

Bhakti Movement in India: Study of Deccan Women Poets

Manjusha Tawase

Gender roles decide and distinguish inferior and superior human beings and thus the distinction between sexes is purposely maintained in the society. Indian subcontinent is notoriously famous for its body politics and patriarchy. Deep roots of patriarchy and its rapid growth in terms of practice, both, are found in the later Vedic period that is a period around 600 B.C. But in early Vedic period, womenfolk of India had a respectable place in family as well as society. Later, it was only the spiritual arena which accepted the very existence of women as equal or superior to men.

Historical references suggest the beginning of Bhakti movement in late 6th century and it came to an end roughly in late seventeenth century. But it is the significant quality of abstract things like Bhakti or devotion that they do exist in traces before their actual acceptance by all and sundry. Same is the case for the after effects of the abstract terminology. Abstract terms often remain as indelible impressions in the minds of people even after their practice is minimized. So, Bhakti is such an abstract term which means being in a passionate love with the Almighty. With a change in time, the deities of worship by people were changed but the fundamental concept of devotion remained unaltered. It means Bhakti or devotional love for the God did exist from the ancient time. The credit of converting the devotional love into movement goes to Tamil saint poets, specially the Alwars and Nayanars. Alwars were the Vaishnavites that is, worshipers of the Lord Vishnu where as the Nayanars were the people who followed Shaivism, that is, worship of Lord Shiva. These Alwars and Nayanars introduced excellent literary works through spiritual compositions. Thus, Tamil saints were the pioneer to the Bhakti movement. The period of Bhakti movement as mentioned by historians, falls in between 6th century to 17th century. The peak period of the movement was around 12th century, during which the movement gained momentum.

Prior to this movement, Indian literature was marked by the writings of Sangam poets (100 BCE to 250AD) and the contemporary women poets. Avvaiyars handled the responsibility of preaching the society during Sangam period. The first Avvai, the most respected lady of her time, preferred to lead a spinsters life and wandered in search of sacred knowledge. In her lifetime, she procreated precious granthas as well as some important writings on Ayurveda, and Metaphysics. Uma Chakravarty writes, “Avvai now began to wend her way up and down the land, ... the Atti-Choodi contains 108 maxims which at the same time teach the Tamil alphabet.” (Manushi 20)

Out of the Tamil women saint poets of Nayanar tradition, the Karaikalammaiyar Punithavati, 6th century AD is worshipped as a goddess and Andal, was the only woman poet placed in the list of twelve Alvars. About Karaikalammaiyar, Uma Chakravarty writes in her research paper titled : *The World of the Bhaktin in South Indian Traditions – The Body and Beyond*, “In the second phase of Tamil literature, (c 600 AD) an important contribution was made by Karaikalammaiyar, ... She composed a long poem of 100 verses titled Arputha Thiru Anthati, expressing her devotion to Shiva, a work which is considered capable of moving people to tears. (Manushi 21)

Next remarkable woman figure was Andal. Andal means a girl who ruled over the Lord. Her birth mystery is unknown. She was brought up by a sage named periyalvar . As a child, she loved to listen the stories about Lord Krishna. Her devotion for Lord Krishna turned into a love of a wife for husband. All her poems show her longing for Lord Krishna. Thus, for Karaikalammaiyar her personal God Shiva, is her Appa (father) whereas for Andal, Lord Krishna is her husband . Surprisingly for Akkamahadevi, Lord Shiva is neither her Appa nor her husband. Her personal god Chennamallikarjuna (the lord white as jasmine), is mere an adulterous lover to her. So, this is the ultimate stage of Bhakti Akka had attained. But the way she depicts her longing for him is matchless.

Uma Chakravarty appreciates Akka in her research paper – *The world of Bhaktin in South Indian Traditions – The Body and Beyond*. Uma writes, “Akka Mahadevi’s experience is, like Andal’s, informed by bridal mysticism. But in Akka Mahadevi’s case, the legitimacy of the experience is irrelevant. The lord need not to be the husband, merely the adulterous lover. Her Handling of her own sexuality is much more open like that of the devadasi, rather than of wife.” (Manushi 26)

Though born in medieval age, Akka Mahadevi seems to be very open and resolute about her own notions and concepts of life and spirituality. A.K. Ramanujan in his scholarly discussion with Madhu Kishwar, explains as how southern women poets left their imperishable impact in the grandeur of Bhakti movement. Scholarly compositions of these women poets worked as an impetus to the movement. A. K. Ramanujan says “Every regional bhakti movement, particularly in the south, has at least one outstanding woman in it. ... The most famous of them is Mahadeviyakka . Nearly a thousand poems are attributed to her”. (Manushi 10)

To get rid of their sexuality and continue spiritual journey without any impediment, these women transformed their appearances. There was no question of marriage in case of Avvai, but she gave up her youth and beauty and changed herself into an old lady . Karaikalammaiyar, the extremely beautiful and spiritually gifted wife, changed herself to a demon devotee for the ease of her journey towards her Appa’s abode (the Kailasa) . Andal clearly refused to marry any mortal man and chose the Ranganatha (Lord Krishna) as her husband. Akka Mahadevi left her

husband and so call home and even clothings for her eternal lover Chennamallikarjuna (Lord Shiva), whom she calls an adulterous lover .

These women were truly superior in their devotion towards their personal deities. It is the characteristic feature of all these women poets that for walking on their path of Bhakti, they discarded all worldly pleasures and finally attained the knowledge. Also they freely used the gained knowledge for the welfare of the society.

Geographically, the uppermost part of the Deccan plateau, Maharashtra, has always been famous as the land of saints and social reformers. In the medieval period, this land also carried out its responsibility of preaching society through literary and spiritual creations. Muktabai, younger sister of Saint Gyaneshwara, is the first woman saint poet. She belonged to the Varkari sect. she lived a life of total 18 years. At such a small age, she wrote with a great authority. Muktabai died in her teens. But the lines she wrote depicting Bhakti, speaks in volumes about her. Saint Namdeva's spiritual teacher, Visoba, the old man from Alandi and Changadeva the old yogi were Muktabai's disciples.

Another woman saint poet contemporary to Muktabai was Janabai. She worked as a maid in Namdeva's house. While doing daily households, Janabai used to compose own Abhangas. She was an illiterate woman but today we can read her spiritual poems by the grace of Saint Namdeva, who noted her compositions along with his own writings. Apart from above mentioned names there were so many other women poets like saint Sakhubai, Saint Kanhopatra, Saint Bahinabai and many others .

Kanhopatra a 15th century saint poet, enriched Marathi spiritual literature with her ovis and abhangas. Kanhopatra was a daughter of a rich prostitute named Shyama . Kanhopatra was heavenly beautiful figure of her time. She was trained as a skillful dancer and singer but she never wanted to join her mother's profession. As a daughter of a prostitute and a rebel, she was oppressed throughout her life but she remained stuck to the path of devotion. She danced only for Vithoba (Lord Krishna) and cleaned his temple premises twice a day. She calls Vithoba as Krishnai, which means a mother to her. In Varkari tradition, the disciples often call their deity by different names. Likewise, Kanhopatra calls Vithoba as Vithai, Kanhai, Krishnai, Janani Vithabai, Devaraya, Narayana, Shripati, Manmatha and so on . She calls herself as fallen, downtrodden, the weakest and even sometimes a calf of a poor doe or the food for the beasts. The word beast in her writing, refers to those cruel people from society who forced her to follow her mother's profession of prostitution. Sarah Sellergren cites Kanhopatra's abhangas in her research *paper titled Janabai and Kanhopatra a Study of Two Women Sants*:

O Narayana, you call yourself
Savior of the fallen ...
A challenge
to your claims of mercy.
Feldhaus Anne (227)

R. D. Ranade writes Kanhopatra, the beautiful daughter of a dancing woman of Mangalvedha, tells us that it is bad pursuit to follow the path of sensual pleasure:

The path of sensual pleasure
Always leads straight to ruin.
Indra got ulcers for his pursuits,
Bhasma was reduced to ashes,
Candra the Moon slept with his guru's wife,
and his face wears his sin to this day,
Ravana lost his demon life
for stealing Sita away.
All this is true,
Says Kanho, dasi of God.
Feldhaus Anne (230).

According to Gurudev R.G.Ranade, above abhanga of kanhopatra is related with the painful incident of her life. As Ranade writes, "This Abhanga she probably composed when she was invited by Mohamedan king of Bedar" (208).

After Kanhopatra another prominent name in the arena of devotional poetry is the 17th century saint poet Bahinabai. Bahinabai was born in 1628. Works of Bahinabai show both, her attraction towards devotional path as well as the her frustrations out of the impediments created by her own husband and so called social norms. She wrote 473 abhangas in all, out of them first 78 are her Atmanivedana that is autobiographical writing. Through her autobiographical verses her dilemma is clearly felt. Sometimes her chaos out of dilemma is acutely heightened and Bahinabai wants the god to take her life. Justin E. Abbott had worked on Bahinabai and her verses and compiled the translations of her Abhangas in her book titled – *Bahina Bai: A Translation of her Autobiography and Verses*.

For some years together Bahina bai seems to suffer and accept her frustrated life as her fate. It is due to her devotion towards God she manages walking through pain and acquires indifference to worldly things. But as a result of this ordeal, she is developed to be a critique to all unjust social norms. She rebels through her work. Through her writings, she has taken her share to enrich Bhakti literature.

Thus, women poets of Deccan area energized the Bhakti movement through their literary works. What they wrote in praise of their personal God, had come directly from their heart which propagated the movement. Being a woman of the medieval period, it was not an easier task to read and write text and thus compete men of the patriarchal society. These women had to walk through tough situations to prove themselves. Still, these women came up with confidence

and created self identity and made indelible impressions on the society. Through their works, these women dynamically changed the age old chaotic thoughts.

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