



Seer women poets in pre-colonial and colonial India

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Abstract

Poetry has been a powerful vehicle of expression for several men and women in the world of literature. Bhakti or devotion to God is a deep personal feeling and an expression of one's spiritual or mystical experience. There are plethora of poet-seers in India and women had to suffer even to find a place in Bhakti cult as it is also patriarchal. Women had to debate with men and had to be stubborn to demonstrate their devotion through poetry. Through their devotional poetry women have not only expressed their piety but also raised their voice against several biases' existent in the then society. Women personally have adopted unique ways to express themselves. This paper unleashes seer women poets in pre-colonial and colonial India who composed in the regional language deliberately breaking the literary and the religious hold of Sanskrit.

Keywords: bhakti, women, struggle for recognition, reformist ideas

1. Introduction

Literature in the Indian context beginning from the ancient times generally would never had been made possible without religion and spiritual aspects impressing upon it profoundly. Indian poetry has a long and extensive history dating back to Vedic and Sramanic Cultures. Several sacrificial songs, myths, legends, sermons and theological treatises, text books of rituals and religious odour were found as part of literature. Religious influence made a transition of *oral literature* in India into *written literature*. The religious literature had its corner stone in Sanskrit literature. But other regional languages like Tamil and Telugu also contributed their religious influence. The poetry found in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata the two great epics are considered to be exalted masterpieces of Indian literature. Towards the middle ages Indian poetry began to be written in Tamil, Kannada and Bengali. With the Muslim invasion Urdu was imbibed by Indian literature and Urdu also became a language of literature. In this way there was unity in diversity of Indian poetry.

2. Discussion

Subject to incessant foreign invasions by the Islamic or the colonization, Indian poetry has been affected by these foreign influences in various ways. As a point of safeguarding its religion, the *devotional* poets came into being. The *bhakti movement* pondered on the dissimilar and sundry pious and devout traditions centering round luminaries like Mirabai, Namadeva, or Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. They have made use of their poetry to express their devotion and love for their preferred deity, often Krishna or Goddess Kali. Along with this *bhakti cult* there arose, another kind of divine poetry in the South, woven round the *Vaishnava alvars* and *Saiva nayanars*. (Chandra, Cultural Development in India, 190).

Srimadramanuja and Adi Sankaracharya, depicted *Vedantic* philosophy and wrote poetry in devotional indisposition. Adi Sankaracharya's immortal poem 'I am He' is an exponent on *Advaitavada* or *the doctrine of non-dualism*

(55). It is a transcendental mystical experience beyond the everyday experience.

Indian religious literature in the early years was sectarian in nature. Bhakti tradition was in the full flowering during the seventh and the twelfth centuries (190). Bhakti movement was a landmark in the cultural history of medieval India. Along with many other people, Neera Desai, a feminist historian proposes

...that the bhakti movement was a response from medieval Hindu society to the threat posed by the growing political power as well as the monotheistic and egalitarian ideas of the Muslim invaders (Desai, Women in the Bhakti Movement, 93).

It was a silent revolution in society brought about by a galaxy of socio-religious reformers. In the later centuries, there was a surge of Bhakti adding Rama to Radha Krishna. A follower of saint Ramanuja, Ramananda, 'substituted the worship of *Rama* in place *Vishnu*.' Chaitanya, Vallabhacharya and Tulsidas were icons of the *bhakti* cult. Mirabai joins in the sixteenth century. In the modern period Sri Rama Krishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda, are great examples of the *bhakti cult*. Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore deserve to be mentioned here. Gurunanak, the founder of Sikh religion, Kabir Das the Alwars are votaries of the *bhakti cult*. Religion and literature introduced great mystics like Ramanuja and Madhavacharya. The *Bhakti movement* peacefully co-existed for the Muslims and the Hindus.

Right from the days of the Puranas the *Oral literature* in the form of *Vedas* and *Upanishads* were sources of knowledge only to the Brahmins and the elite. The epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharatha* that followed the *Puranas* were basically in Sanskrit language. It was a source of knowledge to a sect society in the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries. The bhakti cult emerged quite differently. Other languages became popular means of literature. The aim of written literature was to reach the common man to discipline the common man and to make better the common man. It is in this attitude Tulsidas' Ramcharit Manas, Tyagaraja

Keertana's and Kamban's Ramayana came to the fore front. Mirabai's poems and hymns also belong to this period. They were penned in Vrajbhasha, the language of the layman. Growth of *bhakti* was indeed a part of the social turmoil and upheaval and the social ferment of the period. The important feature of the *bhakti* cult was that it laid immense stress on the intense devotion to a personal, God. Chastity of personal character was laid stress above caste distinctions and devotion was open to all.

The emergence of poetry by women in India could be traced back and attributed to the advent of Buddhism. The freedom offered by religion, the way of life it offered to women, and the principle of equality that it propagated allowed women to pen their thoughts for the first time. The rise of women's literature in India could be traced back to sixth century B.C. 'Two hymns and a few verses in the Rig-Veda are attributed to women' (Tharu Susie, Lalitha. K, Women Writing in India, 600 B.C. to the Present, 55). The earliest known anthology of women's literature in India was identified as those belonging to the Therigatha nuns, (65) the poets being contemporaries of the Buddha. Women writing in India existed from the earliest times in spite of being victims to social ideologies, in spite of being marginalized. Most of this literature, in the form of poetry were either devotion in nature or were folk songs, which directly or indirectly opposed caste discrimination and the ritualized Hinduism. The Tamil Sangam poetry is the evidence for this. In these poems cycles of the agricultural year was celebrated and questioned brahminical dominance. The Moghal courts patronized this kind of secular literature, which exhibited non-Aryan cultures. The Harappa and Mohanjadaro excavations quite clearly indicated that there existed agricultural civilizations long before the Aryans came. With the Aryan invasions there was a synthesis of the Vedic and non-Vedic cultures giving rise to a *bhakti cult* with *Dark Krishna* and *Rama* as their central figures. Folk literature presented by tribal women- *Aadivasis* existed in the early Aryan times. In fact, two hymns and a few verses of Rig-Veda are attributed to women. After the Sangam poetry which was supposed to have been written in the early years in the first millennium A.D there is very little of women writing until the twelfth century which brought the early *Bhakti Poetry*.

Vijjaka or Vidya (650 A.D, a poet from what is present day Karnataka) is sometimes compared of a great poet Kalidasa. One of her stanzas often quoted is "Without knowing about me vijjaka dark like the petal of the blue lotus/That the poet Dandin said that, the Goddess of learning was all white." (55)

During this period there was a paucity of women's writing in classical Sanskrit which was the language of Religion and courtly art used by upper cast Brahmin men. Women and men of the lower caste spoke the local Prakrits (language).

In the eighth century Karraikal Ammaiyar, the Tamil poet, wrote lyric on the Nayanar movement. Nayanars are bhaktas in Tamil Nadu, like Vira Siva's in Karnataka in twelfth century and Varkaris and Manubhavas in Maharashtra in recurring phases from the twelfth to seventeenth centuries. Bhaktas of Alvars and Nayanars of Tamil Nadu symbolized that intense mystic experience of personal devotion beyond pedantry. She begins a long line of women poet saints in the medieval *bhakti poetry*.

Avanthi Sundari, the wife of Rajasekhara, a ninth century scholar and dramatist wrote poetry in prakrit and supported

her brilliant husband's projects. Rajasekhara wrote in his 'Kavya-mimamsa'- a treatise on aesthetics that 'women also can be poets. Sensibility and sophistication knows no difference of sex.' (56) In a way people like Avanti Sundari contributed in making a low language of the people a respectable one for literary composition.

Gangasati is a Gujarathi saint poet following in line with others like Radha Bai, Krishna Bai, Gouri Bai and Ratan Bai. Gangasati's compositions have not been written. They have been handed down through the oral traditions. They were nearly forty bhajans that were addressed to her daughter-in-law Pana Bai, instructing her, *the path of truth*. Her God is not a *Lord Rama* or a *Krishna*. He is not a form but a pure spirit *Nirguna* with whom the human soul could attain union through self-surrender and strict discipline. She was fortunate to be married to a man who adopted her way of life. Their home became a centre for religious discourses, meditations and a gathering of holy men. Her husband renounced the world and in this earthly existence he entered into *Samadhi*. Her son was brought up in this atmosphere and her daughter was being instructed truth, through the holy songs into the path of devotion.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the *Bhakti* movement spread to the North through Rajasthan, Gujarat, Kashmir, Punjab, to the Vaishnava groups in Bengal and Assam. The women poets of this period are: Akkamahadevi, Sule Sankavva, Janabai, Rami, Gangasati, Ratan Bai, Mira Bai, Molla, Bahinabai, and Tarigonda Vengamamba.

Most of this devotional poetry were in familiar contexts and found their imagery in the everyday lives of working people. Their verses are direct in the sense that the poet devotee catch holds, chides woos, rages against God, who is personally chosen husband/lover to the devotee imagined in sexual terms. The writings of Akkamahadevi, a medieval Kannada poet during twelfth century A.D. challenged the patriarchal dominance of the world at large. This *way of devotion* or *bhakti marg* focused as singular love and devotion, with a particular focus on the personal relationship with Divine. Their view of God is *Anthropomorphic*.

Atukuri Molla a Telugu poet of the early sixteenth century was also a rebel. She was born in a poor artisan family but she grew up to be bold in her ways. It appears that she did not marry. She wrote the *Ramayana in Telugu* in five days and dedicated it directly to the *Lord Rama*. The language of her work is simple and one of her argument is that poetic diction should be simple which should appeal to the common man as much as to the scholar. The noteworthy point is that the *Molla Ramayana* dwells in detail Sita's (wife of Lord Sri Rama) Childhood, Sita's strength and vitality are spoken in a gorgeous way. Great descriptions are made of Sita coming to age, her life at Ashokavanam. This reflects a *women's writing of the Ramayana*.

Bahinabai, a seventeenth century Marathi poet wrote poems in the Abanga meter (Maratha meter). She was a cherished child. She was best known to be a bold woman with sparks of rebellious and a refusal to abandon truth at any cost. She was not one of those *bhakti* poets who forsook their homes in their search of God, and who imaged God as a lover. She drew a balance between her duties to her husband and her devotion to God and His saints. It is said that Tukaram appeared her in her dreams and taught her a mantra. She began to experience of Vithoba-a lower caste poet devotee. Muddupalani was a courtesan attached to the retinue of Pratap Sinha one of the Nayaka Kings of Tanjavur. Unlike

other women poets Muttupalani did not have to face the normal difficulties of a woman. As she was a courtesan, she inherited property and was independent. The courtesan in the Tanjavur courts had access to scholarships and fine arts. It is in this state that Muttupalani wrote poetry. Her masterpiece is 'Radhika Santwanam,' an anthology of five hundred eighty-four poems. One of the remarkable features of the work is that she speaks of men as inconsistent, impatient and unreliable. The poet must have drawn these impressions from her everyday experience.

Spirituality in women is second nature to them. It goes very well with their grain or probably with their biology from immemorial times. Singing rhythmically is the inherent quality of a woman. The best example is a mother singing a lullaby to her child to make her sleep or a woman singing before the Almighty. If a woman happens to be a gifted creature, poetry will naturally flow, as the next step to music is poetry.

Women poets during the medieval period, made compositions in the language of the common people who could sing the same about the love of God or devotion to God, which could bring them the much needed solace from day to day misery, to lend them a sense of security and strength to bear the burden of daily trifles that the Almighty is with them, all the time at their beck and call. Often many men poets assumed the form of a woman while expressing their wails of separation from their beloved one. But Mira Bai took exception to this, where she herself being a woman expressed her devotion very passionately. Language of the common man was the language of the women poets. The attraction towards *bhakti movement* was that it was remarkably egalitarian, compared to other forms of worship that denied women, the poor and the dark-skinned people the right to worship.

Speaking simple doctrines of *religion*, of *oneness* and of *love*, Mira Bai's poems made the populace believe in One God could be a *Rama* or a *Krishna* or a *Rahim*. This *bhakti cult* of the medieval period is wonderful in that sense that it preached. Oneness of religion through religion – Kabir or a Mira or a Tulsidas or a Tukaram did not inflame divisions and disruptions in *Religion*. The study of Mira Bai is chosen as a representative of medieval India with the concept that she stood for that kind of Universal peace which is preached today over and over again, of unity in diversity, of oneness in many. Her poems, induced *bhakti* not only to Hindus but to all. Indeed, this might have interested many people to translate her poems into English language.

Mira Bai is often classed with the Northern *Santh bhakta's* who spoke of a formless divinity. She presents Krishna as the historical master of the *Bhagavad-Gita* who is the perfect avatar-manifestation of God in personal form, of the external who is omnipresent, but particularly focused in his icon and his temple. She speaks of a personal relationship with Krishna as her lover Lord and Master. The characteristic of her poetry is complete surrender. Her longing for Union with Krishna is predominant in her poetry. She wants to be coloured with the colour of dusk (symbolic colour of Lord Krishna).

Although Mirabai came from a royal family her devoutness made her abandon her *caste*. Tulsi Das in a letter to Mirabai, was believed to have encouraged her to abandon those who cannot understand her. Examples of Prahlada, Vibhishana were given to bid her to be confident about her firm step. Thereafter Mirabai met her Guru Rai Das in a slum. These

factors tell us that Mira Bai's religion is beyond caste, creed class. Otherwise Rai Das (also Ravi Das) living in a slum could not be her mentor.

Mira Bai fought gender inequality, through her devotion. As per a legend, Jiva Gosain was the head of the Vaishnavites in Brindavan and when Mira wanted to meet of him, he was said to decline to see her indicating that he would not allow any woman in his presence. Then Mira seems to have retorted by defying his stance that everybody in Brindavan is a woman, while the only *Purusha* is Giridhara Gopal and that then only she has come to know about another *Purusha* besides Krishna in Brindavan. Jiva Gosain was put to shame and it seemed that he at once went to see Mira.

3. Conclusion

Women's voice through their poetry highlighted their spiritual yearning. They did not lag behind their male counterparts in the point of creativity. They have hardly written any light-hearted poetry. The expression of individual temperament of man and women has a difference. Not that one is superior to other, but forthright, audacious and realistic expressions, confessional and autobiographical note characterizes women's poetry from men. It does not mean that the aspects of female poetic style of thematic choice are nonexistent in male writers but it occurs with great frequency in female writers. Elaine Showalter in her 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' clearly distinguished between Feminine, Feminist and Female ideologies. The two selected women fulfil female sensibilities when they express their quest's ultimate goal as *unitive-consciousness*.

In spite of old-world traditions, women were able to carve a niche in the world of literature by expressing their feelings and thoughts without any inhibitions. They were strong enough to successfully and satisfactorily produce their work of art even under the conditions of total incandescence of the whole personality.

4. References

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