

Discuss the emergence and role of women saints in Medieval Indian society. Did they function within the patriarchal norms or were they rebels?

The Bhakti movement, which moved in continuing waves from one region to another, beginning in the south in the sixth century, is known to have played a crucial role in shaping the social, cultural and religious life of people of all religions in the subcontinent. By emphasising that god dwelt in all — high and low alike— and by rejecting book learning as a way of reaching god, the bhakti movements opened their doors not just to supposedly low status groups but also to women. The Bhakti tradition provided a novel space for women in the world of religion as well as every day social relations. The shift in the language of worship from Sanskrit to the languages spoken by the common people brought about a new opportunity for women's creativity to express itself in devotional religion.

The rich tradition of *bhakti* is particularly significant for women both for variations and commonalities in its social and religious implications. Here the dominant Brahmanical ritual world is attempted to be turned upside down, boundaries operating in the social world collapse, and the shackles imposed by a rigidly hierarchical social order are stretched to provide breathing space for some men and women. Thus we see the emergence of women saints.

The life and work of women saint was shrouded in mystery unlike that of men saint. This is partly due to the fact that none of them established guru parampara, where their disciples might have preserved the composition of the saints. There were few exceptions like Meerabai, who constituted a minor following. Even lesser number of women saints received recognition for their spiritual greatness during their lifetime. They were scolded by their contemporaries as mad and shameless. Unlike in North India, women saints like Andal and akka were greatly revered in south India. Infact Akka was the leading member of a council of saints. Another factor contributing to the

scarcity of information regarding women saints was the suppression of their writing by the families of the saint themselves.

Most of the regional languages boast of one or more eminent women *bhakta* poets whose work became an essential component in the growth of the contemporary language. In some cases, such as that of Lal Ded of Kashmir, a woman poet is even given the status of the mother of the mother tongue. There are important regional variations here. In the Indo Gangetic plain, Mira is the only woman *bhakta* poet whose work has substantially survived, even though many other women are named in the historical record, and a few poems by others survive. Every regional bhakti movement, particularly in the south, has at least one outstanding woman in it. She is usually considered on a par with, and often superior to the men, both in her devotion and in her poetry. In the Kannada Virashaiva movement, nearly 60 of the 300 saints are women. These are not anonymous; they have legends and places associated with them, and many have left behind them bodies of poetry.

The most famous of them is Mahadeviyakka (12th century) from the Karnataka region. Nearly a thousand poems are attributed to her. The other famous women associated with the Bhakti movement were Awaiyar (5th century), Karaikkalammaiyar (7th century) and Andal (9th century) from the Tamil region; Muktabai (13th century), Janabai (13th century) and Bahinabai (17th century) from the Maharashtra region; Satitoral (16th century), Gangasati (17th century) and Sati Loyal (18th century) from the Gujarat region.

Vijayaramaswami has analysed the social background of women saint from the Northern Deccan and Southern Deccan. He points out that despite several commonalities between male and female Bhaktas, coming to Bhakti inevitably meant different things to women and men. One significant difference was that while male *bhaktas* could follow their chosen path

while remaining householders, this was near impossible for women. The vast majority of women *bhakta* poets in one way or another opted out of married and domestic life, and remained childless. A Tukaram could deal with a non cooperative wife by ignoring her, for she could only object to his way of life; she could not actively obstruct it. But for a Mirabai or a Bahinabai, the impediments created by husband or in-laws took the form of violence that could easily have proved fatal. Thus, most women *bhakta* poets could proceed on their chosen path only by discarding the marital tie altogether. Some refused marriage, others walked out of oppressive marriages. Bahina, the only one among the major women *bhakta* poets who remained married, gives a poignant account of the suffering she underwent before she could convert her tyrannical husband into a fellow devotee.

In addition, some of these women dramatically renounced the tyranny imposed by crippling notions of respectable feminine behaviour — Mira by wearing the tabooed *ghungroos* and dancing in public; Mahadevi and Lal Ded by discarding clothing altogether. Most of them renounced not only marriage but also material wealth and status. Many of them chose the life of mendicants and are revered for it. Though none of these women seem to have founded sects as many male *bhaktas* did, they were accepted as *gurus* and important religious thinkers in their owntimes. Some became wandering teachers imparters of knowledge, others brought their husbands to their path. Most of them, however, had to make exceptional sacrifices — leave home, give up youth, die young. Therefore, their choices could not have been seen as viable for ordinary women. Nor did any of them build a special following amongst women. They remained rare exceptions, yet as exceptions they performed an important social role.

Whether they functioned within the patriarchal norm or were rebels can be answered by looking into the accounts of Andal (9th c.), Avvaiyar (5th c.), Karaikalammaiyar (7th c.) and AkkaMahadevi (12th c.) to consider the nature of the *bhakti* experience and the space it provided to women to expand both their own selfhood and conventional gender and social relation.

In the *bhakti* movement, there was no contradiction in the pursuit of *bhakti* and the life of the *grahastha*. In practice, however, the collapsing of such a boundary operated only in the case of men. The manner in which the question of marriage is handled by each woman saint is linked to the deeper question of the sexuality of these women and their explicit attitude to the female body. Avvaiyar, Karaikalammaiyar, Andal and AkkaMahadevi confront their sexuality in different ways. Avvaiyar, for example, denies her sexuality, by going past the sexually active years into an ascetic kind of situation. With the energy thus released, she wanders about and is accepted by the social order within which she can remain and which she can work with, posing no danger to others and protected from them by her old woman's form. Karaikalammaiyar also transforms her sexuality into an awesome power. She turns into a "preta" — her husband and other men are terrified of her. In her new form, which denies her sexuality, she is inviolate — no man will come anywhere near her — she is now the feminine ascetic par excellence. For Andal and Akka Mahadevi, their bodies and their sexuality are no embarrassment or impediment to them. The body is the instrument, the site, through which their devotion is expressed. Their relationship with the lord is set within the framework of bridal mysticism. Andal's devotion quickens her body; she awakens early to the beauty of her body, through her single minded meditation upon the lord. She says in one poem:

"My swelling breasts I dedicated to the Lord who holds the sea-fragrant conch.."

It is significant that, despite its uninhibited expression, Andal's sexuality poses no threat at all at any point in the legends that have built up around her. Her unfulfilled longings are undeniably frank and expressive but they are neatly containable within the framework of an impending marriage. The sexuality of Andal is the sexuality of a young girl who will become a wife, the "bride of the lord". Akka Mahadevi's sexuality both shares with and is in complete contrast to that of Andal. Like Andal, she does not deny the female body. She confronts it with a directness which is without parallel. But in confronting it the way she does, she forces the world around her also to do so. Her brutal frankness sees no shame in stripping off conventional notions of modesty. But in Akka Mahadevi's case, the legitimacy of the experience is irrelevant. The lord need not be the husband, merely the "adulterous lover".

Only Mahadevi confronts the crucial problem directly. As someone who has not denied her sexuality but at the same time seeks the liberation that other *bhaktas* have, she adopts a radical measure, and wanders about naked. Mahadevi is the very opposite of Andal. In a sense, she flaunts her sexuality and defies an onslaught upon it. Her decision to strip off all clothing is a refusal to be circumscribed by the notion of the vulnerability of the female body, a refusal to make compromises because of it. In that sense she conquers the threat it poses and is the only *bhaktin* to do so. Only Akka Mahadevi works within the female body, not around it, as others do.

The narratives of the *bhaktins'* lives and their poetry indicate that all these women saw god as male but in an idealised version of the conventional relationship of woman to man. Their notion of god was not confined within a patriarchal structure, god was sometimes an equal, as in the case of Andal, and

sometimes the *bhaktin* was subservient, as in the case of Karaikalammaiyar. In any case, the object of devotion was not a distant authoritative god but a close companion, someone you could “speak confidences” to. In *bhakti*, women indicated the possibility of an alternative model of gender relations.

A remarkable feature of this movement is that in it women take on qualities that men traditionally have. They break the rules of Manu that forbid them to do so. A respectable woman is not, for instance, allowed to live by herself or outdoors, or refuse sex to her husband—but women saints wander and travel alone, give up husband, children, and family. While these women often had to face resistance and rejection from the society initially, they were never prosecuted as heretics and lunatics. Most of them were revered and accepted as saints and gurus in their own life time, and their being women implied no special disadvantage at this stage.

All these movements were also able to dissolve the gender lines to some extent. Bridal mysticism did cut across gender division as male saints also regarded themselves as the brides of the Lord. When male saints adopt the path of mystic love to attain union with the God, they often resort to transvestism. It is clear that some divisions did breakdown. Men frequently used the feminine mode in their poetry, saw themselves as feminine in relation to god, and so gave up a part of their maleness. But in the narrative of their lives and even in the distinctive nature of their poetry the femaleness of the *bhaktin* remained. The explicit use of the language of the body is a feature of the *bhaktins'* poetry. One of the last things they overcome, in these traditions, is maleness itself. The male saints wish to become women; they wish to drop their very maleness, their machismo. Saints then become a kind of third gender. The lines between male and female are crossed and re crossed in their lives. Dasimayya says:

“If they see breasts and long hair coming
they call it woman,
if beard and they call it man:
but, look, the self that hovers in between is neither man nor
woman

0 Ramanatha hiskers”

Another interesting feature of these traditions is there is often another kind of woman saint as well. She is the saint's wife, who often quietly outdoes him in saintliness, not by dramatic conversion but by a sort of spontaneous effortless closeness to god. The contrast seen in bhakti traditions between the ordinary woman, the saint's wife, and the woman saint who breaks away from domestic life, deserves attention. The one is close to god without doing very much about it, just by her love and devotion in daily life. For the other, the woman saint, life is a search, restless, dramatic (even operatic), a search outside the bonds of family and household. This contrast has parallels elsewhere, especially in the contrast between the goddesses of the classical tradition and those of the folk tradition.

The Bakti movement in Maharashtra took the form of a number of *sant* traditions which developed between the thirteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Women *sants* appear to be integrated in the Varkari tradition right from the start. The prominent ones usually from *bhakta* households do not individually have to face social slander or flout public convention when they express their devotion. Neither do they become wandering wise women nor do they appear miraculously at a young age. They seem to live relatively ordinary lives yet the tradition is able to make space for them as teachers and *sants*. They are referred to with the same honorific prefix: “SantJanabai” as are the males: “Sant

Namdev."The integration is also suggested in that each has a clear *guru parampara* or lineage, which is important in *sant* tradition.

The paradox, however, lies in the fact that these *gurus*, as indeed most *sants*, in their teachings strongly emphasise the need to stay away from women. Woman, in the songs Eknath and Tukaram, is not only symbol of worldly attachment, but is to be physically shunned lest she distract the seeker. Also, most of them remain subordinate to a male *guru* who is often a relative and refer to themselves in terms of their familial relation to him. For example, Chokhamela's wife Soyra Bai signs her verses as "Chokhya's Mahari" and Aubai signs hers as "Namya's sister." Muktabai, Jnandev's sister, is an exception, signing her verses simply as "Muktai"

The women bhaktas did not necessarily confine themselves to the path of Saguna Bhakti where the lord is worshipped in a highly personalised form. It is pointed out that in Gujarat many women bhaktas also pursued the path of Nirguna bhakti of an abstract type.

Another noticeable fact of the women bhakta poets are that they are rarely seen addressing themselves exclusively to other women, their audience is the entire society. It shows that they at least did not see their role as being in any way limited or constrained due to the condition of their being women. The enduring quality and power of their thought and action must largely be due to this fact that they demonstrated their willingness and capacity to grapple with the issues of concern to the entire society just as their male counterparts did. Neither the women bhakta poets do seem to have perceived their primary concerns as one of man versus woman. (Hence their refusal to address themselves exclusively or even primarily to women). That their gods are all male did not seem to mean anything to them. Quite significantly, Mira whose lord is

Krishna, refuses to worship the deity of her in-laws even though the latter is female. The issues surely were beyond such concerns. Though these women and their lives did not represent any dissent movement and their poetry is no protest literature. However unconsciously they at times were working as rebels and breaking through the patriarchal norms.

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