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Sexual Politics in 18th century Indian Carnatic Music A Case Study into Marakatavalli

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical examination of "Marakatavalli", a prominent 18th-century Tantric Carnatic composition. It is utilized as a case study to explore the intersection of sexual politics, gendered power, and ritual practice within South Indian Tantric culture. It analyzes how the goddess Marakatavalli is invoked as a fierce protector and is confined within the rigid expectations of reproductive roles and marital fidelity. The narrative surrounding the roles of Marakatavalli and Mohini (a trans-femme goddess) as the wife and mistress, respectively, unveils complex ideological narratives involving sex negativity, transphobia, and the policing of the female sexuality and the femme existence in a patriarchal society.

Despite Marakatavalli's divine power, she is trapped within a framework that normalizes male sexual freedom, while holding women accountable to ideals of forgiveness, and silent endurance. The devotional context of the piece, often rote, was taught to children and often sung by women and temple sex workers, further obscuring these embedded controls, creating cognitive dissonance amongst the singers.

The study situates these dynamics within broader biopolitical mechanisms of gender and sexuality, and desire regulation in temple practices, such as the exclusion of women from worship spaces to maintain celibacy ideals and suppress female sexuality. Ultimately, this research reveals how linguistic pedagogies like "Marakatavalli" function as a site of venerating feminine divinity while enforcing patriarchal constraints. It contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations on the intersections of sexuality, gender, and power in South Asian traditions and challenges listeners to reconsider the role of gender in perpetuating systemic inequities.

Keywords: tantra; religion; gender; queer; transgender