

# Women Composers of India

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The history of Indian music dates back to the Vedic times and has evolved since then to the present form at the hands of great composers. Though the composers are predominantly men, there are a few women who sparkle like stars among them.

The Bhakthi Movement between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century AD saw many saints who composed many devotional hymns, verses and songs. The Alwars and Nayanmars form the major part of these saints. The Alwars, as the name suggests, were “immersed” in the Bhakthi of Lord Vishnu and are 12 in number while the Nayanmars were staunch devotees of Lord Siva and 63 of them are canonised.

Among the Alwars we have only one female saint and she is none other than the most popular of them all, Sri Andal. Among the Nayanmars, there are three female saints – Isaignaniar, Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Mangayarkarasiar. But Karaikkal Ammaiyar is the most popular of them all.

Sri Andal and Karaikkal Ammaiyar have the unique status of having their idols consecrated in many temples.

Karaikkal Ammaiyar, originally named Punithavathy, lived during the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. From her early childhood, she had intense devotion to Lord Siva and spent all her time serving Siva Yogis and Bhakthas. This exceptional devotion earned her a place among the 63 Nayanmars. She produced two works – Arputha Thiruvanthathi and Thiru Irattai Manimalai.

## Hagiography

Punithavathy was born in a rich Vysya family to Dhanalakshmi Ammal and Dharmadattan. The young and beautiful lady was given in marriage to another wealthy merchant Paramadattan and they were leading a happy householder’s life.

One day Paramadattan sent two mangoes to his house and Punithavathy thought she would serve him the fruits during mealtime. Meanwhile a Siva Yogi came to their house and as was her practise she served him with great devotion and offered him one of the two mangoes. Later when her husband came she served him the second mango. He liked it so much that he



asked for the second one. Perplexed at this situation Punithavathy prayed to Lord Siva to save her. Lo and behold! There was a mango in her hand. She gave it to her husband and when he tasted it, found it to be as sweet as nectar. He asked Punithavathy where she got that fruit from, as he knew that it was not the one he sent her. Punithavathy narrated the whole story to him. Unable to believe, he asked her to get one more mango by praying to God and to his astonishment the miracle happened again but the mango disappeared when taken in his hand.

After this incident, Paramadattan could no longer treat her as his wife but regarded her as divinity personified. He left her and went to far away lands on business, returned and settled in Pandya kingdom. He married another Vysya girl and named their daughter Punithavathy, as he had great regard for her. When Punithavathy's relatives came to know about this, they took her there. On seeing Punithavathy, Paramadattan, along with his wife and daughter prostrated before her. Punithavathy understood his mental condition and prayed to Lord Shiva thus:

'In that case, Oh Lord, deprive me of the present physical charm and let me have a demoniacal form.' Her prayer was immediately answered and her charming youthful body was transformed into a skeleton.

Then she went on a pilgrimage to holy Kailash and as she thought that it would be sin to place her feet on the sacred mountain, she travelled the last part of her journey on her head. Parvati Devi was taken aback on seeing Punithavathy's strange form and was touched by her deep devotion. Siva explained to his Consort the greatness of Ammaiyyar and welcomed her with great love and granted her a boon.

She fell at His Feet, and prayed: 'Oh Lord of Mercy, give me sincere, pure, unalloyed, eternal and overflowing devotion unto You. I want no more birth. If, however, I have to take birth here, grant me that I should never forget You. Whenever You dance, I must be at Your feet singing Your praise. This is my only wish'. Lord Siva granted the boon and asked her to proceed to Tiruvalangadu to witness His dance. She went there and the Lord danced for her delight. Thiruvalankadu is known as Rathnasabai, one of the famous Ainthu ambalangal (the five temples) where Siva danced as Nataraja. She spent the rest of her life singing in praise of Lord Siva. Music becomes an integral part of many great devotees and they choose this medium to reach God. When in ecstasy, the powerful emotions within a person come out as poetry and song. The compositions of such great personalities add to the treasure trove of our Indian Music.

