

AN OVERVIEW OF “GENDER EQUALITY” DURING BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN INDIA

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Abstract: *The status of women in India is a contradiction. Although a woman is respected and revered as housewife and mother there is general acceptance of her subordinate status relative to man at all stages and in all areas of life. The Laws of Manu, which made her subservient, first to her father, then to her husband and finally to her son, are often quoted as the ideological base for her subordinate status. In other words, it is argued that socio-religious ideologies (which explain the legitimate gender relation) are the obstacles to women's equality with man in Indian society. From this argument flows the belief that by changing (or destroying) religious ideologies one will improve the status of women. This paper questions that assumption on theoretical and historical ground and suggests an alternative explanation for contradictions in the status of women in India during the medieval period. It examines from an historical perspective the impact of the socio-religious reform movement – the Bhakti Movement on the status of women in India. This paper is a trial and precise study in search of gender equality during a particular period of socio-religious transformation in medieval India that was the phase of Bhakti movement which took place in between the 9th and the 14th Century A.D. to bring reform within Hinduism.*

Key-words: *Bhakti Movements, Gender Equality, Medieval India, Saints, Bhaktins, Hinduism*

Introduction:

The Bhakti movement first appeared in the shape of religious reform in medieval India as a reaction against the ritualistic Brahminical religion. Its early name was “Ekantika Dharma” or the religion of single-minded love and devotion to one based upon the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita. Vasudeva Krishna, like Buddha and Mahavira in the Buddhist and Jain systems, was the originator of this reform. The word Bhakti was first used by H. H. Wilson to denote the Krishna Bhakti of the Vaishnavas of Bengal. It was George Grierson who developed the idea that Bhakti is a religious cult and doctrine. Most of the theories which Indian historians also accepted, tried to explain God in abstract and impersonal terms. However, Bhakti indicates a bhava or feeling and can be used in both religion and secular context. The medieval period saw both Sargun and Nirgun Bhakti. Saguna means “having qualities” and possessing a concretized form. Following the general idea of a united deity, Saguna bhakti supposed that God should be worshiped in same anthropomorphosis form of either Rama or Krishna. The followers of this traditions were Vallabhacharya the founder of the celebrated “Pusti Marga” community in Braj. The members of this community were consisted of the lower caste people or ‘Ashtachap’ came from among the Sudras and other poet saints like Vidyapati, Jains, Rashllam, Tulsi Das, Mira bai, Narsi Maheta the group of Marathi Varkavi saints and Sri Chaitanya of Bengal also followed this path of Nirguna bhakti to achieve God. Nirguna bhakti means devoid of qualities. Kabir, Ravidas, Garibdas, Mulukdas, Akhobhayat, Charandas, Dadu Dayal and others followed the Nirguna bhakti Marga. Even Nanak the founder of early Sikhism embodied many features of Nirguna bhakti. The adherents of this class of philosophy followed strict monotheism and Allah were the names of the same god which was understand by them as an absolute source of energy devoid of any visible form of life story so there is no significance of temples, rituals and priests to worship him. Hence opposed idol worship.

Earlier the Bhakti movement was treated chiefly as a literary movement or at best an ideological phenomenon which had religion as the basis of its inspiration. This has mainly happened due to lack of emphasis on social history

and hence the socioeconomic factors which aimed at bringing in a change have been generally ignored. The Bhakti movement was a product of a transitional society when a number of changes were taking place in the society on the political, economic and social front. Since there is a close relationship between socio-political and economic trends and the religious activities, the bhakti movement cannot be seen in isolation. Therefore, it becomes necessary to critically analyze see the historical transition witnessed in the fourteenth and the fifteenth century India.

We are surrounded by gender lore from the time we were very small. Gender is embedded so thoroughly in our institutions, our actions, our beliefs and our desires, that it appears to us to be completely natural. But in the process of evolution and transformation of human society and culture 'Gender' has become a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon. So, we need to step back and examine gender from new perspectives. This is not easy, for gender is so central to our understanding of ourselves and our world that it is difficult to pull back and examine it from new perspectives.

Objective of the study:

The objective of this study is to search out the status of women and particularly the Bhaktins on a gender perspective; to reexamine the existence of gender equality in the socio-political and religious context of the Bhakti movement in India. It is an attempt to have an overview of their position and the status within the given traditional hierarchy spearhead in a social movement articulating their demands for restructuring the existing order. When we analyse the Bhakti movement on gender perspectives, we come across the hypothesis in our mind as to what was the real goal and concept of the Bhakti movement. Questions rose in our minds: What were the socio-political background which shaped the ideology of the saint poets particularly the Bhaktins? How did the movement perceive women. Did it become successful in bringing out women from the oppressive social structure? Did the movement provide an alternative life style for women? Was women's emancipation the goal of the women saints (Bhaktins) and were they be considered as the pioneers of feminism in medieval India.

Methodology:

The methodology followed for writing of this paper is generally a narrative method based on reading, observation, analysis of data collected from secondary sources of history.

Meaning of Gender and Gender Equality:

Gender is the "costume, a mask, a straitjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance". Unlike sex, which is a biological concept, gender is a social construct specifying the socially and culturally prescribed roles that men and women are to follow. So gender is not something we are born with but something we do or perform.

Gender equality means equal opportunities, rights and responsibilities for women and men, boys and girls. Equality does not mean that women and men are the same but that the needs, opportunities, rights and responsibilities of men and women do not depend on whether human being are born as female or male.

Gender Equality in Bhakti Movement:

Political background:

The decadent political structure, the defunct military organization, the stagnant Indian society with its inherent socio-religious and economic imbalance creating a gulf between the masses and the socio-political leadership altogether became responsible for the defeat of the feudal rajput chieftains and collapse of the Hindu socio-political set up in Northern India during the early medieval period. On the other hand, the better military organization, discipline and coherence of the Turkish Invaders and intelligent use of their war strategies made them victorious, beside looting and plundering, their main motive was to spread Islam in India by force. The most valiant Turkish invader Muhammad Ghori had no male issue to inherit his vastly conquered Indian domains. So he established one of his slave officer Qutubuddin Aibek on the throne of Delhi. Thus began the rule of what is called the Sultanate of Delhi (1211 AD) under the slave dynasty enslaving the Indian culture for long 200 years in the Indo-Gangetic valley under five chief dynasties; the slave Tughluq Khilji, Sayed & Lodhies. During these 200 years of Muslim rule in India, at the initial phase; the conservative Hindu society of Northern India was not ready to accept the Muslim community and culture. It took a long period to accept, accommodate and establish social relationships with the Muslims. In this process of

accommodation, the Bhakti and Sufi movement played a significant role in establishing socio-religious equality and coherence in between the Hindus and Muslim community of India. Although the Bhakti movement had already taken birth and gradually grown by the 7th century in South India, it had not got momentum touching Northern India until the 13th & the 14th Century.

Socio-Economy Background:

The Bhakti movement was a product of this society and its ideology served a significant purpose. Its saints were not idle philosophers or arm-chair reformers. They mostly come from lower sections of society and worked for their living. Though Meera, Tulsidas, Gnandev and Chaitanya come from the upper class, Kabir, Nanak, Ravidas, Dadu, Namdev and Tukaram were basically from the trading and artisan communities. They narrated their philosophy on local dialects in lyrical forms. In Orissa also the Bhagavat was written by Jagannath Das in Odia and Laxmipurana by Balaram Das in the local version. They were aware that books on religion were written in Sanskrit and women as well as Sudras were not permitted to read them and thus, they were debarred from any access to religious knowledge. Thus, the Bhakti movement which has been called a literary movement enrolled a large number of traders and craftsman and man women belonging to all section caste creeds into its rank and file. The movement made women conscious of their position and the need of education and democratization of the socio-religious structure of the society. The preaching of man of the saints and devotional songs gave a real shape to the concept of an egalitarian society.

On the economic front the Delhi Sultanate witnessed a number of changes. It definitely created an economic organization considerably superior to the previous one. In its earlier phase it had released social forces which had led to the expansion of towns and alternations in agrarian relations. In the beginning of the fourteenth century there was a considerable growth in these towns and expansions in craft production and commerce. All this had occurred due to a number of changes in the various crafts as a result of improvement in technology. This can be seen in sericulture, carpet weaving on the vertical loom, introduction of spinning wheel (Charkha) in the cotton textile sector, the Persian wheel in irrigation, the introduction of paper, the appearance of the magnetic compass as an aid to navigation and the invention of accurate time-keeping devices for the regulation of economic activity. The increase in commerce can be seen in the increase of coinage as a result of the transfer of stored silver and gold into minted money. There is also seen an increase in the slave market, to provide artisans conversant with the new techniques and cheap labour for the various crafts. Therefore, on the economic front the increase in craft production and commerce had created unstable conditions for the artisan and merchant classes. It was this in socio-political and economic condition, the Bhakti movement flourished in medieval India.

Origin, Growth and Nature of Bhakti Movement:

The Bhakti movement was a movement within Hinduism itself. According to Hinduism there are three ways to attain salvation: (i) *Jnan* (Knowledge), (ii) *Karma* (Duty) and (iii) *Bhakti* (Devotion). During the medieval period, Hindu Saints emphasized on Bhakti as a means or a path to attain salvation that resulted in the Bhakti movement. The movement was not a new movement altogether within Hinduism. There was the Bhagavata movement which had its birth along with Buddhism and Jainism in the 6th century BC, but at that time this movement could not gain strength. Sankaracharya propounded his philosophy of Monoism on the basis of ancient Hindu Vedanta philosophy while, the Bhakti Saints, Ramanada and Ramanuja were the followers of Vaishnavism which emphasized bhakti as a means or path to attain salvation. However, it was necessary for a person to pursue bhakti as a path to attain salvation one should completely surrender himself to God with deep devotion and love towards God. It is necessary for the person to make his mind and body free from every desire and temptation of human life.

The cult of “Bhakti” took birth in Dravidian lands, ripened in Karnataka, came to womanhood in Maharashtra and grew crone like in Gujrat, reaching Vrindavan, she emerged a nubile young woman.

During the Sangam Age between the 3rd Century BC and AD were written thousands of verses in Tamil that have collectively been known as Sangam literature. The expressions of love between a man and a woman in these love poems gave away to passionate expressions of devotional love, where the heroine became the devotee and the hero became the God. The individual outpourings and the unfettered voice of these women refused to be drowned in the pound of patriarchy, gathering momentum until this became a pan Indian movement.

If we examine broadly the nature of socio-religious movements taken place in India, we find there were mostly two groups of progressive movement aimed at the emancipation of Indian women. Both groups recognized the restrictive and coercive nature of the social customs and institutions. These groups are: (i) The Reformers and (ii) The Revivalists.

The Reformers opposed the customs and institutions as they contradicted the democratic principles of liberty and freedom. The Revivalists demanded the democratization of social relations and removal of harmful practices on the basis of revival of the vedic society in modern India which, according to them, was democratic.

The social reformers believed in the principle of individuals' liberty and freedom, equality of all human beings irrespective of sex, colour, race, caste and religion. They attacked a number of the traditional authoritarian hierarchical social institutions and launched social reform movement to liberate Indian women from their shackles. Though majority of the reformers of such movements were mainly men, the reform movement aimed at improving the status of Indian women.

'Bhakti' as a concept meaning devotion and complete surrender to God. The Bhakti movement propagated the idea that God dwells in each individual's heart and one could attain God/Salvation through faith and devotion as a means. Earlier historians perceived the Bhakti movement as a literary or at best an ideological phenomenon which had religion at the basis of its inspiration, But later it also came to be regarded as an attempt at bringing about an egalitarian society, or a protest against Brahminical monopoly.

The concept of Bhakti and roots of feminism:

With everyone equal in the eyes of God, as a basic principle of Bhakti cult, the movement spread religion and spirituality among the marginalized classes – especially women, whose religious expression was restricted in many ways. The movement liberated both God and man (inclusive of women) from the shackles of Brahminical monopoly. The concept of Bhakti itself created a space where one could have a personal relationship with God and removed all intermediaries, related to all Brahminical traditions and rendered the role of Brahmin priests futile.

The unique and alternative path – “the path of Bhakti” or the Bhakti Marga, when became a lay man's reach, many women and lower caste individuals joined the movement and expressed themselves with no inhibitions. The quest for salvation no longer required chanting of Sanskrit mantras and performing rituals. But only deep affection, love and devotion to God.

The movement saw several women saints as well as saints from lower castes leading masses in their own regions singing songs and poems in their vernacular language. The movement was an accretion of smaller regional movements towards salvation and against oppressive hierarchies.

The Bhaktins:

Tracing the roots of Indian Feminism led us to women in Bhakti who challenged Brahminical patriarchy through their songs, poems and their way of life. They rejected all fixities to religion and spirituality when temple closed doors to them, when family objected and rejected them. Freeing their beloved God from closed doors, they carried him in their hearts. They worshiped a 'Nirguna' (formless) God or substituted him as one of those who could dwell in humble abodes being a part of the movement eradicating idol-worship from the prevailing superstitions beliefs of Hinduism. At a time when most spaces were restricted to women, the women embraced Bhakti to define their own truths to reform society, polity, relationships and religions. They broke all societal rules and stereotypes and lived their lives as they pleased.

In the Bhakti movement, women took on the qualities that men traditionally had. Champions of feminism, women poet saints of the Bhakti movement broke free from the draconian Hindu code of life prescribed by 'Manu' to find their religious and spiritual freedom. They lived outdoors, refused sex to husband, wandered and travelled alone, gave up husband, children and family.

Women saints wrote numerous poems and songs expressing their love for the God, who is their husband, lover or consort and about their oppression and desire for freedom. In this context, they not only challenged the God like status of their husbands but also gave their motherhood and family. In this respect, the rule was different for men

and women. While a male bhakta could follow his chosen path and remain as a householder, this was not possible for the woman. Most women had to choose between their Bhakti and their married and domestic life.

Mirabai: Mirabai a Bhaktin of the 15th century an eminent poet and a rajput princess of the 15th Century India, denied the legitimacy of her marriage to Raja Bhojraj and refused to consummate it. She embraced Lord Krishna and spent hours at the temple worshipping him. Roughly, a decade into their marriage (unconsummated), Bhojraj died. Just as Mira had refused to be his wife, she also refused to role as his widow. She would neither wear the mourning garb, nor follow any of the customs expected of a royal woman – giving a lost husband. She lived through the ages through her songs and poems, describing her utmost devotion and love towards Lord Krishna. Mira did not deliberately choose her words to create an effect” but measured her poetry to be “The spontaneous outburst of her heart” which advised perfection because of her artless and deep emotions”

Akka Mahadevi: Akka Mahadevi was the earliest example of a gender – liberated women writer, credited with the composition of over four hundred forty remarkably self-explorative vachanas. She had a powerfully authentic female voice of the radical, egalitarian Sharana movement, which questioned the established barrier between genders and ushered in a world of socio-cultural equality.

Andal: The poetess was found as a baby near a Tulsi bush and eventually ‘married’ Lord Ranganatha. Her works are included in the “Nalayira Divya Prabandham” – a collection of 400 Tamil verses. Andal is the only woman who is acknowledged to be an Alwar. After Andal became a beautiful woman, she refused to marry anyone else but Lord Ranganatha, the reclining form of Lord Vishnu, resided in the temple town of Srirangam. Andal finally merged with her lord in a blaze of light as legends go on.

Ammaiyar: She was one of only three women in the Seriva saints known as ‘Nayamars’, born as beautiful women. She came to identify herself as a ‘peey’, ‘Ghoul’ or Lord Siva’s ‘Gana’. She was the first saint to have written verses for Shiva in Tamil. Her husband Paramadathan realized about his wife’s extraordinary entity and accepted her as his mother. She was set free from the trappings and expectations of the society by Punithavathi’s prayer to God.

Muktabai: She along with her three male siblings – Nivruttinath, Gyanndev and Sopandev – was responsible for lying the foundation of one of the best-known Bhakti cults in Maharashtra which strived for liberation from oppressive scriptural orthodoxy. By her spiritual power, she could convert the dead body of a man ‘Vitthala’ into an alive just by chanting his name in the ears of the corpse.

Atukuri Molla: She was one of the first Telugu poetess and creator of the 1st Telugu Ramayana, which brought her great renown in the court of Krishnadeva Ray of the Vijayanagara Empire.

Kanhopatra: Born in a family of courtesans, Kanhopatra was a prostitute who, despite her famed beauty and charm, longed for a life of a pious lady. Persecuted by her father Sadshiva and a local potentate, she was finally granted the sanctuary of death at the feet of Lord Vitobha in Pandharpur.

These Bhaktins were real women who spoke in a clear, loud voice about real issues. But what prompted them – rich, poor, married or otherwise. Brahmins, Rajputs, Sudras, Prostitutes and Royal Women – to take the path they followed? It is hard to say what comes first, spiritual enlightenment or the quest for religious expression. Because most of these women Bhaktas were known through their biographies composed after their death, those biographies, while embodying their influence and preserving their works, often got exaggerated in their retelling and became mythical, legends full of miracles that were performed by God, their Guru or themselves and were presented through the lens of folklore. While observing the sizeable stock of legends, stories and their own material, the motives of these women are extraordinarily similar. Their stories are subjective, narratives covering the gamut of what it means to be a woman. The compositions of these poetess like the Bhajans, kirtans, abhangs and padams were meant to be sung aloud. Ironically the same biographies that preserved the life and times of these women also sanitized their works, cleansing

them of their suffering and frustration, in an attempt to portray the patriarchal model of Bhakti. Many of their bhajans and abhangs were not sung in public, under valuing the literary genius and talent of these women.

Across the country, starting with the Tamil Andal, the chola princess Mangayarkkarasiyar and Karaikal Ammaiyar in the south, to Lalleshwari – a mystic poetess of the Kashmiri salivate sect, to Gangasati in Gujrat, Sukabai, Muktabai and Bahina, who wrote Marathi Abhangas, Akka Mahadevi in Karnataka, Mahadevi in Odisha and the celebrated Meera Bai in Rajasthan, the individual outpouring and the vibrant voices of these women refused to be drowned, gathering momentum until Bhakti became a pan-India phenomenon.

Findings:

- ❖ The Bhakti movement was a product of the transformation of the socio-political and economic setup of medieval India. Its ideology served the purpose towards achieving an egalitarian social order.
- ❖ Transformations in the socio-economic spheres have spearheaded a social movement which articulated demands for reconstructing the existing order. However an analysis of the position and status of the Bhaktins in the medieval India highlights the fact that ideological and cultural changes did not specify women under their purview unless and until they had filtered down to the grass root level of the society. In fact there was an every attempt at maintaining the status-quo.
- ❖ India, at heart, is a religious nation. While the works of most of these women have been suppressed due to patriarchy once they did not come to the fore, these women were not derided as exhibitionists or even delusional. Rather they became revered for their devotion and literary excellence, as well as the level of spiritual height they had attained by daring to love God, even as their lives were celebrated. Loving God is more difficult than loving man. The paths prescribed to reach him before Bhakti movements were far tougher. The path of love and devotion gave them the scope and space to express their religious and spiritual feelings easily in a conservative, patriarchal society of medieval period. This also signifies the inner power and strength of the women Bhaktas who dared to choose this path to achieve God. Gender obviously did not matter neither did caste. Religion is gender neutral and so as the cult of Bhakti.

‘Bhakti’ by concept is gender neutral, so it is not justified to feminize it as it is something beyond feminism. As far as women empowerment is concerned, it should not be calculated on the basis of ideology of feminism rather it should be achieved for the all-round development of the society and welfare of the whole mankind. The Bhakti movement gave a scope for this by making the movement universal irrespective of sex, caste, creed and colour. It emphasized on the spiritual and eternal upliftment of the individual. Nevertheless the movement inculcated or preached the superiority of feminine quality.

Scholars have defined the concept of feminism in various prospective and in various angles but the concept of Bhakti is something beyond the ideology of feminism. Irrespective of the feminine and masculine quality and behavior when a man or woman through self-restraint achieves or expands his or her inner power making himself or herself free from the lower attributes and strives on the path of salvation passing the stages of the spiritual upliftment, then he or she can be called as a real follower of Bhaktism. Following the path of Bhakti means to raise oneself to that spiritual level through self-restraint that one can make oneself so powerful to be free from all passions, desires and bondage of the world which can be blissful for himself and for the whole universe. The Bhaktins powerfully objected all kind of inflictions that the stereo typed of social order of medieval India inflicted upon them. They epitomized all parallel strength and were powerful examples of womanhood as well as manhood.

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