



WOMEN IN BRAJ BHAKTI LITERATURE

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Abstract

The Bhakti movement's impact on Braj was marked by gender and caste disparities. While men actively participated in devotional practices, women, especially from lower castes, were largely absent due to their socio-economic roles. Lower-caste women's labor-intensive responsibilities limited their engagement in religious activities, whereas higher-caste women had greater social mobility, enabling their participation. Despite the movement's egalitarian messages, patriarchal structures and daily labor demands hindered broader female involvement. The literature of Braj reflects this imbalance, highlighting selective participation based on caste and social status. This paper explores the role and position of women in various religious sects, examining the reasons behind the limited number of women saints in Braj. By analyzing these dynamics, we can better understand the complex interplay between gender, caste, and religious participation in the region.

Keywords: Bhakti, Braj, Women, Patriarchy, Saint.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout human civilisation, women in India have been regarded as the bearers of cultural values and have been entrusted with the responsibility of sustaining societal norms. On one side, they have been portrayed as the paragon of beauty, love, and affection, revered and worshipped in many forms, like Shakti, the embodiment of power; Durga, the warrior goddess; and Sita, the epitome of virtue and devotion. On the other side, they have been discarded from various socio-economic and religious rights and bound with several discriminatory practices such as sati, child marriage, dowry, etc. They have also been considered the hurdle in the path of salvation for men and destructive by nature and many Indian texts also considered them inferior to men and suggested that women always should be under the protection of men. Eventually, the status of women in society deteriorated, and they are being considered weak to their counterparts and debarred from the privilege of being equal to men. Further, many sanctions have been put on their everyday lives; therefore, the lives of women have become more vulnerable in society. The rigidity of society from ancient times continued to the mediaeval period, or it can be said that not a tremendous improvement has been taken place in the condition of women. In mediaeval times, women were expected to unconditionally obey their husbands in all circumstances, with their primary duty revolving around serving and fulfilling the needs of their spouses. Women can get salvation only by performing their rightful duty to their husbands. Although they were not allowed to have a share in the property and were rarely allowed to remarry, they had to dedicate their entire lives to their husbands. These kinds of practices were prevalent in society when the Bhakti movement emerged in North India.

Therefore, the Bhakti movement is considered revolutionary because it broke the continuously prevalent ill practices against women in society. Some Bhakti saints emphasised that caste, race, and gender are no obstacles in the path of salvation and have praised women for their sacrifices, accepted them as equal to men, and allowed them to be the true devotees of the almighty. But this was the only side of the coin because various saints and poets have shown their disagreement about the salvation of women since they are not devotional toward their husbands. Like various poets of their times, they have expressed their views on the characters and nature of women and put women as a hurdle in the path of devotion. They divided women broadly into two categories: one is Pativrita (devoted to her life in serving her husband), which is considered an ideal form of woman. Secondly, Byabhichari (the one who is having multiple relationships with men) is considered characterless and compared with hell.

Kabir (1961) states, "women want to devour all men; therefore, it is good to be alone" (p. 189). Dadu Dayal (1931) asserts, "Women are the enemy of men, and men are enemies of women; in the end, nothing will be in your hand" (pp. 131-132). Surdas (2005) in Sursagar describes women as "poisonous; it is very hard to stop your heart from falling for her; she is very lustful" (p. 1187).

- "Bhagni or Bhujangni kari, inke vishahi darye.

- Raachehu Birche such naahi, bhulat kavahu patayaye. Inke bas man pare manohar, bahut jatan kari paiye. Kaami hai kaam aatur, tihi kais eke samujhaye.”

Keshav Das (1947) in his *Ram Chandrika* suggests that women should serve their husbands to attain salvation (p. 134).

- “Nit Pati panthahi chaliye, Dukh Sukh ka dalu daliye, Tan Man Sebahu Pati Ko, Tab Layiye Subh Gati Ko.
- Dharm Karm sab Nishfal Deva, iah Ek phal ke Pati Seva”

According to Keshav Das (1947), “a woman should not leave her husband, whether he is blind or handicapped; she should love her husband unconditionally” (p. 135).

- “Naari taje na apna sanehu Bhartaar, Pangu Gung guara Gadhir Andh Anaath Apar.
- Dadu Dayal (1931) notes, “piety women always serve their husbands and always remain obedient to him” (p. 95).
- “Pativrita Grah Aapne kare Khasam ki Seb, Rakhyo Rakhe rahe aagyakari Teb”

Women in Braj Region

In history, women’s history did not get much attention due to a lack of sources, or historians did not pay much attention to it. Pre-colonial history mainly was confined to queens or princesses. Therefore, we need to look at the history of ordinary women. In this scenario, we will attempt to write the history of women from the religious text of the Braj region and other private documents of Goswamis of the Chaitanya sect at Vrindavan.

Social Status

Pande (2010) suggests that “there are multiple dynamics of any movement seen in the constant interplay of opposition and co-option, and a gendered reading offers us such glimpses where we see alternating phases of radicalism and domestication” (p. xiv). Pande (2010) also notes that the Bhakti movement provided an alternative space for women by emphasizing that all are equal in the eyes of God and that women could adopt the path of bhakti. Thus, a large number of women participated in the bhakti movement and became true devotees of God. There was a palpable tension that came out when women spoke for themselves and wanted to live life according to their own terms and conditions. Before this movement, women were not allowed to participate in any public sphere. Their lives were confined only to domestic activities. However, men were not ready to share or give any space to women and put some restrictions on the participation of women in the movement. They also wanted reform to be confined to certain limits. “While the women wanted to lead a life as they pleased, the forces of reaction set in as it would deprive the men of their domestic dominance, and these contradictory features manifested to reinforce and reiterate the already existing notions of women, family, and their roles” (Pande, 2010).

In this Bhakti literature, women have been depicted as the ideal ones, like Sita, Durga, and Savitri Radha. It is believed that womanhood can pave the path toward salvation. Thus, the ideal state to get salvation for saints is to imagine themselves as women and feel womanhood. Therefore, from the Bhakti perspective, saints imagined themselves as women. It will be very clear by seeing the devotional poems (based on Krishna and Radha) that these poems were written from the women’s perspective (Entwistle, 1987, p. 107). Entwistle (1987) describes how saints and religious Bhaktas often characterized themselves as incarnations of Shakti, with some, such as Chaitanya and Nityananda, wearing women’s clothes or resembling women. Vallabha is often depicted with long flowing hair on the bank of the Yamuna, holding lotus buds (p. 107). At the same time, their imagination about women was based on very primitive ideological social norms and put all sorts of restrictions on women. In practice, they were far away from the concept of gender equality because Chaitanya was praised by Krishna das kaviraj for his avoidance of women and declared that devotees should maintain distance from women and it will be immoral to associate with them. Krishnadas (1973) states, “it is not possible to separate the men from the women, but still, we strictly prohibited illicit sex; boys and girls who are not married are not allowed to sleep together” (p. 28).

Sri Chaitanya was very strict regarding the association of women in any sphere. But Nityanand and Vallabhacharya were also having feminine feelings and did not give up the attitude of the gopis. Chaitanya also envisioned himself in the form of Radha (Entwistle, 1987, pp. 107-108). Renaldo (1976) reports that during a festival at Nathdwara, he observed men who intoxicated themselves with bhaang, dressed in women’s attire, and danced (p. 94).

Monserate (1914) (traveler) from Portugal, who came to Mathura in 1580-82, and said:

- “Brahmins did not allow pilgrims into the main temple until they had been to the riverside and shaven off their hair and beards and bathed in the river: It is an
- Extraordinary sight; for there are more than three hundred barbers, who very swiftly shave a huge multitude both of men and women standing up to their waists in the river, on steps which have been

built there. At the same time, he refers to the presence in the vicinity of temples built in spots where the silly old wives fables declare that Krishna performed some action to preserve the memory of these

- Wonderful deeds, lest they should be forgotten. Nowadays shaving and bathing do not take place on the same kind of scale at Mathura, though they remain prominent features of pilgrimage to Prayag, Varanasi, and Ayodhya.” (p. 93)

On the other hand, we found some examples of the gathering of men and women at the temple. For instance, some details have been given by Mehmud Balkhi (the Central Asian traveler) who visited Mathura. He further says “a vast concourse of ‘men and women, young and old, poor and rich, assemble’. The sight of men and women in such proximity, he adds, drew large numbers of ‘lustful ones’ to the scene. Later on, the worshippers used to go to the temple to hear sermons and songs” (Habib, 2020). In the same manner, some of the sects started an association with women in religious sermons. As the members of the Sahajiya Sampradaya had seen women as an object for lust and hankered after women, even others’ wives. This sect tentatively followed the path of Tantrism and did not establish social norms. Dimock (1966) suggests that Sahajiyas, “if a person’s lust for voluptuous women is very strong indeed, and one’s frustrations very great, to carry him through the stringent and arduous, though interesting, training necessary before the sexual ritual was undertaken” (p. 106).

When these kinds of activities started increasing in the sects and violating the established norms of Sampradaya, they started losing hold over their religious positions. Eventually, when these sinful deeds were heard by Sabai Jai Singh and disturbed by listening to the facts that some of the Vaishnavas, particularly Ramanandi ascetics, were involved with women and business. Therefore, to regulate the conduct of these ascetics, he called the representatives of different sects and ordered them not to involve women in business and should not try to violate regulations concerning caste and creed distinction (Entwistle, 1997, p. 206). To stop the corruption among these sects, he suggested that they (the ascetics who were interested in keeping women) leave the life of ascetics and lead the life of a householder (Ibid.).

Radha as the Main Deity

In this period, Radha emerged as the main attraction or main deity among the female deities. She was considered the central model for Krishna Bhakti. In many places, she is depicted as a married woman and has several obligations on her to obey her husband and social rules. But the problem arises when she fell in love with Krishna; she did not care about society and followed her passion and devoted herself to Krishna. Left behind everything, she secretly started loving Krishna. She is very vocal and discarded the rule and demands of Dharma and set an example of a symbol of devotion. She expressed devotional sentiments to God without caring about society’s regulations (Lele, 1981, p. 90).

Radha’s exceptional qualities were frequently highlighted by saints and religious figures, who made her a symbol of true love. Her portrayal as a central figure in the Bhakti movement was solidified by her role in illustrating both material and spiritual love. Jiv Goswami notes that Krishna, who is revered by the women of Braj and Dwarka as an embodiment of Kama (desire), also reciprocates their love and affection (Entwistle, 1987, p. 82). Thus, Krishna realized his blissful nature through Radha, the Gopis, and other devotees (Entwistle, 1987, p. 82).

Krishna’s relationship with all the Gopies did not get much attention for devotional literature, but Krishna’s love for Radha has been considered pure and gets great acceptance among devotees. It is the love of Radha that made devotees more enthusiastic to follow the path of devotion, particularly women. The love affair of Radha is considered more passionate because it is an illicit one. Similarly, devotional poets have qualified extramarital love as something more powerful and intense because it dares to transgress social rules and boundaries (Entwistle, 1987, p. 83). But in reality, women are kept inside the home with so many restrictions and are always put there without giving their share in the contribution of human progress.

We see in the case of Radha and Krishna, they belong to the same community but at different hierarchical levels. But Radha has shown the courage to break the social boundaries of marriage and love. It is a matter of fact that in many cases, like Radha, several women adopted the path according to their will. They also pursued their love and devotion without caring for the social critic. These instances represented, on the one hand, the autonomy of women, and on the other, the possibilities of the formation of new social groups through exogamy. Society, the kinship system and family, and women as part of the social order all found representation in the poetry not merely as contemporary structures but as systems of long continuities that witnessed desired modifications evoked by changing material conditions. Despite their role in the economy and household structure, it is generally concluded that kinship and caste always located women in such a way that they were subordinated to men in every walk of life (Sharma, 2011, p. 53-54).

We have seen in some cases where women saints have chosen a different path to follow other than devotion. They found it difficult to follow the path of devotion because in Bhakti, God implicitly conceives of a lover or a husband. However, in the traditional view, a woman is fully devoted to her husband and has to

consider him equivalent to God. She has to follow her husband in every sphere of life. Therefore, if she initiates herself into the bhakti, she would not be able to come over the criteria of the bhakti. Thus, we find it most difficult for women to follow the path of bhakti. But various women saints crossed the boundary of social norms and traditional rules and followed the path of bhakti. They found bhakti as an alternative to marriage and adopted the life of an ascetic, broke relationships with the material world, and took initiative to spiritual marriage to the god (Lele, 1981, p. 83). One of the best examples is Mirabai, where she declared Krishna as her husband.

As she describes to Rana:

- “I don’t like your strange world, Rana.
- A world where there are no holy men and all the people are trash
- I have given up ornaments, given up braiding my hair. I have given up putting on Kajal and putting my hair up.
- Mira’s Lord is Giridhar Nagar; I have found a perfect bridegroom”

(Pandey & Zide, 1964, p. 26).

At another place, she refuses to accept the conditions put by her husband’s family members and asserts that Krishna is her only husband now. One can think of why she did not accept the conditions of her in-law’s family. We know that in Rajput families, the tradition of sati was followed, and after the death of her husband, a woman has to perform the act of sati with her husband. But Mira did not perform Sati. In one of her poems, she asserts that “sati na hosyan girdhar gansyam mhara man moho ghananami.”

- “I will not be a sati. I will sing the songs of Girdhar Krsna the famous one attracts my heart.”
- “Friend, I cannot live without Hari.
- My mother-in-law insults me, Her daughter humiliates me, When Rana seeks in rage
- I am imprisoned, Kept under house arrest,
- How shall I surrender our primal love? Love that was born in an earlier life.
- Mira’s Lord is Giridhar Nagar.
- Can reach her heart”

(Nandy, 1975, p. 56).

Mirabai’s journey led her to Vrindavan, where Jiv Goswami initially refused to meet her, citing gender biases. However, she challenged these distinctions, and upon meeting her, Jiv Goswami was deeply moved by her devotion (Entwistle, 1987, p. 82; Harirai, 1936, p. 531). Despite the varying sects within Bhakti, there was often discord among them, as evidenced by texts such as the Chaurasi Vaisnavan Ki Varta, Bhaktamal, and Do Sau Vaisnava ki Varta. For instance, Vallabhaite texts suggest that Mirabai faced disrespect from Vallabhaite followers, with incidents such as Ramdas’s refusal to recognize her and subsequent departure from her village (Pandey & Zide, 1965, pp. 54-73; Harirai, 1960b, pp. 79-82). For instance, if we look at the Vallabhaite text, Do Sau Vaishnav ki Varta, it appears that the meeting of Gusain Vithalnath (son of Vallabhacharya) with Mira did not work, and he failed to impress Mira Bai. The text further suggests that Ajaya Kunwari (Friend of Mira Bai) was living with her and declared Gusain as her Guru. Later, she asked Mira Bai to become a disciple of Gusain, but Mira Bai declined the offer and suggested her friend stay away from Gusain (Gokulnath, 1960, p. 483).

Other Vallabhaite texts (Chaurasi Vaishnavan ki Varta) also indicate that Mirabai ignored and did not get her due respect from the followers of the Vallabha sect and even sometimes abused and insulted her. For example, Ramdas went to Mirabai and started singing the songs dedicated to Vallabhacharya in front of the deity of Mirabai. Then Mira Bai asked him, “Sing some Visnupadas for my deity.” After listening to this, Ramdas replied with an angry face and said, “Foolish wretch. Are these songs for your khasam (enemy, husband)? Go; I won’t see your face again.” After saying this to Mira, he left the village with his whole family. Mira Bai entreated him to stay. She also tried to offer some gifts, but he declined the offer and shifted to another village. Ramdas expressed his passion and love for his Prabhu and never wanted to see the face of Mira Bai again in life (Harirai, 1960b, p. 79-82). Later, Mira has spent her entire life singing the devotional song and playing the sitar.

Similarly, we can see one example of female devotion in the painting of Mughals, the portrayal of Yoginis in the landscape. It is a group portrait of female ascetics who have renounced the world. In this miniature, they have engaged in devotional songs in a barren landscape far away from city life and its worldly complexities. In the miniature, there are yoginis, two singers on each side, and their leader in the middle, who is playing a stringed instrument in accompaniment with the song (Majlis, 2006-07, p. 307-11).

Some of the women became popular female devotees; for instance, Jahnvi (wife of Nityananda) is considered a guru and figurehead for the Sahajiyas. She used to live in Bengal, but later she moved to the Braj region from Bengal because in Bengal she was having an image of herself, which she considered Radha and must be installed in the Gopinath temple of Vrindavan. When she arrived in Braj, Jiv Goswami and other religious people of the Gaudiya sampradaya came to receive her with greatness (Entwistle, 1987, p. 109). Later,

she gave an image of herself (which she considered Radha) to a disciple named Shrinivas; he took that image from her and placed it to the left of the original image of Radha (Entwistle, 1987, p. 110).

Economic Status

In the period of the 16th and 17th centuries, the economic status of women varied from region to region, and they have been indulged in various economic activities as per their capacities. However, women were never considered capable of doing economic activities or given inferior status as compared to their counterparts. They have always been assigned a supporters's role in various economic activities. Although women are not far away from men in terms of hard work, they did not get recognition for their contribution. Whether working in the fields or helping their husbands in agriculture were the activities of the rural women's lives (Moosvi, 2008, p. 137). Once the crop is ready to harvest, women would be assigned various works such as collecting grain, cleaning the produce, and beating the rice to separate the grains, illustrating the diverse activities women undertook in the fields during harvest season.

As Fryer noted about the Indian women's lives and commented, "the Indian wives dress their husbands, victims, fetch water, and grind their corn with a handmill while they sing, chat, and are merry" (Fryer, 1912, p. 118). Bring water from the well was the common practice of rural women. For this, every early morning, they had to go to the well and bring water for their families. The way the village women in India carried pitchers filled with water, balancing them one over the other on their heads, became a very popular theme for artists in Akbar's court (Moosvi, 2008, p. 139).

Another important task that was assigned to women was feeding cattle and milking. Generally, it was the duty of women to feed cattle, and milking and other relative activities were handled by women (Ibid., p. 140). In the works of Surdas, the Gopis (milkmaids) of the Braj region played a very crucial role in the daily life of the Braj people. They also dominated the social and cultural life of the community (Sobha, 1983, p. 122). From milking the cows, looking after the household, fetching water, and selling milk and milk products in the street of Mathura, women discharged almost all the daily functions (Ibid.). But in many cases, men also used to do feeding and milking cattle to help their women. As in one of the paintings of Mughal in which 'there was no strict division of work between men and women in cattle feeding and milking' both men and women were shown doing feeding and milking (Barret & Grey, 1963, p. 88). It seems that the involvement of women in petty commerce is very much confined to milk and its products. But there was a difference in the selling patterns of these items; Gujjar caste women went door to door to sell their milk product, and Ghosi caste women sold things from their homes; they did not go door to door to sell their products. Women of the Gujjars hawked the products from door to door, while those of Ghosi sold these at their own house (Moosvi, 2008, p. 148). However, these working traditions appeared in the lower caste or common peasant families where women work along with their family members. In higher castes, women were not allowed to work in the fields or outside; they had to confine themselves indoors and look after the domestic work, particularly (Moosvi, 2008, p. 141).

In the construction areas, women also were deployed, but we did not find appropriate evidence to evaluate how many women were indulged in this field. Similarly, in some of the Mughal paintings, we get some glimpses of working women in construction fields. In the construction of Mughal Capital Fatehpur Sikri, women were shown in the paintings that they were deployed in very heavy tasks and given the responsibilities of breaking stones and bricks. In another painting, women can be seen carrying pans on their heads and hands. As Geeti Sen says, among the labourers, the banjara women are identified by the decorative bodices and skirts worn (Sen, 1984, p. 91).

It is a well-perceived notion in India that only men can have the right to hold lands and property. Therefore, we do not find enough information about the holding of land and property by women in large numbers. But, on the other hand, we find some exceptional cases where common women hold property rights in the Braj region. Through the documents related to property, we find that women had to move to court to claim their rights on lands. For instance, we see that a few common women were holding some piece of land registered on their names and went to Qazi's court and presented themselves as the owner of that particular land (Habib, 2020). The phenomenon seems very crucial because assigning the property rights of land to a woman was not common in society. But we find very interesting things in these documents: women having their Huliya for their identification. As Irfan Habib says, Huliya was the facial feature recorded, presumably for identification (Ibid.). Moreover, we see some cases where widows were also having land rights. This could happen in some special cases; when a woman's husband dies and he has not left any heir of his property, then his wife can move to court and raise her claim on that property and can demand to transfer that property right in her name. "Some women also received grants of lands in the form of Madad-i-Maash; seventy bighas of land were measured by Ilahi yard in Pargana Kol and were given to Khatoon as Madad-i-Maash in the forty-first regnal year of Aurangzeb (Misra, 1967, p. 153)."

Sati

The most tragic time comes in the life of a woman when her husband dies. In the Braj region also, the custom of Sati prevailed to a certain extent. There were various instances in which a woman had sacrificed herself with her deceased husband. In most cases, widow remarriage is hardly permitted. The custom of Sati was more prevalent in upper-caste women. The wives of Rajputana's cannot avoid being burnt with their husbands if they have no male issue, and if they refuse, are carried by force (Thevenot & Careri, 1949, p. 256-7). We find few cases of sati in lower castes since women in the lower caste experience fewer restrictions in the personal sphere than the upper-class women. If a woman would deny to sacrifice herself with her husband and she has to lead a life of pain and misery, She would also be treated as a burden or face disrespect in society for her entire life. Unlike the Muslim women, widow remarriages were not practiced among Hindus and upper caste communities except for some lower classes (Badayuni, 1884, p. 367). Even Careri comments on the condition of women that Hindus like milkmen, fishermen, washermen, gardeners, and people of many lower castes allowed their women to remarry (Thevenot & Careri, 1949, p. 256-7).

CONCLUSION

As we have discussed at the beginning of this chapter, from ancient times, many restrictions and obligations have been put on women, such as being devoted to their husbands. Once the women were debarred from their rights like education and equality at the religious sphere and economic and social level, their condition worsened in the coming centuries. After the commencement of the bhakti movement in Northern India, women came to a position to set themselves free from the ill practices of society and protested for their rights as well. The impact of the Bhakti movement was varied from region to region in India. Similarly, this distinct impact can be seen on men and women of the Braj region, where the participation and interest of men were quite large but women did not seem interested in the newly established path of devotion by various sects. Thus, we do not find much involvement of women in various religious activities organised by these sects. This happened because women from lower castes had to work the whole day, whether it was domestic work or working in the field with their families. However, most of the female saints come from the higher caste. Therefore, we can see some female devotees also, but most of them were from the higher caste.

Except for the religious sphere, we saw that women were also indulged in petty business managed property and donated to religious sects. This shows the role of women in the economic sphere. In the Braj region, the women also from lower castes were involved in various economic activities and were earning for their families, textile, construction, selling milk products. Women, particularly from the Ahir community, were enjoying a more autonomous life in terms of freedom and widow remarriage because of their community structure. Widow Remarriage was permitted in some of the lower caste communities, but many higher caste people forced their women to commit sati with their deceased husbands. Sati custom was very painful for women because it snatched everything from women, their happiness, joy, compel to wear only white clothes, no use of colour, and considered widow as a curse on society. Therefore, to some extent, Mughals have taken the initiative to ban the Sati custom. They issued a Farman that for a young girl, her consent is mandatory.

The life of ordinary women was simple and had more freedom in the Braj region as compared to other parts of the country. In the Braj region, women have indulged in various agricultural and production activities; in the absence of their husbands, they managed their all work. Moreover, women were engaged in professions of their own choice. As they were sonarin, darjin, kumharin, or nati, and Kanjarini selling minor articles in the streets, and Jauharini also were praised for their skills.

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