



The Contribution of Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai to Bhakti Literature: A Comparative Study from the 21st-Century Perspective

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Abstract

This study aims to demonstrate the contribution of Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai to the Bhakti literature. This paper will explore the contribution of two classical female Hindu poet-saints by analyzing their selected poetry, a comparative analysis of Mahadevi's devotion to Lord Shiva, and Mirabai's devotion to Lord Krishna. These two famous women poets in the Middle Ages acted like social reformers and radical change makers in society; breaking the patriarchal norms, and erasing the distinction of caste, class, and language barriers to democratize spirituality through their artistic emotion of devotion and lyrical composition. The only possibility of self-expression available to women in a patriarchal society remained through spirituality. The spiritual imagery used in rebel saints' music reflects their societal estrangement. The argument in this study is divided into two parts, while Akka Mahadevi is aimed to define and describe the nature of devotion to Siva; and Mirabai is concerned with a woman's ability to speak authoritatively by the nature of devotion to Lord Krishna. This study will emphasize how these two poets overcame the caste, class, and social disparity women faced in the Middle Ages by contextualizing the history and literary point of view by analyzing their poetry.

The Bhakti movement is mostly seen as a movement in literature or, at its best, an intellectual development with religion serving as its primary source of motivation. This mostly occurred because the history of society was not given enough attention, and as a result, societal and economic factors that were intended to bring about transformation were frequently disregarded. Every religious reform movement has a certain goal, which cannot be contested. It emerges from specific socioeconomic backdrops and works to empower the underprivileged and downtrodden segments of humanity. A significant shift in society, politics, culture, and religious practices is brought about by the Bhakti Movement, a process of religious, political, economic, and social revolution. This movement

may have been sparked by the severe caste structure, the intricate ritualistic behavior that made up the religious practice, and the innate yearning to switch to a more fulfilling form of worship and redemption. The Vaishnavite and Shaivite poets Alvars and Nayanars, whose poetry greatly contributed to the movement's recognition, are said to have started it in the Tamil area between the sixth and seventh centuries AD. These poets, who came from both high and low castes, produced a powerful body of work that has cemented its place in the canon of contemporary literature. According to Rekha Pande,

“The Bhakti movement emerged from this society, and its philosophy provided a particular purpose.

Its saints weren't passive thinkers or ignoramus revolutionaries...They did not adhere to the traditional literary traditions of Sanskrit when they described what they were thinking in poetic forms using local languages" (Pande 216).

The movement started by Basavanna (1105–68) in the Kannada area in the 12th century for an era that undermined the hierarchy of castes and strained the fabric of local culture. Even though the traditional view was able to hold itself together, the Bhakti movement in this regard gave rise to a prolific body of writing known as Vachana Sahitya, which was written by Basava as well as his students Akkamahadevi, Allama Prabhu, Devara Dasimayya, and others. These Vachanas, which were composed of succinct proverbs, made some perceptive insights on spiritual and societal issues clear-cut.

The individual expressions and unrestrained voices of these women throughout the nation, starting with the Tamil Andal, the Chola princess Mangayarkkarasiyar, Isaiganaaniyar, and Karaikal Ammaiyar in the south, to Gangasati in Gujarat, Sakhubai, Muktabai, and Bahina, who wrote Marathi abhangs, Akka Mahadevi in Karnataka, and the renowned Mirabai in Rajasthan, gathered momentum until Bhakti movement has become a pan-India phenomenon. According to Sandhya Mulchandani,

“The majority of these women's works may have been hidden by gender inequality, but when they finally emerged, these women became criticized as charlatans, exhibitionists, or simply insane. Instead, women gained respect for their dedication and artistic talent along with the celebration of their lives” (Mulchandani 23).

Some of the aforementioned female figures, particularly Mirabai, are ingrained in Indian culture. The biography of Mirabai and her devotional songs are still spoken and recited throughout the whole country. Others, like Andal, Akka Mahadevi, and Lal Ded, are incredibly well-liked in their home regions.

Religious freedom for men and women would be presumed anticipated in a society immersed in spirituality. Although they were required to take part in home and communal events, women did not have the right to pray; they were not allowed to proceed on a different religious path than their spouses. Women, especially those of great birth, were typically grouped with shudras (outcasts) and placed on the very lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder because they were viewed as being dirty, immoral, and without an innate tendency to do anything dharmic. The concept of a female austere represented an utter outlier in the circumstances. The thought that a woman would give up her role as a mother or her need for sexual satisfaction was

inherently contradictory. Therefore, it was not feasible nor appealing for women to become ascetics.

The Bhakti movement upended several of the aforementioned traditional social structures that were hierarchical and challenged limits for those who were caste- and class-based minorities as well as, perhaps more crucially, for women for whom it opened avenues to religious freedom and self-expression. The awakening gave them a fresh setting and laid the foundation for an equal view of worshipping. The most important individual in this distinguished gathering of around 300 persons, of which approximately sixty were women, notably, Akka Mahadevi. Mahadevi, who was referred to with respect as "elder sister," was one of Mantap's most well-known figures for her vachanas. These vachanas' primary goal is to promote Vira Saivism and the idea of universal brotherhood.

In the Shivamogga district of Karnataka, in Udutadi, a significant historical location, where Akka Mahadevi was born about the year 1150. Her parents, Nirmal Shetti and Sumati were ardent followers of Shiva and adherents of the Trividhi ideology, which places a premium on serving others beyond one's own goals, seeking out the truth under a guru, and worshipping Shiva. Mahadevi was highly passionate even as a small child since she was nurtured in this environment. As Mulchandani states,

“Her proximity to natural abundance thus led her to find beauty and God in nature. Her inherent divinity that had begun to manifest itself as a child, blossomed into love for the Lord” (62).

The turning point of Mahadevi's life, was when she got married to King Kaushika. The king was overwhelmed and fell in love with her and proposed to marry her. Mahadevi agreed to marry him but in certain conditions. The couple was married, but they never were married in the end, and the disappointed king is believed to have disputed Mahadevi's claim that she devoted entirely to Lord Shiva. However, Mahadevi calls her connection with Shiva an adulterous one and sees obstacles to her union with her God in her partner, parents, and other relationships. Because she believes that relationships with mortal men are unpleasant, she sings about switching her spouse to Shiva. As Mahadevi sings,

“My utterly beautiful Lord
From the mountain peaks,
My Lord white as jasmine,
And I will make Him
My good husband”

She evolved into more transparent about her association with Shiva as her commitment to him progressed, disregarding the fact that she was married to the king. Akka Mahadevi desires a union with Mahadev. She writes,

“O Lord white as Jasmine
When do I join You
Stripped of body’s shame
And heart’s modesty?” (Mahadevi)

She is a radical mystic who uses her feminine characteristics to communicate her knowledge of the Bhakti tradition and the Hindu concept of reincarnation. She claims, "I've come through eighty-four hundred thousand vaginas, not one, not two, not three, or four. I have passed across implausible universes that seemed generated by both happiness and grief. Mahadevi is extremely conscious of the reality that her physical presence is the sole instrument for expressing herself she has. Mahadevi was direct and combative, and even as she removed her clothing, she was very conscious of her body and the issues that males would have with seeing her in her natural state. As she expresses,

“Brother, you’ve come
drawn by the beauty
of these billowing breasts,
this brimming youth.
I’m no woman, brother, no whore.”

Mahadevi eventually overcomes the restrictions of household duties and marriage, which vary announcing that she is the one and only person for her. So, she writes

“Don’t hold me.
Don’t stop me.
Let go of my hand,
... ..
The whole world now knows
Chenna Mallikarjuna is my husband,
O brother,
No one else can be my man.”

She frequently compares her connection with Chenna Mallikarjuna in her writings to an unlawful or adulterous love. Akka Mahadevi uses radical lyrics in her music. She, unlike numerous other people, used symbolism that blurs the barriers between genders in addition to romantic metaphors to illustrate the union of oneself with the divine. The idealized version of Krishna has been projected onto Shiva in one of Akka's poems, which is represented by all males as women. As she sings,

“Locks of shining red hair/A crown of diamonds

Small beautiful teeth/And eyes in a shining face
... ..

Are but women, wives. /I saw the Great One
Who plays at love/With Shakti
Original to the world.

I saw His stance/And began to live.”

The journey of Akka, which is revealed by her vachanas, takes place on several levels of awareness, including those of awakening and lucid visions and dreams. Her vachanas are conversations she has with her cherished divine and other people, creatures, plant life, and things on all of these levels. Her vachanas might be compared to a holy pilgrimage across the worldly realm. They are powerfully expressive and lyrical poetry that can stand on their own.

Akka Mahadevi’s Vachana is dialogic, addressed directly to Shiva, she seeks confirmation and assurances from him on worldly matters, spiritual and drawing up a unique relationship with Shiva. According to Sushumna Kannan,

“Akka Mahadevi’s Vachana’s are not easy to understand. The Bhakti period all across India regions evoked the interest of colonial historians and missionaries since they saw the similarities between Bhakti and Christian devotional traditions.... There is greater understanding with regard to the nature of monotheism” (9).

The women poet-saints were leading the Bhakti movement with Mahadevi, as they would later with Mirabai. Mahadevi used this vehicle to convey her intense love, desire, and separating pain as well as some of the most enigmatic realities that every religion regards as eternal.

In the fourteenth century, the renowned Indian poet Mirabai used the Rajasthani dialect of Hindi in her poems. Her Krishna devotional songs differ significantly from Surdas and Tulsidas' songs in a number of ways. Mirabai's spouse and loyal lover is Krishna. Like many other saints of the Middle Ages, we know little about her life and works. Even though Mirabai was a bhakt, her religious journey set her apart from other bhakts in her category. God has been pictured, worshipped, and addressed in a number of ways throughout the history of Indian devotional spirituality. She discovered Krishna's existence everywhere. In contrast to other male bhakts, who describe a deliberate discipline procedure in their poetry, Mirabai’s bhakti has been described as "natural, spontaneous, and so powerful that it permits her to rupture all obligations, fight all impediments." In contrast to Mirabai's portrayal of her love of God, relationships with

relatives, standards of dignity, and worldly comforts appear to be intentional encroachments.

Mirabai deals with and overcomes a number of patriarchal difficulties in the bhakti sphere, additionally, the spiritual path was regarded as a domain for men, similar to the societal and political realms. A woman is seen as an impediment to salvation in the culture. The pull of money is used as an analogy for the seduction of women, which means devotees from the path of righteousness. It is deeply ingrained in religious tradition and is supported by myths and tales that depict women as temptresses who cause distractions.

In her relationship with Krishna, Mirabai refused to accept any sort of human or institutional intervention. The connection that Mirabai had with Krishna whom she viewed as her spouse, master, lover, and protector was one of extremely intimate dedication. She declined to follow any established rules or regulations because she was so captivated by the notion of Krishna. She also had an approach to life that questioned any form of a structure of hierarchy influence, or submission and was opposed to accepting any limitations. The study of Jain and Sharma states that,

“On several occasions, Mirabai emerged as a fiercely independent-minded devotee with scant regard for recognition from any established schools of bhakti. Although Mirabai attended religious gatherings, listened to the discourses of the sadhus, and interacted with them, she resisted all attempts to formally affiliate herself with any established school or sect of bhakti” (4649).

The poems of Mirabai can be broadly categorized into four groups: (1) poems of greeting; (2) poems of love for Krishna; (3) poems of dissatisfaction with the world and its particular Location; and (4) poems of separation. Several poems are also written on Braj, Krishna's youth, and his flute, and stealing the garments of milkmaids, yet they showcase Mirabai's most extraordinary poetic language. The most stunning of Mira's lyrics are those in which she refers to Krishna as her spouse and declares her unwavering love for him. In her poetry, she expresses the depths of her heart and her steadfast commitment. She writes in “My Sole Support”

“My love is reserved for Giridhara Gopal
And for no one else.”

She composes exceptionally pleasing and heartfelt verses. The verses are among the best in the Hindi language. Mira doesn't address many different topics. Her main topic is how much she loves Lord Krishna. As a result, the poems usually discuss identical topics. Although her poetry often

comes out as repetitive, it continually demonstrates the strength of her love and her intense devotion to Krishna and the holy men. This is particularly pertinent when negative criticism is present.

She abandons her relatives and family members to serve Krishna alone, enjoying the companionship of devoted priests and other followers. The king once sent her a cup with poison in it in an attempt to murder her. Mira is adamant that it is not poison and chooses to embrace whatever happens after drinking it as Lord Krishna's "charan amrita" with complete affection and devotion. Surprisingly, nothing could damage her, and she stated that she is prepared to face any danger for the affection she has for Lord Krishna.

“The king sent me a cup of poison,
I drank it down with joy...”

People believe, according to Mira, that her affection is not only for her spouse but also for other men. Everyone thinks that she is in love with Lord Krishna. They believed that she was attracted to various men sexually. Perhaps this is the explanation for why in one of her poems, "Testing," the king who sent her poison to murder her is mentioned along with Madan, the Hindu deity of romantic affection and sexuality.

“People think that I am mad over Madan
The love of Shyam has driven me silly
The king sent me a cup of poison...”

She writes, "I am dyed deep in the love of Shyam" in the poem's first line. Although Mira's poetry does not address an extensive number of topics, she always expresses her love for Krishna from a broad perspective of bravery and love.

She writes adorably earnest poetry about separation. They have some of the greatest lyrics in Hindi literature. The heart of her poetry and its primary subject is the love she has grown to have for Lord Krishna. Despite the repetitive themes in her poems, the boldness of her love and passionate devotion to Krishna and the holy saints' shines in her poetry with deep dedication, exceptional kindness, and innocence. Her poetry about Krishna's absenteeism and detachment from her evokes her deep passion for not having him by her side, and she is very eager to see her love. The sense of absence is evident when she writes,

“I do not know how to meet my lord
... ..
I spend days in search
Scanning the road night and day”

Mira is disappointed at Krishna's disappearance. She expresses internal turmoil as a result of feeling his absence. Her passion for Krishna fully dominated her thoughts and her entire being. As she writes in "Sufferings in Absence",

"The pain of absence gives me bewildered heart
And gives me no rest."

She constantly holds Krishna in her thoughts. She overlooked everything including her surroundings, food, and beverages in favor of Krishna. Her life continues in this manner. She, therefore, questions how her lord could have forgotten him. This is the reason she expresses not being loved back and describes her pains in the poem "Reproaches" for her devotion to Krishna.

"Food, drink, and my surroundings,
All are forgotten
Why does my life go on?
.....
Without thee I am heartbroken."

Mira is the epitome of love, purity, and commitment; her heart is a place of worship. Her songs are filled with affection and she speaks and sings with compassion, love, pleasure, and power. As a result, she anticipates in her poem "Expectation" that her lord will approach her in accordance with nature, while also foreseeing the calls of frogs, peacocks, and cuckoos due to the impending rain. The dance of Mira and her display of emotional turmoil in her attraction for Krishna is also mentioned in this work of poetry. Mirabai prayed to the thunder and rain deity Indra in hopes that he would bring Giridhara Krishna to her and make himself appear to her. As she writes,

"O my master, the courtly Giridhara
Come quickly, my king" (Mirabai)

Mira claims that she and her companions met her sweetheart in the poem "Meeting the Beloved" that follows. She has satisfied and honored her loved one. She now enjoys herself and abandons her sorrow. She alludes to the five senses figuratively when she says that she ultimately encounters Krishna thanks to her sensory organs, a picture of divine and spiritual love. Now that happiness is all around her, she can relax and think clearly about herself. So, she writes in "Meeting the Beloved"

"All my desires are fulfilled
and my sufferings forgotten"

Additionally, she admits that she is prepared to get married to Krishna. She is prepared to install a red Shari and wants to go to the location where Krishna resides. So, she writes

"If the beloved tells me

I shall put on a red Shari

... ..

If he tells me

I shall decorate my hair-parting with pearls."

Mira mentions her union with Krishna in some of her poetry. This wedding occurs in dreams. It is a spiritual marriage rather than having a theological standpoint. She formally accepts Krishna as her spouse. She made references to the sacred game in the poem "Holi" while she was residing at the location of Krishna's birth while imagining herself in the role of Radha. In this scene, everyone is fascinated with the dashing Krishna as he plays with the Gopis.

Mira encounters and overcomes several patriarchal challenges in the arena of bhakti, just like she does in the political and social spheres because asceticism was seen as a male domain. A woman is viewed as a barrier to redemption in several cultures. The pull of riches, which eliminates the devotee far from the path of virtue, is compared to the seduction of women. Religious history and myths and tales have contributed to the widespread perception of women as temptresses and sources of diversion. As a result, when women turn to spiritual practice and commitment to the Almighty, their moral integrity is questioned and they are treated with apprehension.

Several distinctive and admirable facets of the state's historical culture are entirely ignored in the framework of gender formation. By emphasizing the life and times of the fabled Mirabai, a conscious effort has been made to illustrate the opposing viewpoint in the description above. Interestingly, it happened in traditional and feudalistic settings that experienced the Mirabai insurrection. Mirabai confronted and overthrew the most ingrained organizations of the period, and yet she was able to amass unmatched honor, recognition, and support, making her "the most remembered and quoted woman of Indian history, right down to our times." In addition to chronological creation, a unique worldview has been developed around Mirabai's individuality.

In India, the origin of feminism as a social movement was shaped by aristocratic masculinity who spoke against feminine development; in presenting their views, they frequently resorted to historical female characters from India, primarily Hindu, heritage. Recent criticism in Indian feminism centers on the inclusion of female priests alongside other conventional female role models, many of whom are drawn from mythology and epic. In relation to the literature of ancient Hindu female saints, Madhu Kishwar observes that,

“women's revolutionary poems by Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai claim that these ladies did not discuss women's rights and liberty as they should have, instead choosing to replace servitude to a divine with enslavement to their husbands. In other words, they weren't feminists, hence they weren't good historical figures for women to look up to” (Pechilis 112-113).

However, the cultural rebellion that these women saints symbolize in their works and lives are significantly more subtly and unintentionally represented. The writings of female saints show the passionate personal search for God under utterly disagreeable household and societal situations. They are making a subtly critical observation about society as a whole. There is typically no explicit attempt made to critically analyze or overthrow the current social structure, just like with the male saints of the bhakti tradition. As Pande says,

“The social front was also characterized by a change. There was the Brahmanical oppression of the worst kind. In order to maintain their status quo, complex rites and rituals were practiced by them and those who did not fit into the traditional four castes were termed outcastes or chandalas. They alone understood Sanskrit in which the ancient religious texts were produced, and this made the performance of various rites and rituals their monopoly” (216).

The Nirguna saint in particular, who represents the opposing hegemonic rhetoric of the Bhakti movement, denigrates women. They were unable to overcome the ingrained prejudice that views women as obstacles in the path of redemption. She is a person who is exploited by everyone, and to Kabir, she is worse than hell. In addition, it is a woman's purpose to eliminate all males and then live alone. Women, drums, the illiterate, Sudra, and animals are all grouped together by Tulsidas as being solely suitable for a beating. A woman, according to Surdas, is more dangerous than a poisonous snake, and one should be aware of its toxicity. Once she has a man in her net, it is hard to escape.

Thus, the birth, existence, and artistic output of these female apostles had a profound influence on modern culture. Both their explicit and intentional contributions as well as their subtle and unconscious ones were made. In response to the mounting threat posed by Jainism, the restoration of Saivism had a clear and deliberate role. With the exception of Akka Mahadevi from the South and Mirabai from the North, who appeared more like activists for social change, the portrayal of social opposition in their lives and creations of these women saints is, however, much

more subtly and unconsciously. The writings of women saints largely reflect their passionate personal search for God while enduring utterly hostile domestic and societal conditions. They are making a subtly critical observation about society as a whole. There is typically no overt attempt made to critically analyze or overthrow the current social system, just like with the male saints of the bhakti movement.

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