

## [South India's Bangaru Adigal](#)

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Shakta Oracle or Avatar?

For a few hours every Tuesday, Friday and Sunday Bangaru Adigal sits cross-legged before a short, black granite Adi Parashakti image, closes his eyes and becomes the voice of Shakti, the Mother of the universe. Thousands have listened. Hundreds of thousands are following.

On appointment, ragged paupers and dressed-for-success politicians come for a reading as the Shakti prophet scans the time continuum of past/present/future. Getting into see Bangaru Adigal is easy - buy a ticket, get in a long line that has the hungry look of waiting to see the latest Star Wars movie, and wait your turn. Religion, creed or status is no bar. Advice comes fast in Bangaru's native Tamil, translated for non-Tamil speakers. According to personal testimony, careers have been built, baffling diseases cured, barren women have conceived. Often mammoth donations are given. Mother Shakti through Bangaru has guided the structuring of what clearly is big religious enterprise. Critics charge it is benign mass exploitation.

At 41, Bangaru Adigal (an honorific title) is a man of otherwise ordinariness at the center of an extraordinary Liberal Hindu oracle movement. By classical standards he is no Oracle of Delphi, an occultly trained, celibate matron suspended over volcanic vapours who spoke the prognostications of Apollo for the Hellenic elite. Bangaru is a school teacher by profession married with two sons and two daughters. He has had no verifiable psychic training, has no guru and is unaffiliated with any teaching order. When not in trance, he is a simple man, whose only vice seems to be he enjoys a non-vegetarian diet. Only recently did he abandon his teaching job when the trustees of his ashram complex started paying him a salary from incoming donations. As for dramatics, he likes to circle the ashram's Shakti temple twice, then on a third round with a fistful of neem tree leaves randomly touch faces in the crowd - all in silence. And he says his gift isn't permanent. Like a

communications satellite in space, it could go dead any moment.

But his prophecy success average is good enough and the novelty of a Shakti oracle fascinating enough to have created a grassroots following and mystique. As one observer pointed out, "People don't go to Bangaru to see and hear a great sage, like they would go to the senior Shankaracharya abbot of Kanchi monastery. They go for a personal reading, perhaps a miraculous cure and for most the excitement of seeing a spiritual spectacle." Another says, "most people go to see him like they fawn over film stars."

But for all those that just come for the spectacle, there is an enormous body of devotees who are living by the words of Mother Shakti. Through Bangaru's mediumship Mother Shakti dictated a non-sectarian philosophy of serving all humanity. Social/educational welfare service and projects were started, prompting further popularity. Films and other public relations gambits have been produced. Local and state governments are actively encouraging the establishment of Adi Parashakti missions.

Over the last few years, the movement has grown into an empire with 1500 centers (called mandrams) scattered across India with roughly 100 located abroad. Unofficial estimates place his devotees at 1 million. Some are saying he has eclipsed Satya Sai Baba in popularity.

The meteoric success has spawned a wide spectrum of opinion on just who Bangaru Adigal is: siddha (master of supernatural powers), avatar incarnation, black arts sorcerer or a harmless fake. D. Senapathi (a fictitious name to protect the interviewee's identity), of Madras, says "Bangaru met a recluse from whom he had picked up black magic in its full form. He had thereafter started using it with mesmerism to influence women folk particularly and unwary people." Coincidentally, women are by far the majority of devotees. T.V. Natarajan, president of an orthodox Saivite society, points out that wives of influential and high-ranking politicians are very active in the movement.

Many outside observers are willing to concede he has some degree of psychic ability. But they temper this with a cautionary, "He seems to combine intuition with common worldly knowledge. Certainly he is no siddha." The official legend coming

out of Bangaru's ashram is that he was an accomplished siddha in his last life.

Devoted Bangaru disciples are in the process of establishing a case for his avatarhood. As C. H. Krishnamurthi Rao, a wealthy, intimate Bhangaru devotee and one of his chief interpreters for non-Tamil speaking visitors, says, "Secretly speaking, for close devotees he is an avatar of Shakti. There is no difference between he and Shakti. That will become more and more apparent."

The headquarters of this avatar-in-the-making movement is Adi Parashakti Siddhar Peetham, an ashram located in Bangaru Adigal's home town of Melamaruvathur, about 23 miles south of Madras. It is favorably placed right on the main Madras/Trichy highway. State-run buses going both South and North often stop to allow passengers to worship in the ashram's temple and catch a glimpse of Bangaru. The ashram is large, spread over much of 20 acres of Bangaru's family land, and well maintained with its high income. There is an air of controlled business as numerous educational institutions, small factories and a hospital connected with the ashram are run and the devotees handle the visitor crowds.

In a Hinduism Today interview, Krishnamurthi Rao repeatedly emphasized that the peetham is an ashram, not a Shakta temple, making clear that it and Bangaru/Amman serve people of all religions. Walking around, it is immediately obvious that there is no real connection to sectarian Shaktism. In the temple itself Hindus, Christians and Muslims worship according to their unique religious disciplines. A cross and Muslim crescent moon are mounted alongside the Shakti image in the main sanctum. The surrounding cottage industry factories have Christian and Islamic symbols. Bangaru doesn't teach or follow any Shakta sadhanas or any specific sadhanas for that matter. Krishnamurthi Rao says each person, when face to face with the entranced Bangaru, sees their own conception of God, "Hindus see Shakti, Christians see Jesus Christ, Muslims see Allah, Buddhists see Buddha."

The ashram is mostly populated by women, of all ages. It is the women who perform the puja to the Shakti image, all the invocations being chanted in Tamil, not Sanskrit. Any lady who is wearing Adi Parashakti's dictated color of literally blood red can perform the puja. They are all dressed in crimson red saris. Bangaru himself wears a red dothi when in trance. It is a kind of uniform symbolizing that the blood of humanity is one color.

Three hundred yards from the present ashram is where it all began. Here was Bangaru's childhood home. Right across from it was a popular Mariammen temple. [Mariammen is a Hindu folk-religion goddess commonly worshipped for protection against disease but sometimes worshipped as the universal Shakti.] As is the custom in non-Agamic temples, non-brahmin families performed the rites. Bangaru's father, Gopala Nayagar, held this responsibility annually during a certain festival period.

One year Mariammen appeared to Gopala Nayagar, stating in a few years she would begin communicating through Bangaru. Meanwhile Bangaru himself was worshipping the goddess daily under a neem tree, which again according to folk tradition was surrounded by 27 siddhas in the form of snakes. In 1970 the tree blew over in a storm, revealing a swayambu (naturally occurring) form of Amman. It became the focus of worship and a rough-hewn temple was built. Bangaru began speaking prophecy. In 1974 the Adi Parashakti image was installed behind the swayambu Amman as were stone images of the snakes.

At first Bangaru was regarded as a third-rate fortune teller and there was stiff opposition from orthodox society. One observer says that Bangaru would simply buttonhole passersby, trying to get them to sit still for a reading.

Krishnamurthi Rao is an avid spokesman for those who testify to Bangaru Adigal's gift. He says he has personally seen enough cases to fill a book, which he intends on writing someday. He often brings international visitors to Bangaru. "One day three Japanese gentlemen came. Amman greeted them through Bangaru in Japanese and told one of them she was pleased with him for being such a good Christian. Two of the Japanese didn't even know their good friend was Christian. There was a good deal of publicity in Japan over the event," he recounted. "Last year a politician came. A lot of famous people come here. He wanted to know if he would be elected. Amman told him he would be so and that he should serve the country in a greater capacity than his elected office." As events turned out, when Indira Gandhi died, Rajiv Gandhi was elected, this politician was elected and is now a minister in Rajiv's cabinet.

But all the readings do not go as well. A Muslim politician was told that if he tendered his resignation it would be rejected and he would gain greater authority. He followed the advice, but his resignation was accepted and he lost his job. T.V. Natarajan said his personal reading was unsatisfactory and one interviewee who

talked to a lot of people said only 10% are actually accurate. Another stated that visitors are artfully interviewed before their appointments. The information is given to Bangaru who uses it to appear more knowledgeable than he really is.

Experts on psychic phenomena conclude that futuristic predictions by the untrained are, at best, hit and miss, so many variables are involved. Most people want to believe what is told them, especially if it is positive. Their own subconscious mind will then attempt to create what has been predicted for them. In Bangaru Adigal's case, they say he could be a channel for some astral devi connected with a region of India, much like Edgar Cayce, the early 20th century, American "sleeping prophet," was a channel for a group of entities working predominantly within the Christian world.

Whatever he is, oracle, prophet or not, his Adi Parashakti movement is in a chain-reaction phase. Missions are popping up like fast-food franchises, miniature clones of the Mother temple at Melamaruvathur complete with a picture of the Shakti oracle Bangaru tuning in Adi Parashakti. Red is becoming a very popular color these days in South India.

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