equivalence of masculinity—and thus spiritual status—between Hamza and Gilani.  

Lalla serves as the ultimate medium for Raina. Depicting Lalla as an extreme and perfected ascetic saint unable to be replicated affirms the value of asceticism as she simultaneously connects Raina’s Sufi lineage to the most powerful Suhrawardi saints and amplifies the power of their spiritual teachings with her own supreme spiritual status. Since Lalla is able to wander naked among most men and yet not break gender protocols, we observe a gender paradigm in which ascetics are superior to non-ascetics, and yet among ascetics a fierce competition for greater masculinity ensues. Being a perfected ascetic and yet not a man herself, Lalla identifies who is more masculine than whom, and thus who holds superior spiritual rank. Finally, Lalla’s encounter with the tiger affirms the widely held notion that ascetics wielded power over beings of the Kashmiri wilderness, whether manifest like the tiger or hidden like the spirits of rivers, trees, and mountains. By bringing Lalla and the Rishi Sufi Order into the orbit, if

---

28 If this analysis is correct, then the fact that Lalla does not cover herself in Hamza’s presence when she teaches him from the spiritual plane after his birth seems to imply Hamza’s profound masculinity pre-birth is somehow lessened, muted, or concealed once he was born and/or that Lalla’s own masculinity after death was increased beyond that of Hamza after birth.
Accardi

Discipline of Mahādevī and Lalla

not the service, of his Suhrawardi Sufi Order, Raina and his fellow disciples are made central to both religious and political authority in Kashmir.

Including Lalla among Muslim Sufi saints Tazkirat al-‘Arifin is risky. By venerating a non-Muslim (a naked ascetic woman) as a saint superior to all others, Raina and his Suhrawardis risked accusations of bid’at, heresy. Yet, by carefully reinscribing Lalla and her legacy, Raina not only renders Lalla safe. By making her the conduit and amplifier of all ascetic sainthood and miraculous spiritual powers to his own Sufi Order, Raina positions Lalla as the means by which Sheikh Hamza Makhdum’s Suhrawardi Sufi Order could assert itself to be the most powerful spiritual, religious, and political force in Kashmir. He was arguably successful. Today Hamza Makhdum’s shrine is among the most significant spiritual sites in Kashmir, and many would argue that when brought together with Nund Rishi and Sayyid ‘Ali Hamadani (which Raina and his co-disciple and fellow hagiographer Daud Khaki explicitly do in their texts), these three saints guide the destiny of Kashmir itself.

Conclusion

We return then to our motivating questions: how have scholars come to think of Mahādevī and Lalla as model Hindu ascetic saints? Why have we so often put together saints like Mahādevī and Lalla who lived centuries and thousands of miles apart? What can an analysis of the chains of hagiographical reinscription reveal about how our images of the past have been constructed? And how can those insights serve us today?

At first glance, it appears that we may have falsely associated these Mahādevī and Lalla, linking them through superficial similarities. Furthermore, it appears obvious that the Mahādevī and Lalla we think we know today are actually the result of hundreds of years of reshaping and reappropriation for newer and newer purposes. Thus one might conclude that the “real”
Mahādevī and Lalla have nothing to do with each other, that how we know them today has little to nothing to do with who they “really” were centuries ago. I would argue that such a conclusion only reinforces the fetishization of origins.

Critical analysis of hagiographical materials takes these late stories of early saints materials as valuable in their own right. They reveal the communities who cherished and reinvoked such figures generation after generation. Perhaps it is coincidental—although I doubt it—but in the sixteenth-century Śūnyasampādane and Tazkirat al-‘Arifin, despite their numerous differences, we find some remarkable parallels in how naked ascetic women saints are handled. Potentially dangerous, Mahādevī and Lalla are praised as spiritual sisters to the ascetic male religious authorities of their sects that wrote the Śūnyasampādane and Tazkirat al-‘Arifin. The spiritual authority of the ascetic is affirmed through the praise of Mahādevī and Lalla. Both are elevated in ways unavailable to other women. While the danger of common women emulating Mahādevī and Lalla was thus allayed, accepting female ascetic power could still threaten the masculine basis of their communities’ ascetic religiosity. Thus, our hagiographers have Mahādevī and Lalla openly challenged in their narratives, voicing and then refuting the objections of “lesser men” until their womanhood is no longer a problem to the ascetic status quo and their sainthood can affirmed. To be doubly sure nothing remaining in Mahādevī and Lalla’s legacies could disrupt their sects’ assertions of elite spiritual status on the basis of superior ascetic masculinity, the authors of these hagiographies narrate Mahādevī and Lalla submission to the authority of male ascetic leaders by receiving their teaching and guidance and then serving the needs of the larger community. Handled in this way, Mahādevī and Lalla are no longer a threat or even an odd exception. Rather, the authors of these hagiographies incorporate Mahādevī and Lalla into their narratives to serve as a means to enhance and bolster the elite male ascetic
leadership of the sixteenth-century communities, preserving and furthering the veneration of these naked female ascetic saints in a way that the larger, patriarchal religious institutions are strengthened.

Why then did we need to examine both Mahādevī in the Śūnyasampādane and Lalla in the Tazkirat al-ʿArifin? It seems like the conclusions just presented could have been generated from an examination of either one of these two hagiographies alone. What new is revealed through bringing these two analyses together? If one were to analyze one of these texts alone, one risks attributing certain qualities of a saint to a particular aspect of the saint’s identity—such as their being a Hindu, or a Shiava, or a woman—on the presumption that such qualities are inherent to that identity and thus the saint’s exhibiting of that trait is a manifestation of the inherent quality of that group to whom she belongs. Even if we were to avoid such sociocultural essentialism, one could attribute a particular element found in one of the hagiographical narratives—such as Mahādevī being given the familial title Akka (“Elder Sister”)—to it being a convention of Kannada literature or Kannadiga culture of the time or even to the idea that Hindus at the time simply referred to revered woman with such terms and this it unnoteworthy that it is used in the context of Mahādevī. Or, one could conclude that bestowing the title Akka upon Mahādevī was a unique occurrence attributable to the unique genius of the authors of the Śūnyasampādane without any connection to anything outside the text itself. Yet, when we find that Lalla was also given a familial title, Maji (“Mother”), in the Tazkirat al-ʿArifin—a text written by Mulsims in the Persian language in far-away Kashmir—these prior interpretive options for why Mahādevī is called Akka in the Śūnyasampādane appear insufficient. Instead, we must find something else shared between the Śūnyasampādane and the Tazkirat al-ʿArifin that could explain such parallels in these two texts. I have sought to provide just such an analysis here
and to conclude that parallels in depictions of women saints in these two hagiographical texts are the product of shared historically-contingent processes and the dynamics of a shared sociopolitical context. Analyzing the Śūnyasamīpādane and the Tazkirat al-‘Arifin together, I propose that the parallels in these two texts reveals something about hagiographies of the sixteenth century—namely, that hagiographers transform the legacies of female saints to serve the needs of those hagiographers’ predominantly male, patriarchal, ascetic religious communities who rose to prominence in the sixteenth centuries due to increased royal patronage and broader social recognition of ascetics’ authority in sixteenth century South Asia.

Can Mahādevī and Lalla be reappropriated, reinscribed, and reshaped to confront, challenge, and disable the patriarchy of today? Perhaps. But let us take heed from analyses of hagiographical reappropriations of the past to tread carefully, lest we sabotage our own efforts by replicating or lauding paradigms produced by past patriarchies and reverse accomplishments so hard won and so easily lost.