

PHILOSOPHY OF LOVE AND DEVOTION WITH REFERENCE TO INDIAN FEMALE SAINTS MUKTABAI AND MIRABAI

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Abstract: In Indian tradition, Bhakti (devotion) is one of the ways of final liberation. Bhakti understood as loving devotion to God as the supreme person, is portrayed in the mystic experience of God, as revealed vividly in the God-intoxicated saints of India. There are different ways in which mystic saints experience God. The bhakti or devotional movements in medieval India witnessed the emergence of shudra saints, anti-caste leaders, and women saints. Given a patriarchal social set-up that denied the freedom to women, spirituality provided the only means of self-expression. Women saints ranged from the conformists, the wives, daughters, or sisters of male saints, to the rebels who broke every social norm, including discarding clothes. Some of the saints looked upon themselves as brides of the Lord. The compositions of rebel saints use mystic imagery and reflect their social alienation. Interestingly, the conformists and the revolutionaries have found acceptance in the modern Hindu tradition. This work is a brief thematic analysis of the work of the Indian female Saints Muktabai and Mirabai, two great female mystical saint poetesses in the History of Indian tradition.

I. Introduction

One achieves *Bhakti*, love of God by hearing and chanting about the Supreme Lord's special qualities, even while engaged in the ordinary activities of life in this world.....SrimadBhagavatam. (Narada *Bhakti Sutra* Chapter 3)

Bhakti (Sanskrit: भक्ति) literally means “attachment, participation, devotion to, fondness for, homage, faith or love, worship, piety to (as a religious principle or means of salvation).” *Bhakti*, in Hinduism, refers to devotion and the love of a personal god or a representational god by a devotee. *Bhakti* is for the human being of a mainly emotional nature, for the lover. He/she personalizes God and uses human forms of relationship to symbolize his love for God. He also brings rituals, flowers, incense, beautiful buildings, forms, and other things to aid his religious practice and express his love for God. Some puritanical people look askance at such forms of adoration. However, they forget that spiritual giants, great mystics, and saints have mostly come from the ranks of the followers of such *Bhakti* cult, and also that from their own ranks have come only either un-aesthetic or atheistic passionate puritans or men who have reduced religion into a branch of social reform. For *Bhakta*, rituals and mythologies are forms that make God tangible to them, and men who have no sensitivity to these have no right to condemn them. The *Bhakta* surrenders in such a way that he does his daily chores, and he/she indulges in his/her worldly affairs, and keeps the Lord in his mind. His mind is the entire time one with the Lord.

To the *Bhaktas*, the rationalists who try to capture God in the net of their intellect seem senseless. They appear to them as senseless, like men who break a

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beautiful statue to know what material it is made of. *Bhakti Yoga* teaches them how to love without any motives-loving God and to love God because it is good to do so, not for going to heaven, nor to get children, wealth, or any worldly advantages. It teaches them that love itself is the highest recompense of love. God, Himself is love.

II. Bhakti, its origin and development in Indian Tradition

According to S. Radhakrishnan, “*Bhakti* can be considered the emotional attachment distinct from other paths like knowledge or action.” (Radhakrishnan, 1923, 558) Swami Vivekananda considers *bhakti* as an ordinary emotion that can be converted into powerful feelings; ordinary love can be converted into Divine love or Supreme Devotion, i.e., the *Bhakti Maya*. (Lal, 1973, 33)

Bhakti philosophy, i.e., devotion to a personal God, became a movement in the medieval period of Indian history. The *bhakti* cult is also known as Vaisnavism, where Vishnu is the *Bhagavata* (glorious), *Purusottoma* (the supreme person), Narayana, and Hari is the sole lord. (Murthy, 1973, 9) The history of *bhakti*, however, can be traced back to the *Rig Vedic* Age. Vishnu is referred to a number of times in *Rig Veda*. It refers that Vishnu strode over this universe in three places he planted his steps, enveloped in his deity. Vishnu, the unconquerable preserver, stood three steps, thereby maintaining fixed ordinances. Upanisadic *upasanas* are regarded as the origin of the *bhakti* movement by R.G. Bhandarkar. In Panini’s *Astadhyayi* (5th century B.C.), the word *bhakti* means a thing to be liked or loved. (Neog, 1982, 8) But it was not necessarily to God. According to the Upanishads, the Absolute and God are one, he is the supreme Brahman to emphasize the transcendence of the finite, and he is called *Isvara* to emphasize the personal aspect of religious devotion. (Ibid., 9) There are different views regarding the origin of *bhakti* in Indian culture and religious practices. Its development can be traced to the *Vedic* literature, which can be discerned in the verb *bhajamahe* in the mantra: *tamu stotah: visnu sumatim bhajamahe* (1.156:3).

There are other mantras as well. *Yajnas* are the earliest form of *bhakti*. The *Upasana* (Worship of the “*Upasana Kanda*” of the *Khanda Traya* is another form of *bhakti*. The worship of the Supreme Beings (that we can term for the present purpose as *bhakti*) is suggested in the Vedas, as it is the only path to reach the Supreme Being’s abode. (Singh, 2008, 2) The seeker should go to his/hers shelter, *tvamagne vratapa asi deva a martyesva/ tvam yajnesvidyah* (*Rigveda*, 8.11.1).

Further, the seeker considers Him/her everything, i.e., mother, father, brother, nourisher (*Yajurveda*, 32.10), and protector. The study of the Vedic discourse reveals that the Vedas are the source of the origin of spirit of *bhakti*, though the term is nowhere used. The attributes of *bhakti* can be seen in the relationship between sought or to be established between the seeker and the Supreme Being, known by different names in the Vedas.

Even the shelter of the Supreme Being, the coveted destination of the seeker (*Bhakta*) here, is mentioned in the *Rgveda*:

*Urum no lokamanu nesi vidvantasvarva jyyotirabhauam svasti/
Rasva ta indra sthavirusya bahu upastheyam sarana brahanta//* (6.47.8)

The *Upanishads*, e.g., *Mundakopanisad* (2.2.4), *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (6.11), and *Chandogyopanisad* (3.18.1), consider the attributes of *bhakti* in various ways. The term *bhakti* appears for the first time in the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (6.23.4). The *Svetasvatara Upanishad* further mentions the shelter of the Lord as the basic tenet of the *bhakti*.

The *Upanishadic* discourse suggested the states of devotion being (*Mundakopanisad*, 3.1.1), the primacy of faith of the knower/ seeker (the *Mundakopanisad*, 1.2.11), and even the inefficacy of the role of *guru* (teacher) in the Odyssey of the seeker (*Kathopanisad*, 1.2.7). However, only that person becomes a devotee (*bhakti*) whom God bestows upon with *bhakti* or devotion (*Kathopanisad*, 1.2.24). However, the *bhakti* referred to in the *Upanishads* is mere 'dry' devotion, worship, or ritual. In lack of living, love in its various forms— an essential attribute of *bhakti*. The Upanishadic discourse was a way of thinking from a way of living in Vedas, marking a shift to *jnana* (Knowledge) from *karma* (action) and abstract from concrete. It left no space for delicate devotional feelings, as found much later in the *bhakti* discourse.

The *Gita*, after the *Upanishads*, discusses *jnana*, *karma*, and *bhakti*, though it lays greater emphasis on *jnana*. Each human being is born to act. However, it (action) should be without *Sasaki* (attachment) and dedicated to Lord. The *jnana* (knowledge) acts as a raft, as Krishna says to Arjuna:

*Api cedasi papebhyah sarvebhyah papkrttamah|
Sarvam jnana-plavenaiva vrajinam santarisyasi|* (4.36)

Even if you were the faultiest of all sinners, this *jnana* (knowledge) alone would carry you like a raft across all your sins.

He further says:

*Yathaidhamsi samiddho 'agnirbhasmasat kurute' rjuna|
Jnanagnih sarva-karmani bhasmasat kurute tatha||* (4.37)

As the blazing fire turns the fuel to ashes, Arjuna, even so the fire of knowledge turns all actions to ashes. The Lord in *Gita* says, *mayyarpitano buddhirjo mad bhaktah sa me Priya* (12.14). He who has dedicated his *mana* (mind) and *buddhi* (intellect) is a *bhakti* (devotee) dear to me. Krishna says that He is *jnana* (knowledge). "The man of knowledge is My own self. He is identical with Me; therefore, he is dear to Me, and I am dear to Myself". (*Gita*, 7.17-18) It means that the *jnana* (one who has attained knowledge) is at the highest rung. Devotion is the means, not the end. The *Gita* sees devotees in four categories (Singh, 2008, 4):

*Caturvidha bhaiante man ianah sukrino rjuna|
Arto jijnasure artharthi jnani ca bharatarsabhu||* (7.16)

1. In the first category is the devotee, who is in some trouble and wishes to be saved from the (*artha*)

2. The second type is *jijnasu*, or inquisitive, who prays to God to know the secret of lineage not a single heir of his dynasty should be born lineage not a single heir of his dynasty should be born to boast of the temple being constructed by his ancestors

3. The seekers of worldly possessions. Some people are clear about what they want and take the shelter of God because they are convinced; that only God can provide what they seek. King *Dhruv* is an apt example. When *Dhruv* was a small boy, he felt neglected by his father, King *Uttanapada*. Disheartened, he went into the forest and did penance to please God and wanted to become more powerful than his father. However, as his devotion grew, he realized that God possessed the priceless jewel of divine love, and what he was seeking was like broken pieces of glass. Therefore, when pleased with his devotion, God gave him *darshan*, he requested the Lord to bestow upon him; self-less pure love.

4. Those situated in knowledge. Lastly, those souls who understand that they are tiny parts of God. Such people engage in devotion with the intent that it is their eternal duty to love and serve Him. Shree Krishna calls them the fourth kind of devotees.

III. Historical Background of Bhakti in India

Andal *The Bhakti* movement started in the seventh century from the south by mainly Sancharacharya and the *Alvaras* from Tamil Nadu. It later spread to north India, i.e., Karnataka, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Punjab, and Kashmir. It spread across northern India in the fifteenth century and peaked in the seventeenth century. India is a land of *Bhaktas* and Saints—Narshi Mehta, Meerabai, Kabir, Tulsidas, Namdev, Tukaram, Gyaneshwar, Muktabia, etc.

Bhakti flourished in South India with the rise of a group called *Alvars* from the 6th – the 9th century. They followed the path of spiritual liberation through the medium of music and dance, songs, and poetry. Their movement was a reaction against the caste and ritual-ridden society. They began to compose and sing their songs in the vernacular language as a reaction against the Sanskrit language, which was considered the language of the elite. Their poems reflect the struggle of a living person questioning his own experience in native speech. These saints went from temple to temple and, by singing and dancing, chanting the lord's name. A large group of people (devotees) followed their path, and it took the shape of the movement. In the early phase of the movement, it was more spiritual than social. (Kabita, 2011, 8)

There were twelve Alwar poets Nammalwar, Madhur Kavi, Periya, Aantal (Andal), Paigaiyer, Pudatta, Tirumalsiar, Tiruppan, Tundaradipuri, Tirumangalai, Kulsekhar and among them one was Brahmin, Periyalwar and one-woman Andal.

Andal considered herself married to lord Krishna. She introduced a strong note of bridal mysticism. The songs of the Alwar poet reflect that the soul does not find rest until it finds God. (Murthy, 1973, 15) they followed the books like Bhagavata Gita and Bhagavata. The Alvars represented spirituality and divinity in their faith. “The Bhagavata Purana mention that men who have born in the age of Kreta, Treta and Dwapara will wish to take birth in Kali age, because in that age great soul would born, who will become the devotee places, but in Dravida land they would be found in great numbers near the rivers like Tamraparni, Kretamala, Payasvini, Kaveri.” (Neog, 1982, 31) Along with the Alvars, there also emerged a group of Saiva bhaktas Nayanmars. The Nayanmars reacted against Buddhism, Jainism, and even Vaishnavism. Their bhakti poems were like the instruments of religious war. (Das, 1998, 12) The Nayanmars, to preach their devotion, composed a number of literature like Tevaram, Periya Puranam, *Saiva*

Siddhanta shastras, and so on. The *Virasaivas* were also *Saiva bhaktas*. The main emphasis of their devotion was “greatness of God and the feeling of submission, self-abnegation and self-surrender to God.” (Majumdar, 1979) Medieval India is noted for a new influence that came from Islam. To an extent, the modern period (15th century and afterward), along with Hinduism, came under the influence of Christianity. It also saw the decline of Jainism and the almost total disappearance of Buddhism from India, the land of its birth. As in European countries, the medieval period saw the growth of the devotional path or *Bhakti Yoga* in India. From within the fold of Hinduism came up a simple flock that took the advice of *Bhagwad-Gita* seriously and followed the path of *Bhakti*. It was later named the Bhakti movement, which produced some of the finest flowers of Hindu spirituality and continues to nourish much Indian piety even today.

The *bhakti* cult or devotional path flourished throughout India during the Middle Ages. Many great saint poetesses wrote poems and hymns in local languages during this period. Many of them were charitable and catholic in their views. Since the poetry of women saint-poet falls under the category of *bhakti*, it would be appropriate to contextualize it by discussing *bhakti*, the movement, and the contribution of women to the body of *bhakti* poetry.

IV. Philosophy of Mysticism

Mysticism stands for the sublimity of the soul through the purification of the heart. It promotes one to gain the personal experience of God, making him or her a God-intoxicated soul. In short, it is a process to know God, which is the highest ideal. Thus, mysticism in humanistic terms is an endeavor to have a person-to-person experience or relation within humanity as a love-intoxicated human being to be thrilled in knowing the other, seeking the other, feeling one with the other, and with all its possibility merging one with the entire humanity losing one's own concerns of self-interest and ultimately, in this process, the otherness is gone. The we-ness is born, extending its limits from the human to the entire levels of existence consisting of the human, animal, green, brown, and the entire universe. Mystic experiences are often attributed to occult practices or mysterious phenomena. Etymologically mysticism can be attributed to the Greek root “*muo*,” which means “to conceal.” (Roy, 2010, 15) What is hidden is not common to the common flock, but the mystic has the key to unlock it. What is concealed is revealed through the mystics. ‘Mystics’ is also described as Greek “*mustein*,” which means “to shut one's lips.” So, mysticism may be considered philosophy, realization, or enjoyment of God in silence. As found in Christianity, Islam, or any literature of India, it might be called a philosophy of asceticism or “*Mauna*.” (Ibid., 16)

Mysticism is derived from the Greek word “*mystikos*,” which means initiation. It is the pursuit of communion or identity with or conscious awareness of ultimate reality/the divine, spiritual truth, or God through direct experience, intuition, or insight. Traditions may include believing in the literal existence of dimensional realities beyond empirical perception or that accurate human perception of the world transcends logical reasoning or intellectual comprehension. A person delving deep into these areas may be called a mystic. In many cases, the purpose of mysticism and mystical discipline such as meditation is to reach a state of return or reintegration into Godhead. A common theme of

mysticism is that the mystic and all of reality are one. The purpose of mysticism practice is to achieve that oneness in experience to transcend identity and re-identity with all that is. The state has many names depending on the mystical system.

A mystical union is claimed to be the direct transforming experience of the unification of man's soul with the highest reality. It is indeed the most authentic ascent of the human spirit. It is synonymous with ecstasy, beatific union, *smadhi*, *satori*, *nirvana*, etc. it refers to the core of religious life. Mystical experience refers to an experience that fills a person with spiritual insight, enlightenment, and exaltation. (Roy, 2010, 16)

The term "mysticism" is often used to refer to beliefs that go beyond the purely esoteric practices of mainstream religions while still being related to or based on mainstream religious doctrine. Mysticism is usually understood in religious contexts; transcendent experiences may happen to anyone, regardless of religious training or inclinations. Such experiences may occur unbidden and without preparation at any time and might not be understood as religious experiences. The artist or athlete may experience a momentary unity as a perceived interconnection with the existence or a loss of self-accompanied by feelings of euphoria. However, an authentic mystic's ultimate goal is sustained full consciousness through self-knowledge.

V. Vedic Women Saints

From the Vedic times to the 20th Century, we have many women saints, from Hindu, Jaina, Buddhism, Sikh, Christian, and Muslim traditions, who have hallowed this land. Many women saints are unknown, except in local regions and vernacular literature. Many were poetesses; a few were princesses who did much temple building and charities. In the medieval period, women were confined to homes. According to some moral codes, women were prohibited from studying or chanting Vedas and Vedic *mantras*, including the famous *Gayatrimantra*. In contrast, *mantras* were invoked as female deities or goddesses. However, the Vedic *Rishis* and wives have learned about women and even participated in serious philosophical conversations and discussions.

We find numerous women sages and saints mentioned in the Vedas and the Vedanta, the Upanishads. Many are *yoginis* and poetesses under the shadow of their husbands, who were great *rishis* and philosophers. We hear of Gargi, who questioned her husband Yagnavalkya on esoteric wisdom. Maitreyi, Aditi, Indrani, and so on, while women's position was lower in the earlier period, in Rig-Vedic times, they enjoyed greater freedom and equality. In Rig Veda, we find hymns, *Devi Sukta*, sung by Vach, daughter of the sage Ambhrina. This poetess was later identified with Goddess Saraswati, the Goddess of Speech. This hymn has been part of *Shakti* worship in later times. Vishwavara, another seer who was sage Uddalaka's wife, worships Agni for a happy wedded life thus (Roy, 2010, 97-98):

Repress our foes, O Fire:, to ensure our great good fortune;
Let the riches brought by you be of the highest excellence;
Make the wedded life fully restrained;
Overpower the strength of those who are hostile to us.

Another reckoned woman seer is Godhadevi; Agastya's wife, Lopamudra, gave a few hymns. Her poems show her appeal for conjugal love with her ascetic husband, who spent time in austerities. The *bhakti* cult or devotional path flourished throughout India during the Middle Ages. During this period, many great saint poetesses wrote poems and hymns in local languages and dialects of Hindi, Marathi, and other languages like Muktabai and Mirabai. Many of them were charitable and catholic in their views.

VI. Women Saints in the Medieval Period

Spirituality provided Indian women with that freedom that orthodox Hindu society denied them. The emergence of women saints occurred in the context of the *bhakti* or devotional movements that characterized the medieval age in India. The movement began in the sixth-seventh century in South India and gradually spread throughout the country. It lasted till the sixteenth-seventeenth century. Most of these devotional cults were heterodox and reflective of an inner social ferment. The *Bhakti* movement in India, by and large, was marked by the rejection of the existing ritual hierarchy and Brahmanical superiority; the use of the vernacular in preference to Sanskrit (the language of the elite); and the emergence of low-caste, non-literate persons as great spiritual leaders. There was large-scale participation of peasantry, artisans, and other lower classes and ritually inferior but economically powerful groups such as skilled craftsmen in these devotional movements. The emergence of women saints during this period is significant in light of this background. The morphology of feminine spirituality in India lies in the long record of male oppression and sexual exploitation, which characterized the condition of women in traditional India. Indian society being essentially patriarchal, the position of women was considered markedly inferior. The birth of daughters was an occasion for mourning rather than rejoicing. Girls constituted an economic drain because, while no material returns could be hoped for from them, one also had to spend a fortune on their dowry at the time of their marriage. The north Indian milieu presented a particularly grim picture. The Rajputs and other social groups in northern India experienced the most significant threat from the invaders. For the warring clans of Rajputana, the crying need was for soldiering sons, not daughters. Perhaps this consideration led the Rajputs to indulge in the horrendous practice of female infanticide. This evil persists in some backward regions of Rajasthan and other states.

From the earliest historical times, Dharmashastras and the *Smritis*, especially *Manusmṛiti*, enjoined upon women obedience, chastity, and surrender to the male, be it father, husband, or son. Women entered their husbands' homes as a child-bride, which enabled their conditioning into a position of helplessness. The women were illiterate and knew little else besides domestic skills. Two medieval customs reinforced and strengthened the exploitation of women. Two primary factors behind the social exploitation of women were their lack of education and economic independence. In brief, the role assigned to women in traditional Indian society consisted of these two extremes - the sacrificing mother, chaste wife, obedient daughter, or, alternately, the prostitute. Thus, the traditional society provided no scope for women's independence or self-expression. The spiritual path helped women to break out of all stereotypes. As a saint, she made the

unacceptable acceptable. She broke out of the chains of tradition, orthodoxy, and gathering.

The women saints in medieval South India emerged in an atmosphere of discrimination and suppression but blossomed into thinkers, scholars, and realized souls. Their life and works constitute the supreme form of the self-expression of women. Consciously or unconsciously, these women saints departed from the norms of social behavior and spurned the limitations imposed by their families and society. It is a moot point whether their compositions carried the overtones of protest. Their very emergence was a social revolt in itself. One of the main thrusts of this paper is that female spiritualism, per se, indicated a break with the existing social order even though there were both conformists and rebels among the women saint. The life and works of the women saints are shrouded in mystery, unlike that of the men saints. It was partly because none of them established a *guruparampara* or monastic tradition with disciples who might have preserved the sayings or compositions of the saints. Mira, too, had a following, and the "Mirabai" seemed to have constituted a minor sect in the medieval period. However, very few of the north Indian women saints really gained any recognition of their spiritual greatness during their lifetime. Their contemporaries usually scorned them as "mad" and "shameless." Lalla was called "mats" or mad, and Mira referred to herself as *Diwani*, who is not in her senses. It is possible to explain the differential impact of women saints in north and south India in terms of the perception of real or imaginary threats to the social fabric in northern India leading to greater rigidity and restrictions on women in contrast to the south. In northern India, the compositions of Mirabai of Rajasthan and Lalleswari of Kashmir have been better preserved than others. The solid musical appeal of these compositions may also have resulted in their being passed down through the generations as musical traditions.

An analysis of the social background of women saints indicated that since quite a few came from the priestly class, they have had access to religious or spiritual knowledge. It is true of Lalleswari or Lalla and Rupa Bhavani of Kashmir; Muktabai, Bahinabai, and Mahadambai (the earliest poetesses in Marathi literature who lived in the 13th century) of Maharashtra; and among the South Indian saints Aandal. These women, though excluded from scriptural knowledge, could and did have access to knowledge that was based on folk traditions. Their language was not Sanskrit but the local language. It made possible the tremendous contribution of women to vernacular literature. Akka Mahādevi's contributions to Kannada literature are paralleled by similar achievements by north Indian saints - Lalla to Kashmiri, Meera to Hindi, etc.

Hindu scriptures provide the path of renunciation for men in the final *asrama* or stage of life prescribed – *sanyasa* (renunciation). It was, however, only the upper castes who were qualified to adopt this course. This spiritual path was closed to men of lower castes as well as women. Therefore, while Jnaneswar would have social sanction for their renunciation, female asceticism was, prima facie, a flouting of existing social conventions. However, the medieval bhakti movements provided the scope for changing the existing order of things. In overturning social conventions, both the woman saint and the low-caste male saint find a certain degree of acceptability. These women saints can be classified into a few broad categories based on their choice of the spiritual path and their particular interaction with traditional society. It is interesting to note that,

irrespective of whether they were married, many women saints believed themselves to be brides of the Lord. Mira looked upon Lord Krishna as her husband and put the bridal garland upon him. She sang: "Giridhar Gopal is my husband, I have no other." It was not a vague or metaphysical relationship but a physical surrender of oneself, body and soul, to one's divine husband. Some of the women saints use very powerful imagery in their compositions. However, the most unusual or startling imageries are to be found in the *abhangs* (hymns) of Muktabai, the sister of Jnanadev. To Changadeva, one of her principal followers, she said he should speak words of silence (abhang 9) and sleep the sleep of ecstasy wherein the unstuck sound is heard (abhang 10). "In that state," says Muktabai, "the bridegroom will come from the womb of the bride, and as the bridegroom comes out, the bride will vanish from before him and there will be no limit to the happiness that may be enjoyed" (abhang 12 - Ranade 1983: 206). The only parallel with the mystic imagery of Muktabai is the *ulat sawayyan* or the inverted truths, found in Kabir's poetry, such as the tree with its roots outside and the branches beneath the earth, the upside-down well, etc. Along with the male saints of the bhakti movement, the compositions of the women saints marked a substantial contribution to the growth of vernacular literature like Lalla to Kashmiri, Akka Mahadevi to Kannada, and Mira to Hindi.

VII. Muktabai (1279-1297)

Muktabai was a great female Saint in the *Warkari* tradition from Alandi, Maharashtra, India. (Bose, 2000, 192) hus, Muktabai, as per her name, was one of the eminent women Saints of Maharashtra who had simplified the path of self-realization, i.e., to be liberated or "*Mukta*." Her parents, Vitthalpant Govind Kulkarni and Rukmini, were a pious couple from Apegaon near Paithon. By tradition, while Muktabai is hailed as the incarnation of Goddess Adi Shakti or Saraswati, the primordial power of the Supreme Reality, her three brothers, the *mahayogis* Nivrutti, Jnanadev, and Sopandev, were the incarnations of Bhagavan Sadashiva, Lord Vishnu and Lord Brahma. The youngest of the siblings, Mukta Bai, was known for her simple and straightforward expression of thoughts. Born to Vittalpant and Rukmini, In Alandi in 1199, she was the youngest amongst her brothers, though she was the authority of spirituality among them. (Roy, 2010, 101) Vitthalpant had studied the Vedas, and he went on a pilgrimage with his wife's permission. However, due to his Guru's (Ramananda Swami) order, he had to abandon Sanyas, leave Kashi, and return to his marriage. It was unacceptable to the orthodox authorities, so the family was excommunicated. The authorities assured them of accepting their children if they committed suicide as a punishment; therefore, Vitthalpant and Rukmini committed suicide; but society did not accept those children, and the children had to survive by begging. However, these children emerged as great spiritual saints who, through their knowledge and spiritual intelligence, were accepted by society and became great saints of Maharashtra.

Muktabai was the youngest sister of saint Jnyaneshwar, Nivrithinath and Sopan. She wrote forty-one *Abhangas* throughout her life span. Her famous writings are "*Tatiche Abhang*" (The Song of the Door) and "Preaching to Changdev." In both these writings, we find her philosophical approach and maturity of thoughts, which she expressed in simple Marathi language. Though

she ended her life at just nineteen years of age, she lived the life of those enlightened ascetics who took upon themselves the mission of liberating people oppressed by orthodox Brahmanical practices by initiating them into direct experience of God, without the intervention of priests and their incomprehensible rituals and incantations. With their spiritual teachings and compassion for ordinary people oppressed by rigid scriptural laws and orthodox Brahmins, she and her brothers gathered a growing following in what became a movement for spiritual liberation. This movement, named the Varkari cult, had been described as Lord Vithoba—being at the center that had long been the symbol and object of folk worship by various non-Brahman communities, including Brahmins. The Varkaris are a sect of people who worship Vishnu in the form of Vithoba or Vitthal and Rukmini (Rakhumai).

The family underwent great humiliation from society; Vithalpant was criticized and rejected by the people of the village, who did not accept the idea of a *sanyasi* re-entering *grihastashrama* life. Thus, he became an outcast and went to live with Rukminibai on the banks of the river Indryani on the outskirts of Alandi. They led a life of prayer, contemplation, and devotion in accordance with the scriptures. When the children went to the village of *Sidhbet* for *bhiksha* (alms), they were stoned and abused. It was endured with patience, for the children were firm in pursuing *Brahmavidya*. Vithalpant approached the *pandits* (Brahmin scholars) in Alandi for the performance of the sacred thread ceremony so that these children would be accepted by society. The *pandits* refused his request; instead, they sentenced Vithalpant and Rukminidevi to death. Even after this, the children were not spared by social torture. Muktabai took care of her brothers after the death of their parents, and she considered her own brother, saint Nivruttinath as her own *guru*. Some anecdotes about Muktabai are given below to highlight the prominent role enjoyed by her in the bhakti tradition.

There are specific incidents in her life where she showed the right path to these saints. Once, Jnanadev became so distinguished from the abuse by society that he decided to give up his body through *samdhi*. He locked himself inside the family hut and started to prepare himself. Nivrutti and Sopandev pleaded with him not to leave them, but to no avail. Then Muktabai returned from the river, and very lovingly, with a maturity and insight far beyond her young years, she began pleading with Jnanadev to open the door and to give up his drastic plan. She wrote forty-one *Abhangas* throughout her life span. Her famous writings are “*Tatiche Abhang*” (The Song of the Door) and “Preaching to Changdev.” Muktabai’s outpourings, which later became known as “*Tatiche Abhang*,” was deeply inspiring in their perfection. See the beauty of her pleadings; a knowledge and Advaita vision comes in the mornings. In both her writings, we find her philosophical approach and maturity of thoughts, which she expressed in simple Marathi language. Though she was the youngest among the siblings, through her writings, we learn of her spiritual growth and reach, equivalent to the other great saints. At times, she guided other great personalities on this spiritual path, like Saint Changdev, Visoba khechar, Namdev, and even Saint Jnyaneshwar.

Muktabai also gave guidance to Jnanadeva. Once, Jnyaneshwar got upset and annoyed due to the insulting treatment by people in the village, so he locked himself in his hut. To get him out of his upset state of mind, Muktabai composed *Tatiche Abhang* (The song of the door), which helped him to

understand his role in society and social reform. She helped him bring his mind back to the spiritual path and to uplift the people for whom he had taken birth.

Oh my beloved brother, please open the door. How can you be angry with your own self? The whole world is our self. When one hand is trying to scratch the other hand and in that process blood seeps out, would one cut off the hand that scratching? If one bites one's tongue with one's own teeth, would anybody try to destroy the teeth? (Roy, 2010, 102-104)

Changdev Maharaj was a mystical *yogi* turned saint believed to have lived for 1400 years. He achieved *Bhuta Siddhi* (control over classical elements) due to his yogic power. Though he was a very great *yogi*, the ego and complex of sex were hindering him from his spiritual development, which Muktabai rightly pointed out. To remove his ego, she made the dead bodies alive, the *siddhi* (supernatural power), which Changdev already possessed with pride. She also removed his complex of sex through her spiritual teachings to him, explaining Atman's eternal nature, showing the material body's falsity, and making him understand the omnipresent nature of God as pervading in all beings. Thus, Changdev eradicated these weaknesses due to Muktabai and considered her his Spiritual Guru, giving her the status of his mother. He has given many references to Muktabai in his *Abhangas*.

Visoba Khechar was a jeweler by profession. He used to hate Jnyaneshwar, and his siblings created obstacles in their path. Once when Muktabai went to get one earthenware from a potter, he struck her angrily and disallowed the potter to sell it to her. So Muktabai returned home and told this to his elder brother Saint Jnyaneshwar. Therefore, Shri Jnyaneshwar heated his back with his yogic power, and Muktabai baked the food (*Mande*: sweet buns) on his back. By watching this miracle, Visoba was astonished and asked for forgiveness from Jnyaneshwar and became their disciple. He achieved self-realization and became the Guru of Saint Namdev.

Muktabai removed the covering of ego from Saint Namdev's mind. Saint Namdev was prideful as he was considered a great saint in Pandharpur in the 13th century. When Muktabai and all the siblings, that is, Shri Jnanadeva, Nivrithinath, and Sopandev, prostrated before him with humility, only Muktai, whom to remove his pride, did not fall at his feet. She said to saint Namdev that the one who considers being in the constant company of God had not been freed from his ego yet; this pride will hinder his growth. Therefore, he needs to take a lamp in his hand even in the daylight, i.e., to introspect and remove the pride.

In another incident, Muktabai requested Saint Gora *Kumbhar* (the potter saint) to test the pots (heads, i.e., the maturity) with his testing rod by hitting it on the heads as he does for testing pots, whether baked or not. When he hit Namdev on the head, Namdev began shouting at him, so Gora *Kumbhar* proclaimed it was half-baked. (That means Namdev has not fully achieved self-control and has not reached the highest stage of spiritual development, as he is yet to gain control over his anger and remove his pride, which hinders him from spiritual growth.) Namdev was furious due to this insult and ran to Lord Vitthal in the temple. Lord told him to see the all-pervading nature of God as present in all the beings and was asked to go to Visoba Khechar, and through his teaching Saint Namdev achieved enlightenment.

Muktabai was the disciple of Saint Nivrithinath, who was her eldest brother. She considered Guru as an integral part of spiritual growth. Without Guru's guidance and grace, one cannot succeed in the path of self-realization, as without Guru, one finds it difficult to remove all the obstacles coming in this path. She was a Guru of Saint Changdev who lived 1400 years ago and was a great Yogi who achieved higher stages of Yoga; she accumulated various yogic power but did not reach the final stage of enlightenment. She guided Visoba Khechar as well as Saint Namdev and guided them to their ego and their progress in the spiritual path.

Muktabai, in her *Abhangas* expressing *Bhakti* towards Lord Vitthal of Pandharpur, also expressed the importance of Guru Nivrithinath, with whose grace she understood the true nature of the God, as *Sagun* (with the name and form) as well as *Nirgun* (formless); which is difficult to understand. Muktabai, in her "*Haripath*" (Deshpande, 2015) states the importance of recitation of Naam, i.e., the name of God, which helps us to have continuous awareness of the presence of God and which is sufficient enough to attain liberation. In one of the *Abhangas*, she says that due to "Naamjapa" (continuous recitation of the name of God), one experiences liberation and self-realization. Even those who committed sins can achieve higher spiritual growth through *Naamjapa*. By this, one understands the true nature of the Lord and becomes one with God.

In *Abhanga*, she describes her peaceful state of mind by the realization of truth, the pervading nature of the ultimate reality by which she experienced a state of pure, peaceful bliss achieved at the higher stages of Samadhi. In some of her *Abhangas*, she expresses the mystical experiences achieved at the higher stages of yoga, which shows her spiritual authority in this path. The literal meaning of the *Abhanga* shows the things practically impossible in the world. However, if they happen, it will be considered a miracle like. An ant flying to the sky and eating the sun, a barren woman giving birth to a child, Scorpio going down to the earth, the hell where *Sheshnaag* (considered as the king of hell in Hindu mythology) touching his feet, and a fly giving birth to bird (black kite).

Similarly, our "*Chitta*" is covered with ignorance and worldly attachments, so the removal of that ignorance and achievement of realization of the unity or no duality of the individual self with the universal self; is also a great miracle. It is a great mystical experience that makes Muktabai happy. Thus, through this *abhanga*, she states one's ability to achieve the difficult or seemingly impossible state of self-realization by remaining on this path of *Naamjapa* with devotion.

Through the writings of Muktabai and incidences of her life, we know that though she was the youngest amongst the siblings, she had achieved the higher stages of spirituality and yoga, as she was a Guru of the great yogi Changdev. She made the spiritual knowledge simple, expressed through her *Abhangas*. At times she also guided Shri Jnanadeva, Yogiraj, a great Saint in Maharashtra. She made him realize his role and responsibility toward social upliftment, which shows her spiritual leadership and awareness of the responsibility of social excellence and spiritual growth.

One of her *Abhanga* from her "*Tatiche Abhanga*" states that one who attains mental purity or sanctity, which cannot be bought in any shop, can be achieved only through thorough regular practice and contemplation (*Sadhana*). For such a person, God is not far away. However, at the same time, she states that while achieving this, it is one's duty to guide others and help them to attain this

supreme spiritual knowledge. She persuaded Saint Jnyaneshwar to open the door through these “*Tatiche Abhanga*.”

O my beloved brother, do I need to tell you who a saint is? He is a saint who is full of affection and kindness and compassion for others, and who is the very embodiment of forgiveness. He is not touched by greed; he was absolutely crushed his feeling of ego-sense. He only can be called a true *virakta* (unattached to worldly things) whose every word is the flow of *jnana-ganga* (stream of knowledge). How can he be fainted by the superimposed sounds in the air? Please open the door. (Roy, 2010, 102) ...O brother, is it so very easy to become a saint? One has to eat and digest grams made of iron balls, and then only can one become established in the *brahmic* state. One has to bear all sorts of injuries and insults. The mind naturally tends to run to hundreds of different places, it has to be brought under control through percussion and by force. Please open the door. (Ibid.,)

Jnanadev heard this from inside. His heart melted with every word that Muktabai spoke. His anger subsided utterly, and he rushed out and took Muktabai in his arms, for she had reminded him of his mission. Thus, we find great spiritual leadership, the ability to guide the spiritual progress of great saints, balanced thinking enriched with values like patience, tolerance, forgiveness, and a sense of social responsibility through her teachings and *Abhangas*.

O my beloved brother, do I need to tell you the qualities of a *yogi* who is ever in a tranquil state of mind and who calmly bears the insults and injuries inflicted upon him by the world? Even if the world is burring with the wrath of fine and jealousy, it is our duty to pour water over this fire and try to extinguish it. The world is holding a weapon of cruel words, but we have to accept this as a means for improving ourselves. What are this word and its beings? It is like the warp of cloth woven with the *brhamic* thread, that is, our own part, as we are *Brhaman* itself.

On another occasion, Muktabai wished to cook sweet buns for her brothers. So she set off to the village to get a clay plate from the potter to roast them. A prominent leader of the village, Vishoba, who was very cruel to the children, scolded her and ordered the village potters to refuse her request. As she returned home, she was weeping with sadness. Jnanadev asked her to prepare the dough. He then bent down, touching their floor with his hands, and heated his back red-hot, asking Muktabai to roast the turns on it. She did so and happily, gave them to her brothers. With shock and amazement, secretly watching this miracle through a window, Vishoba Chaati realized the power of these extraordinary children. He rushed inside the hut and picked up the crumbs of the buns as their Prasad. Seeing this, Muktabai exclaimed, “O *khechara* (mule) turn back”! This word completely transformed his heart. He felt at their feet, crying and begging for their forgiveness. When he asked them to accept him as their discipline, Nivriddhi requested Muktabai to initiate him. After that, Vishoba left the village to spend the rest of his life in deep contemplation and *sadhana*. He achieved self-realization and became the guru of Saint Namdev. The tests continue for the children. They asked to go to Phalthan, the great Vedic scholars and *pandits*, for a letter of appraisal that would enable them to be accepted by society. However, they were also mocked by the *pandits* for being the children of a *sanyasi*. On this

occasion, it said that Jnandev performed around extraordinary miracle and proved the oneness of all beings by passing his hands on buffalo and causing a follow of Vedic chants to emerge from its mouth. Realizing the greatness of the children, the *pandits* responded and became their followers. The suffering of the child was thus brought to an end, and all accepted them as great saints. Everywhere people followed them and listened with great awe to their discussions and their singing of *bhajans*.

Another interesting event was that continued with Changdev. Changdev was a great yogi (believed to be aged 1400 years) but suffered from pride in his extraordinary achievement. His ego was obstructing his achievement. Herring on the glory of the four *yogis*, Changdev was perplexed and wanted to test them. Hence, he sends them a note, but not knowing how to address them, he sends a blank paper. When the paper reached the children, Muktabai laughed at his ego-filled foolishness. Nivrutti asked Jnandev to write on this paper, and Jandev wrote 65 verses, the quietness of Vedanta. This paper was a return to Changdev, who could not understand the verses and therefore decided to meet the children and directly show them his power. He made this trap sitting upon a tiger with a serpent in his hand as a whip and was followed by thousands of disciples. When the children saw him coming, they petted the wall upon sitting on it because they were vehicles. It rose into the air, flying to meet Changdev, who was amazed to see this “in animate wall” coming towards him. He liked the greatness of the children. He realized the children’s greatness and prostrated at their feet and humbly apologized to them, wishing to be accepted, disciple. Jnandeshwar told him the real meaning of surrendering the egoistic head to God, the Almighty because that means obstructing the path toward realization. Muktabai then initiated him and removed from his mind all doubt and ignorance. Thus, yogi Changdev became Muktabai’s disciple.

Likewise, Muktabai responsibly removed the covering in the mind of saint Namdev. When they meet Namdev in Pandharpur, Nivrutti, Janeshwar, and Sopandev humbly prostrate before him. Namdev was proud because everyone in Pandharpur regarded him as a great saint. Muktabai, with great compassion for this sincere devotee, wishes to remove this short-sightedness by giving him a cosmic vision. Thus, she did not fall at his feet, as her brothers did, but requested Gora Kumbhar (the potter saint) to test the pots. Gora *Kumbhar* understood and, with his testing rod, began hitting the heads of Nivrutti, Jnandev, Sopandev, and other saints who were present. All of them remained calm and quiet, upon which Gora Kumbhar proclaimed them fully asked. When he hit Namdev on the head, Namdev began shouting at him. Thus, Gora Kumbhar proclaimed him half-baked. Namdev was furious at this insult and ran to Lord Vithala in the temple. The Lord told him they were right because he saw God only in Lord Vithala rather than as an all-pervading Creative Presence. He was asked to go to Vishoba Khechar, and through his practical teaching, Namdev became fully enlightened.

Muktabai could be considered one of the first poetesses in Marathi, along with *Mahadamba*. There are around fourteen *abhangas* attributed to her. She was graced with an intuitive knowledge of the Self at a very early age, which gave the essence of Advaita Vedanta as follows: “What is this universe? It is Brhman when Maya is uprooted”. The deeply moving words of her *Tatiche Abhanga* continue to live with us, an expression of the great compassion and philosophical truth that motivated Muktabai’s life. She said, “Listen, if you want to attain

salvation, the first step is sincere devotion. Devotion will bring *Vairagya* and *Vairagya* will lead to *jnan*. Therefore, you again should be *jnani* and your first foot must be devotion. She also used to give illustrations to Jyaneshwar who felt neglected and insulted by the upper class of the society. She dissolved herself in five elements at the age of eighteen.” Thus, we find a great spiritual leader’s ability to guide the spiritual progress of great saints as well as balanced thinking enriched with values like patience, tolerance, and forgiveness, with a sense of social responsibility through her teachings and *abhangas*. Thus, Muktabai, as per her name, was one of the eminent women Saints of Maharashtra who had simplified the path of self-realization, i.e., to be liberated or “*Mukta*.”

VIII. Mirabai (1498-1546)

Saint Mira, also known as *Mirabai*, was a 16th-century poet and devotee of Krishna. She is a celebrated Bhakti saint, particularly in the North Indian Hindu tradition. Saint Mirabai was an aristocratic Hindu mystical singer and devotee of Rajasthan and one of the most significant figures of the saint tradition of the Vaishnava *Bhakti* movement. Mirabai is like the pole star on the horizon of devotion whose songs of love for her beloved Giridhar Gopal remain unparalleled in *Bhakti Sangeet* (songs of devotion). The name “Mira” has become synonymous with the fervor of true devotion. Although interpreted differently by various scholars, the name ‘Mira’ expresses the essence of her illumined life. In Hindi, “Mira” means “light”; in Sanskrit, “*mir*” means “ocean”; in the Rajasthani dialect, it has its roots in the word *Mera*, which means a bumper harvest. She brought light into the lives of devotees with her ardent devotional poems that enthrall the hearts of the *bhaktas* even today. She was an ocean of pure love – the love that is the ambrosia of immortality. Indeed, her life was an exceptional bumper harvest of unalloyed devotion. Mirabai’s life has been a maze for many researchers and historians, as her poems do not reveal much about her personal life. There is complete self-effacement in her bhakti, so the “devotee” Mira does not find a substantial place in her poems. Any mention of her personal life and experience only highlights the greatness of her beloved Giridhar Gopal. Under such practical constraints, various biographers and critics have made various speculations about her life. She was a Rajput princess and belonged to the royal family of Mewar. She renounced the luxuries of royal life and became an ardent devotee of lord Krishana, especially devoted to an image of Lord Krishna called Girdharlal. Her soul was so full of deep longing for Lord Krishana, or Girdhar as she called him, that she proclaims:

I have the god Girdhar and no other;
 He is my spouse on whose head is a crown of peacock feathers;
 Who carries a shell, discus, mace and lotus, and who wears a necklace;
 I have forfeited the respect of the world by ever sitting near holy men.
 The matter is now public, everybody knows it.
 Having felt supreme devotion I die as I behold the world.
 I have no father, son or relation with me.
 I laugh when I behold my beloved, people think I weep,
 I have planted the vine of love and irrigated it again and
 Again with water of tears.
 I have cast away my fear of the world, what can anyone do to me.

Mira's love for her god is fixed, come what may.

Mirabai was married to a Rajputi prince, Mewar. All the time of going to her husband's place, she became very disconsolate. She wept until she became unconscious at the idea of leaving the image of Girdharilal behind. So, her parents gave her the image as a part of her marriage dowry. Her husband died only a few years later. His family was shocked that she did not remain secluded as a widow and worshiped his family's deity, the goddess Durga or Kali. Instead of knowing these traditional norms for a widowed Rajputi princess, Mirabai took unenthusiastic worship of Krishna. She identified herself as the spouse of Krishna. The compilation, *The Voice of Women: Gargi to Gangasati*, records Nabhadass's introduction of the legendary *Bhakta* Mirabai in his work *Bhaktamala*. (Singh, 2008, 49) The translation is as follows:

Modesty in public, the chains of family life –
 Mira shed both for the Lifter of Mountains.
 Like a latter-day gopi, she showed what love can mean
 in this devastated age-ending age.
 No inhibitions. Totally fearless.
 Her tongue sang the fame of her tasteful Lord.
 Villains thought it vile.
 They set out to kill her, but not a single hair on her head was harmed:
 The poison she was brought turned elixir in her throat.
 She cringed before none. She beat bhakti's drum.
 Modesty in public, the chains of family life –
 Mira shed both for the Lifter of Mountains.

The verses succinctly and effectively throw light on Mirabai's life, which, like a prism, radiates the multi-hued dimensions of her inspiring life and personality. The first line emphasizes that she treads the unconventional path, discarding modesty in favor of her love for Giridhar Gopal. Mirabai's passionate love for her Lord, like the *gopis* of Vrindavan, still blows the eternal bugle of 'True Love' in this modern age of skepticism. Throughout her life, she showed the fifteen qualities of a true devotee who remains dauntless in all circumstances. No matter what tests life presents to such a devotee, he or she maintains equipoise and remains unaffected. Mirabai professes:

Whom would you call a devotee?
 They alone are true devotees
 Who calmly bear the world's taunts and blows...
 That alone is the real diamond
 Which loses no luster at the hammer's blow. (Sethi, 1979, 84)

When the depth of a devotee's love for the Lord is such, His hand of protection, *abhayahasta*, is always on the devotee. It can be seen in the life of Mirabai, who miraculously survived numerous attempts on her life. Nothing could chain the fervor of love that overflowed as Mirabai kept singing the glories of *bhakti* through her *bhajans*. Bhakti does not embrace the weak and the fickle who dance to the tunes of erratic sensual impulses. She bestows her grace on the sincere, steadfast, and zealous devotee. In Meerabai's words:

My sisters, O my friends,
 Devotion's path is hard; It's not for the timid Nor for the weak to take.
 The path of devotion Only tread the rare brave. (129)

A popular legend says that a turning point came in her life when Mirabai was around five years old. An interesting event led young Mira to watch the pomp and show off a marriage procession; she was intrigued and possibly enamored by the glamour of the bridegroom riding a horse, which is still a popular custom in North India. When she enquired, her mother explained the event, and young Mira wanted to know who her bridegroom was. Her mother, probably to pacify her little girl, pointed at the idol of Giridhar Gopal in front of their palace and answered that Giridhar Gopal was her bridegroom. A remark made casually or jocularly proved to carve a new epoch in the making of *Bhakta* Mirabai. Mira took this observation to heart and considered herself betrothed to her beloved Giridhar Gopal. After that, she gave her heart and soul to her Divine husband. Why did her mother's words leave such an indelible mark on the mind of young Mira? How could a little girl understand the depth and sanctity of a marital relationship with the Divine Lord and observe it with utmost sincerity? Logic and rationale can only answer these questions if they are within the scope of the mind and the intellect. However, the answer can be unearthed in some of her poems. In one of her poems, she categorically declares:

Why should I abandon my ancient love
 Inherited from earlier births?
 Mira's Lord is the courtly Giridhara
 And she will be satisfied with nothing else. (Alson, 1980, 51)

Like many in the Bhakti movement, she ignored gender, class, caste, and religious boundaries and spent time caring for the poor. Her practice of bhakti worship horrified her in-laws and the new ruler of Mewar. The legends tell of multiple attempts on her life by Mirabai's late husband's family. She miraculously survived a poisonous snake, a poisoned drink, and drowning in all of these attempts. Mirabai returned to her home city of Merta, but her family also opposed her turning from traditional religious practices to the new bhakti worship of Krishna. She later joined a religious community in *Vridnaban*, a place holy to Krishna.

Mirabai's contribution to *the bhakti* movement was primarily in her music; she wrote hundreds of songs and initiated a mode of singing the songs, a raga. Scholars accept about 200-400 songs written by Mirabai. Another 800-1000 songs have also been attributed to her. Mirabai did not credit herself as the author of the songs (as an expression of selflessness), so her authorship is uncertain. The songs were preserved orally and not written down for a long time, which complicates assigning authorship. Mirabai's songs express her love and devotion to Krishna, almost always as Krishna's wife. The songs speak of both the joy and pain of love. Metaphorically, Mirabai points to the longing of the personal self, atman, to be one with the universal self, or *Paramatma*, the poet's representation of Krishna. Mirabai wrote her songs in the Rajasthani and *Briaj Bhasa* languages, which were translated into Hindi and Gujrati. Mirabai songs and bhajans are popular throughout India and have been published in several translations worldwide. They are sung to this day with great reverence throughout the

country. Mira's songs are in a simple form called a *pada* (verse), a term used for a small spiritual song, usually composed in simple rhythms with a repeating refrain. Her collection of songs is called the *Padavali*. The extant versions are in a Rajashtani dialect of Hindi, *Briaj*, a dialect of Hindi spoken in and around Vrindavan (the childhood home of Krishna), sometimes mixed with Rajashtani, and Gujrati. Look at the following line from Mirabai (Roy, 2010, 100):

That dark dweller in Braj is my only refuge my companion,
Worldly comfort is an illusion.
As soon you get it, goes.
I have chosen the indestructible for my refuge,
Him whom the snake of death will not devour.

My beloved dwells in my heart all day. I have actually seen that abode of joy. Mora's Lord is Hari, the indestructible. My Lord, I have taken refuge with you, your maidservant. She speaks of her relationship with Krishna as her lover, Lord, and master. The characteristic of her poetry is complete surrender. How longing for union with Krishna is predominant in her poetry. Mirabai also dives into the "Sea of Immortality," which only the truly courageous ones do once this plunge is taken. Indeed, there is no return. The waves of individuality are lost in the ocean of immortality. Such a pure, untainted devotee is often stigmatized as mad by the world, but Mirabai answers the worldly wise in her words:

Mad? Yes, I am insane.
But the love of my Lord
Through madness I gained
I am, indeed, insane,
In the Lord's love, though; T
he joy of my madness,
Can the world ever know?
The bliss for which in vain
Even gods and angels pray,
In that bliss this mad one
Does revel night and day. (Sethi, 2008, 85)

Intoxicated with love for the Divine, Mirabai could not lead a conventional married life. Various researchers have come to different conclusions regarding the relationship between Bhoja Raj and Mirabai. Some researchers claim that Bhoja Raj supported his wife's devotional practices after understanding her extraordinary devotion. He even organized the construction of a temple of Giridhar Gopal for her. Others claim that Meerabai's devotion did not meet with her husband's approval and that he harassed her. It is a fact that Bhoja Raj suffered constant bickering and mudslinging from his relatives, who disapproved of thirty-three Mirabai's ways. The foremost among them was Mirabai's sister-in-law, Udabai, who left no stone unturned to defame Mirabai.

Mirabai's poems testify to the genuine intensity and depth of her bhakti. When sung or listened to, even today, they enthrall the hearts of the listener and elevate one to a different plane. The famous line from her *bhajan* comes alive as one listens to "*Paga ghunghru bandh Meera nachi re*" (wearing the anklets, Mira dances). A keen listener is transported to the world of Meerabai and sees her dancing in divine abandon; no doubts assail the mind of the one who listens to

them with a sincere, open heart. Her songs are in themselves a proclamation that God is Love and Love is immortal. Meerabai kept singing merely to *Giridhar Gopal dusro na koi*. The following is the English translation of this popular bhajan from Swami Budhananda's book *The Story of Mira's Love*:

Mine is Giridhara Gopal, none else
 He who wears the peacock crown is Mira's Lord;
 Father, mother, brother or kin, none is mine,
 I have flung the pride of my family;
 What care I for anyone
 Living in the company of saints,
 I bade good-bye to the world and its opinions. (Budhananda, 2002, 66)

Mirabai's willingness to sacrifice family respect and traditional gender, family, and caste restrictions, and to devote herself entirely and enthusiastically to Krishna, made her an important role model in a religious movement that stressed ecstatic devotion and that rejected traditional divisions based on sex, class, caste, and creed. Mira's devotion to Krishna was initially a private thing, but at some moment, it overflowed into an ecstasy that led her to dance in the city's streets. Her brother-in-law, the new ruler of Chittorgarh, was Vikramjit Singh, an ill-natured youth who strongly objected to Mira's fame, her mixing with commoners, and the carelessness of feminine modesty. There were several attempts to poison her. Her sister-in-law Udabai is said to have spread defamatory gossip about her.

Mira declared herself a disciple of the guru Ravidas. From a sociological point of view, the acceptance of Sant Ravidas as Mirabai's Guru makes a bold statement of the rejection of caste hierarchy. When Princess Mira bowed down to the "untouchable Guru" Ravidas, it would have naturally created a furor in the orthodox society of her times and the royal household. The echoes of her defiant act still resound in the folklore of the lower-caste people in Western Rajasthan, who applaud her for this rare courage and tenacity. She considered herself a reborn *gopi*, Lalita, mad with love for Krishna. However, the priest in charge of the temple of Mathura, sometimes identified as Rupa Goswami, a disciple of Chaitanya, is said to have refused to allow Mira to enter the temple because she was a woman. Mirabai replied that there was only one honest man in Vrindavan, Krishna; everyone else was a *gopi* of Krishna. She continued her pilgrimage, danced from one village to another, almost covering the whole north of India. After some years of wandering, at the age of 67, Mirabai died at Dwarka, another place sacred to Krishna.

Time has not marred the reverence and popularity of Saint Mirabai as a *bhakti* poet. She occupies an incontestable, venerable position in the hearts of all, even today. What has lent her name this unquestionable integrity? One of the reasons could be her purity of purpose – she loved the Lord for love's sake and professed no other hidden agenda. Whether her Master was Saint Ravidas or Sanatana Goswami, it becomes evident from her poems that she only sought to quench the thirst of her spiritual yearning. Significantly, she never adhered to, initiated, or propagated any cult, school of thought, or philosophy. There is no trace of sectarianism or institutionalization in her life or poems. It is one of the main reasons her name shines bright and unsullied even today. True spirituality cannot be mixed with dogma as it deals with the Absolute Truth. Any endeavor to do so leads to religious adulteration, often promoting dogmatic beliefs. In this

respect, Mirabai steers clear of any controversy, claiming nothing as her “own” accept her Giridhar Gopal. She made no disciples in her lifetime. However, such is the ardor of her devotion that anyone who listens to her *bhajans* soaked in longing and love for the Divine becomes her disciple at heart. Just as salt cannot be separated from water once dissolved in it, Mirabai cannot be separated from the ocean of bhakti. It is exemplified in legends that recount the end of ‘*Bhakta*’ Mirabai. Mirabai remained oblivious to the world, absorbed in her love for Giridhar Gopal.

However, the fragrance of Divine Love she invoked spread far and wide, inviting one and all to partake in its glory. It is the paradoxical nature inherent in the lives of most saints. They do not pursue name and fame, but just as a vast magnet attracts by its mere presence, their glory spreads far and wide, kindling the fire of Love for God in the hearts of many noble souls. She was just a *bhakta*, a true devotee of the Lord, who had no option but to leave her domestic life in pursuit of her beloved Giridhar Gopal. It is observed from the lives of many women saints that they could not lead an everyday family life. They had to eventually give up their family responsibilities voluntarily or under pressure to pursue their spiritual goals. Such instances jeopardize the norms of a primarily patriarchal society that are bent on shackling a woman’s spiritual independence, even at the cost of transgressing the laws of the Creator.

Here lies the critical difference in the definition of success concerning the material and spiritual worlds. In a materialistic society, an assertion of one’s individuality, manifested through political, economic, and social accomplishment, becomes the parameter of success. In this respect, the patriarchal society provides a definite advantage to men, but that, in turn, becomes a disadvantage in the path of bhakti as the whole purpose of a spiritual journey is to lose one’s individuality. On the other hand, it works to the advantage of women as social conditioning makes them more ‘giving’ with the result that surrender to the chosen deity becomes a natural expression. In the path of *bhakti*, a *bhakta* has to become a woman from within, the eternal bride of the Lord. Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, while talking about the state of a *bhakta*, observes in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Chapter 18: In that state, a devotee looks at himself as a woman. He does not regard himself as a man. Sanatana Goswami refused to see Mirabai because she was a woman. Mira informed him that at Vrindavan, the only man was Krishna, and all others were His handmaids. “Was it right of Sanatana to think of himself as a man?” Mira inquired. (Nikhilananda, 1942, 377)

This aspect of *bhakti* has been highlighted in the book *The Voice of Women - Gargi to Gargasati*: All the attributes associated with maleness – status, wealth, scholarship, power, strength, aggressiveness, and arrogance – were among the many obstacles in the path of devotion and inward experiences. It may be why the female psyche and sensuality have primarily formed bhakti. All the attributes of maleness will have to be completely discarded before one can cultivate bhakti, which involves surrender, humility, devotion, love, and a sense of service. To be a *bhakta* is to forsake maleness. Thus, Mirabai taunted Jiva Goswami for retaining maleness in *Vraja*. (Singh, 2008, 62)

In the contemporary context, Mirabai’s answer opens the door to modern concepts of the feminine principle and the celebration of womanhood in its proper context. The inherent qualities of the female psyche, like patience, fortitude, self-sacrifice, compassion, surrender, etc., have often been inferred as signs of

weakness and understood to be the cause of her subservient position in society. Ironically, in the realm of spirituality, particularly on the path of *bhakti*, these qualities become the jewels in the crown and pave the way for the final fulfillment of life. It is of no wonder to us that most women saints took naturally to the path of *bhakti* just as a fish takes to water. A study of the lives of male saints who followed the path of devotion also clearly demonstrates the nurturing of these qualities. Sharanagati (surrender) inevitably plays the most crucial role on the path of *bhakti*. A *bhakta*'s "all in all" is laid at the feet of his or her chosen deity in the spirit of *sharanagati*. In the words of a logician, it can be said that the spirit of surrender is inversely proportional to the strength of the ego; the less the ego, the more the spirit of surrender, and vice versa.

IX. Conclusion

The most crucial part of teachings and spiritual prominence of *bhakti* mysticism is the purity of heart, relationship, and love that comes across the devotee and the object of devotion and among the devotees themselves. The *bhakti* movement in India integrated, on the one hand, certain aspects of Jaina and Buddhist values like a sense of fraternity among the devotees, tending hospitality to fellow devotees, and the possibility of spiritual attainment irrespective of social and economic background. On the other hand, it directly confronted these heterodoxies with energetic theism, an affirmation of the phenomenal world as God's creation, and the importance of the individual in such mystical experiences. In other words, their approach was affirming and world-affirming, bringing about the conversion of the spirit for the better. The emergence, life, and creative works of these women saints significantly impacted contemporary society. Their contribution was direct and conscious as well as indirect and unconscious. The compositions of these women saints undoubtedly portray the mood of freedom from material things and the achievement of spiritual bliss. However, they also portray their separation from society and personal loneliness, using compelling imagery in their compositions. Along with the male saints of the *bhakti* movement, the compositions of the women saints marked a substantial contribution to the growth of vernacular literature, like Muktabai's composition in Marathi and Mirabai's composition in Hindi.

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