

Tracing the Ideas of Emancipation in the Voices of Women Saints of India in Medieval Period

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Abstract

The New education policy 2020 has emphasised on the inclusion of values and facts of the Indian knowledge tradition. Feminist Historians brought out the gaps in documented history and there was a sincere effort to include the voices of women in different spheres. They relied on oral history, folklores, deep investigations of religious and historical documents, music, art, literature of different periods to explore the vast treasure of knowledge. The demographic reality of India and plurality of culture has been a challenge for the researchers. There have been different schools of thought emerging in different parts of the subcontinent which were distinct at times, but there have been instances of alternative voices emerging to challenge the traditional socio religious structure. The Vedic teachings under the Brahminic control continued for long. Bhakti movement is an important phase of social transformation where the leadership came from different sections of the society. During early medieval period, the Southern India saw two distinct groups emerging, the Alvaras and the Nayanars worshiping Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva respectively. The voice to challenge the Brahminic supremacy was prominent. There was an emphasis on freedom to choose one's own spiritual path and follow one's own heart to worship in one's own distinctive way. This was a major social change which perhaps sustained because of the non-threatening method called Bhakti or Devotion. The Gods were given local names and there were many spiritual leaders who took this movement forward with their followers who were actually small localised groups. Many women used this opportunity and joined the movement and expressed their desires with no restraints. The main objective of this study is to trace the egalitarian voices of women saints in the Bhakti Movement and to locate their importance in today's times. It needs to be mentioned here that India ranks at 123rd place out of the 162 nations under gender inequality Index.

But, at the same time, the rising crimes against women, lower status and marginalisation of women cannot be overlooked. Amidst these realities, searching for an egalitarian consciousness in the voices of women saints would not only be limited to an academic exercise but also help to bring an evolved feminist and humanist consciousness in society. This study follows a qualitative approach and methodologies used are descriptive and interpretative discourse analysis.

I. Introduction

The demographic reality of India and plurality of culture has been a challenge for the researchers to study sociocultural history and trends. There have been different schools of thought emerging in different parts of the subcontinent which were distinct at times, but there have been instances of alternative voices emerging to challenge the traditional socio religious structures. The Bhakti movement is considered one such important phase of social transformation which is distinguished because of the unique nature of emancipation that at one level was a radical opposition to the Brahminic Supremacy but at another level was continuing with subtle and soft messages of ultimate love and devotion for the Deity. There was a continuity of worshipping popular symbols and follow the rituals and practices. Historians have emphasised on various characteristics of Bhakti Movement. The one aspect that needs special mention is the leadership of Bhakti movement which came from different sections of the society including the lower castes and tribals. During early medieval period, the Southern India saw two distinct groups emerging, the Alvaras and the Nayanars worshipping Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva respectively. The voice to challenge the Brahminic supremacy was prominent in both these groups. There was an emphasis on freedom to choose one's own spiritual path and follow one's own heart to worship in one's own distinctive way. This was a major social change which perhaps sustained because of the non-threatening method called Bhakti or Devotion. The Gods were given local names and there were many spiritual leaders who took this movement forward with their followers who were actually small localised groups.

While earlier historians had talked about the plurality in leadership, they just made passing reference to women saints. It was only when Feminist Historians Many women used this opportunity and joined the movement and expressed their desires with no restraints. (Oza, 2022). The main objective of this study is to trace the egalitarian voice of women saints in Bhakti Movement in the medieval period and study its importance in today's time. It needs to be mentioned here that India ranks at 123rd place out of the 162 nations under gender inequality Index. But, at the same time, the rising crimes against women, lower status and marginalisation of women cannot be overlooked. Amidst these realities, searching for an egalitarian consciousness in the voices of women saints would not be limited only to be an academic exercise, but also help to bring an evolved feminist and humanist consciousness in society. This study follows a qualitative approach. The methodologies used are descriptive and interpretative discourse analysis.

II. Historical Background

According to renowned Indologist A. B Keith, the Puranic genealogies, the pattavalis of Jains and the works of Buddhists are of considerable historical value. Biographical works by Billahana and Kalhana make substantial contributions to the growth of historiography of serious nature. The political events which took place in India up to twelfth century AD have not been recorded chronologically or systematically because there was no single powerful state that continued to rule the entire subcontinent described as Bharata khanda. There were multiple power centres. Historian Radha Kumud Mukherjee has rightly pointed out that, "History is not merely political and chronological and is not to individual and datable facts and events. History is more important and interesting as history of thought. It is social and cultural history." The historians have found a detailed and systematic method of record keeping in Kautilya's Arthhashashtra. It was a kind of record keeping that was done at the local level. A "Gopa" was an official who was in charge to keep a data of five or ten villages concerning everything important from agricultural products, trade, commerce etc. He also used to maintain a record of social groups as per their profession and occupation and register them. Apart from these records, each successive age left plenty of valuable information about their society in their literature.

Knowledge inequality was evident in ancient Indian culture where society was stratified on the basis of Varna and Caste. Modern historians have brought scholarly articles where they have unanimously agreed that traditional discourses and documented history of the past have mostly been the history that was written by the dominant groups. For the first time when the voices of resentment came, it came from parallel power groups albeit from different localities called Janapadas. Both Buddha and Mahaveer were the sons of small kingdoms outside the powerful ruling kingdoms in the centre. They chose the path of spiritual freedom from the clutches of Brahminic and Vedic domination. They addressed the knowledge gap that was created. People followed them and this itself was a major shift.

Bhakti Movement in Medieval India

Bhakti movement in medieval India brought a new phase in the sociocultural and socio religious history and discourse where the voices of common people were heard and documented. Language other than Sanskrit came to challenge the knowledge dominance of the powerful. In a plural society, a unified culture is a myth. That's why the dominant knowledge traditions have been busted many a times by small movements to bring alternative voices to challenge the reigning knowledge tradition in the society. These voices either have been subsumed within the dominant knowledge tradition or stand on their own feet as a parallel knowledge tradition creating a distinct culture in a parallel social system or in the same social system. Women's role in public space was limited and their access to scholarship and elevated discourse was considerably limited even when their position is exalted by the patriarchal designs on certain occasions.

CE onwards, there was a clear degradation in women's positions in Vedic Smritis. The worst of all is "Manusmriti" as cited by feminist scholars. This indictment of Manu was

actually a code of conduct prescribed for Brahmins which was later used by them to control the society by strict caste and gender-based divisions. The subordination of women had been included in a very systematic way whose reflections were found in many other epics and literature of that period. There was an underlying dissatisfaction amongst people of every stratum that could see that there was an unnecessary restriction on them to follow a religious life. Their love for their God is neither respected nor recognised. Faith is an innate emotion of an individual.

Bhakti is an emotion that is stemmed from faith. So, each one must be free to connect with one's own God the way he or she wants. This emotion is the foundation of Bhakti. The much-used term in common parlance, „unity in diversity“ has a deeper link with Bhakti movement. Bhakti is a tradition, a religion of heart that emphasises on collective participation. Between 600 to 1600 CE, poet saints took to singing bhajans for finding inner peace or register the anguished protest against domination of higher castes. There was a conspicuous presence of interactions between Hindus and Muslims, between the sexes, between different regional cultures, and between Dalits and upper castes. This crucial aspect makes Bhakti movement a powerful political resource. (Howley, 2015).

Scholars and their Views on Voices of Women Saints of Medieval India

Till very recently, empowerment, gender and patriarchy were discussed from the Modern Western Feminist perspective where neither context nor cultural differences were used.

For this study, choosing women saints from both Shaivite and Vaishnavite schools was a purposeful choice to bring a comparative analysis into the socio cultural and socio-political discourse. The emergence of these voices cannot be seen from a singular lense of women saints rising against patriarchy. The very fact that these women saints belonged to different time periods spanning more than seven decades and were of different social categories make this study complex and interesting. Talking of the plurality of culture, they have been taken from different parts of the subcontinent that was neither united under a single ruler nor followed a uniform code of socioreligious practice.

There have been a number of books and research papers on Bhakti movement. Each scholar's work has added to the discourse on Bhakti movement in general and the role of women saints in Bhakti movement in particular. However, a meta-analysis was found ineffective to bring out the essence of scholarly dispositions. Hence, an interpretative discourse analysis was applied while studying the works of different scholars. It was found that Eleanor Zelliott's article on Hindu Women saints in Mediaval Maharashtra makes an insightful observation of women saints starting with Mukta Bai in 9th century to Bahina Bai in 17th century. Her focus on one thing that was strikingly unusual in Maharashtra was the rise of Bhakti saints who were from lower castes who even were untouchables. The voice and tone they used in their poems were softer and there was a complete surrender for their Lord Vithala or Panduranga. They followed very simple methods of worship like singing songs of love to their God but didn't renounce homes like some of their contemporaries like

Akka Mahadevi of Karnataka (12th Century), or Lal Ded in Kashmir (14th Century). (Bose, 2000).

Chitalkar's explanation of the gender in Indian context is broad. The spiritual unity aspect that is missed in previous explanations is treated as most vital. She brought an important argument in support of an insightful study of the emancipatory voices of women saints of medieval India within the cultural context. According to her, the colonial framework of understanding patriarchy, gender, and egalitarianism is restrictive, biased and west centric. Therefore, it should be shunned and a more appropriate methodology that is culturally and contextually appropriate should be used. (Roy, 2022).

Life behind the Songs of Devotion of Four Women Saints

Akka Mahadevi emerged as a strong voice of Vira Saivism – the radical religious movement that started in 12th century AD in Karnataka. It was led by the Lingayat Community. Akka Mahadevi was born in a Lingayat family and was introduced to Shiva worship in her childhood. The Virasaivites were searching for means to Brahminic dominance and thus wanted to create space for themselves through a religious movement that challenged the existing social norms. As a woman saint, Akka Mahadevi worshipped Shiva and lived identical life like Shiva renouncing the world and all social norms. Her life and teachings were probably the most radical of all the writings during medieval period. She was wilfully rebellious in her writings and in her behaviour to the extent that she opposed the established social institutions, mores, and norms. At times she used strong sexual imageries to represent the union between the devotee and the object of devotion. In one of her Vachana she writes, “I saw the haughty master, Mallikarjuna, for whom men, all men, are but women, wives.” Thus, there is a strong challenge to the common understandings of sexual identity. In some vachanas, she describes herself as both feminine and masculine. The sexually intense and sensual natures of her Vachanas were not only radical but it reflected her unapologetic desires for union outside her marriage. She regarded Chennamallikarjuna as her illicit lover and her husband too. She was not only a mystique poet and a seer but she was a social reformer too. She wrote about 430 Vachanas which are considered a form of spontaneous mystical poems and two short writings called Mantragopya and the Yogangatrividha.

Lal Ded in Kashmiri is name people used for Lalleswari or Lalla Arifa. She was born in a Pandit family in Kashmir. She had got preliminary education at her parental house and as was the social norm was married off at a young age. She was leading an unhappy life in a graceless marriage. She would often sit in the banks of the river while she used to go to fetch water and ruminate over her life. She was influenced by the Shaivite teachings of Sidh Shrikanth. Through her Vaks or verses what comes forth clearly is her own internal power that prompted her to shun the marital ties and opt for a tough life of a wanderer. She often mentioned the union of Shiva and Shakti as the ideal union. She wrote, “My Guru gave a single precept: turn your gaze from outside to inside, fix it on the hidden self. I, Lalla, took this to heart and naked set forth to dance.” When she turned into a mystique and left home,

many people came under her influence. She used the local language to recite her Vaks and the issues were close to the hearts of common people. The very fact that without any trace of her work documented during her time, they lived through the folklores of Kashmir who kept her work alive till they were documented after 200 years. (Schelling, 2014).

Saint Poet Jana Bai is one of the most revered and popular leaders of Bhakti Movement. She called herself, “Jani Dasi Namyachi” which literally meant Jani the servant of Nama which refers to saint poet Namadeva who was her master who was popular within the Warkari Community of Maharashtra. People of Maharashtra take Janabai’s name with reverence as they take the names of Saints like Dnyaneshvar, Eknath, and Tukaram. She has written about 350 poems. These are called “Abhangas”. The themes of Janabai’s poems range from glorification of God Vithoba to spiritual issues of general character pertaining to her status as a woman and as a servant maid. She often mentioned about her low origins. She often found her spiritual joy while doing her routine household chores like cleaning, washing, collecting cowdung but, mostly grinding. She could grind for hours to feed all 14 members of Namdev’s household all the while composing and humming the songs. They are popular as „grind mill songs. So popular was Janabai and her songs that in 1949 G.V. Sane, Dadabhai Phalke’s assistant made a film on the life of this Bhakti Saint.

Mirabai lived from 1498 to 1545 was a princess. Her love for Krishna was so deep that she couldn’t think her life without Krishna. As the legend goes, her husband, the king was so unhappy with Mirabai’s craziness and way of life that he gave her poison and Mirabai drank it with a smile. But, it was Krishna who saved her. She wrote, “Why must I not hate your palace, Rana? You sent me the cup of poison to kill. Lo, I drank it as the offering to my lord.” This was a miracle that changed the perception of people who were around her. The story became so popular that Mirabai was given the status of the most powerful devotee of lord Krishna. She called herself an eternal slave of Krishna. This aspect though is contested by researchers; the psychological state of complete surrender is significant when she calls herself, an eternal slave of Krishna. Mira defied and showed complete disregard to popular customs of Rajput clan. She refused to commit Sati when her husband died because she considered herself eternally married to lord Krishna. She had accepted Saint Ravidas who belonged to the „untouchable“ community as her Guru going against the caste-based restrictions on her. The popularity and respect Mirabai got in subsequent times become an area for deeper investigation by interdisciplinary researchers. “Nothing is mine, except Krishna, O” my parents, I have searched the world and found nothing worthy of love. Hence I am a stranger amidst my kinfolk and an exile from their company, since I seek the companionship of holy men; There alone do I feel happy. Mira is absorbed in the contemplation of Krishna; she is with God and all is well!”. These lines are not just an expression of spiritual thoughts of Mirabai, but it reflects a strong angst and discontent for social rules and regulations that didn’t allow a woman to lead her life even for spiritual and cosmic contemplation. Her poetry showed the tenderness of a woman’s heart which longs for a union with her consort but at the same time there is a mention that this union is

beyond the understanding of preconditioned minds of narrow and restrictive society. Mirabai stood against the conventions of time.

An Interpretative Analysis

The role played by Oral tradition and hagiographic narratives is immense when it comes to remember the works of women saints of medieval India. The most common factor was most of them were young and impressionable when they were introduced to the God they worshipped. There was a strange tendency to exalt these women saints and give them a glorified position but, in the folklore, many years after their death their songs, bhajans and kirtans were not performed in public. The voice of sensuality that often was openly expressed as love and union with the God was spiritual in essence but quite similar to human longing and desire for intimacy. Therefore, it was not only unusual but also emancipatory from the womanhood that was prescribed in Manusmriti. They were crossing the lines drawn by denouncing families, asking freedom from marriages and often turning into wondering monks. Both Akka Mahadevi of Karnataka and Lal Ded of Kashmir made bold and powerful announcements against the patriarchy and asked tough questions.

The most emancipatory message that the Bhakti movement could create was creating a space in religious sphere for women of diverse backgrounds. Religion that was a major public sphere had mostly been dominated by men. The very fact that the women saints during Bhakti movement didn't have anything in common. Some were prosperous while some were poor, some were married and some refused matrimony, some were Brahmins or from other upper castes where as some others were Shudras or lower castes, some were from royal lineage and some were even prostitutes. The one thing that was common was they expressed themselves without fear and challenged the established social norms. These women saints penned songs and poems about their oppression and discrimination, their love for God as their lover, husband, or consort.

They expressed their desire to be liberated from all social chains. They broke the stereotypes that women were only meant to be wives, mothers, or slaves. Many of these rigid social expectations were flipped by them as they jumped the boundaries. They used the common language they spoke to create poetry; they made the rules of worship simple and uncomplicated; they even chose asceticism and role of religious leadership. They made their God a close confidante who is friendly and easy to please, who is always by their side as a close companion, a guide, a friend, a lover or a husband. But society was not ready to be very accepting of the women saints who professed their Bhakti for their Male Gods. Bhakti movement that was mostly dominated by men had no trouble in gaining acceptance in society. Whereas most of the women saints either left their homes or were treated like outcastes in their own homes even after they have had few people openly expressing their desires to follow their teachings. These women saints had to face challenges at multiple levels throughout their lives. The common social perception of these saints was that of a deviant and hence women were not allowed to be followers of these women saints.

During 16th century, women were considered subordinate to men even in their

spiritual worth and were expected only to assist men in their worldly as well as spiritual pursuits. It was during such a time; women saints like Mirabai chose to defy every social rule that wanted her to shun her spiritual path. Her Bhakti became legendary and the entire North India came under the influence of Mirabai's unflinching devotion for Lord Krishna. The Varkari community of Maharashtra is an example of consolidation of the power that stemmed from religious movements against the dominant social structure marked by Brahminic supremacy. As most of the women saints and devotees were brought up and raised to believe that a woman's allegiance is always towards the patriarch be it their fathers or their husbands, they couldn't move away from choosing their God in any other position than their masters. Majority of them were married and lived within families. So, their devotion to God was through all the household chores. The example of Janabai is a proof to it. They often found themselves struggling to balance their dedication to God and their commitment to domesticity. They rejected the institutionalised religion and put a strong emphasis on personal devotion.

III. Conclusion

English Historians wrote about thousands of years of history in the subcontinent in such simplistic way that the maladies were highlighted, the divisiveness were focused and the forces that disunited were injected into the psyche of Indians. The simple living and rich ecological value system that respected nature, flora and fauna was looked down and completely disregarded. The local cultures rooted in simple spiritual traditions were never written about. It is a matter of logical analysis and scholarly investigation to find the common sources of unifying ideas, ideologies, and values that played an important role to create a knowledge tradition that stayed vibrant and rich. Therefore, we didn't see any detailed accounts of Bhakti movement in the subcontinent till feminist historians emphasised on rewriting history. Centrality of India gave India an advantage to continue as a Civilisational state that survived the savages of history. The Multipolarity and Human Resources complemented each other and helped to fight with external aggressions and internal strife. The world offered challenges, but there was some unique resilience that the people showed and bounced back. There have been conscious attempts to distance India from the history, culture and traditions. Macaulay's design to rule through English language not only succeeded to establish English language as a force to rule and govern but it erased everything that was traditional and was rich because of thousands of years of civilisational history. Umesh Kadam, member secretary of ICHR announced that by March, 2023 the first volume of Comprehensive History of India will come out. This project, "Comprehensive history of India" is planned to bring out 12-14 volumes within next four years. These volumes will cover Indian history from the time of Indus Valley Civilisation till today. More than 100 historians from across the country are working on this project. The aim is to focus on the history, culture, and traditions of India using vernacular sources and bring out the pride, glory and uniqueness of a civilisation that emerged glorious amidst all attempts of sabotage and savages. The future generations must grow up feeling proud to know their

rich cultural heritage. History of a nation must be written from a geo cultural perspective and not with a geopolitical perspective. Tracing the ideas of emancipation and egalitarianism in the voices of women saints of India in the medieval period must find a place in the lofty scheme of writing the Comprehensive History of India.

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