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BOLD, ASSERTIVE AND SIGNIFICANT VOICES OF BHAKTI WOMEN SAINT POETS

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The advent of Bhakti Movement and emergence of women saints

In the early Sangam phase, taboos pertaining to determination of purity or impurity given the biological process concerning a female body were almost nil. Whereas in the late Sangam literature, we come across references pertaining to the inferiority of the fairer sex, determined on the basis of biological distinctions.

This transformation in the very ideological basis of the society was an imposed one, given the existing Brahminical patriarchal order. The Brahmins reflected a transitional stage in the position of a woman; owing to the growth of rituals and the development of social institutions, the scope of a woman's life was gradually becoming limited. The society then circumscribed the woman into some fixed norms, the most vital of all being, giving birth to a son.

Similarly, the early Vedic period, there existed "a uniform spirit of reverence for womanhood and the Vedic religion does not deny any right to women, not in the least the religious¹". It was after the advent of the Aryan civil society that the very basis of gender relations were altered. The fact that menstruating women were supposed to abstain themselves from worship or a woman until forty days of giving birth to a child was considered impure.

During this period the society eventually became systematized and religion developed into a science, its primary role being to monitor almost every aspect of human life. For instance, the very creation of the universe was read by the Aryans as a result of the union of Prakriti (woman) and Purusa (man), who collectively are held responsible to be the key proponents in

¹Rao Shastri, Shakuntlala. *Women in the Vedic age*. Bombay: Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, 1986

the idea of a 'home'. Our renowned sage Vishvamitra, who realised this moral and spiritual force of a woman, thousands of years ago had himself declared that "the wife is the home".

In this transforming phase pertaining to gender relations the idea of female spirituality occupied a complex position. Analyzing this prevailing tension regarding the space of a woman at home vis a vis her own personal space in the context of her spiritual leanings, gives rise to a further conflict as to what is the scope available for a woman in a patriarchal society if she desires to fulfill her spiritual aspirations. Though in the history of Bhakti period we have witnessed many women mystics realizing their own potential and acknowledging their desires as a devotee. But at the same time if we look at each of these women saints closely spread across the whole country, it would not be wrong to infer that almost all of them had to face social banishment, as a result, were entitled to step out of their family units.

The problem of the relationship of human to god is an important aspect in understanding gender relations in any society. There is much cultural variation even within India. The need for historical investigation into the past is thus that much greater. The rich tradition of bhakti is particularly significant for women, both for variations and commonalities in its social and religious implications. Here the dominant Brahminical ritual world is attempted to be turned upside down, boundaries operating in the social world collapse, and the shackles imposed by a rigidly hierarchical social order are stretched to provide breathing space for some men and women.

The dissent movements of the sixth century BC had virtually accomplished the construction of a caste, class and gender stratified social order. The question of women's place in the search for salvation had surfaced among all religious currents, but especially in the dissent movements and attempts to resolve it had led to a plurality of situations. Buddhism, for instance, was forced to concede a somewhat grudgingly space for women and provide an institutional means for them to pursue their religious goals. However this accommodation had been made within the social ambit of the Buddhist Sangha. In one sense Bhakti was a continuation of this tradition, but it also represented a significant departure because it collapsed the distinction between the world of grahasta and the world of sanyasi.

However if we look at the aspect of the experience of Bhaktins, it would be interesting to note that the space these women mystics have carved out for themselves is a radically broader one as they have expressed their own selfhood and redefined gender relations. Also at the same time they have made tremendous efforts in order to reshape the configurations that tend to commodify the female body.

Bhakti as a spiritual expression for women saints

Though spirituality for a female mystic ordains freedom, empowerment and independence, but at the same time, the female saint occupies a space on the fringes of her society, because she is considered as a deviant. Thus as Vijay Ramaswamy puts it, “spirituality becomes a mode of empowerment yet, they are disempowered or marginalized.”² The most interesting aspect of sainthood, particularly in the case of women is the way in which they tend to invert normalcy and yet are eulogized and revered among the masses.

From Karraikal Ammaiyar, Andal, Lal Ded, Mirabai to Akkamahadevi etc, each of them alarmed femininity in their own ways. “Karraikkal Ammaiyar violated notions of femininity by turning into a skeletal being, while Auvaiyar opted to exchange her beauty for instant old age. Akkamahadevi walked naked, while, Nanga Pennu ran away from marriage podium to the sanctuary of the temple. Thus patriarchy and social constructs were shattered by all these women mystics.”³

But at the same time, it is only rare that we come across women saints who have created a mass uprising or have established an order. In most of the cases, as we see in almost every sect of Hinduism this resultant absence of a monastic lineage created by a woman is mainly due to the customary practice of excluding them from canonical pantheon. It was only after the twelfth century that the images of Karraikkal Ammaiyar, were placed in the temples, thereby, acknowledging a social validation of her potency, purity and effectiveness. Throughout her life she was vigorously devoted to her ascetic practices, which is also visible in her skeletal form. Likewise, Akkamahadevi, she too opted out of the society in order to attain her spiritual goal.

According to Sandra Gilbert and Gubar, silence that women observe with regards to their own desires, whims and fancies, should be discontinued. Indeed, this silence is marked by a repeated horrifying absence of women from history, writing and discourse. Therefore, a patriarchal hegemony is established, because all descriptions are monological in nature and also one sided.

Therefore, the voice of these female mystics like, Akkamahadevi or Lal Ded is to be regarded as a counter-discourse within the society, often occupying a sub-altern position, seeking idioms for resistance.

If we look at both Akkamahadevi and Lal Ded in a close parallel there are many common areas to be underlined and highlighted pertaining to both the saints. The fact that both were women of high birth, yet were disinterested

² Ramaswamy, Vijay. *Walking Naked : Women, Society and Spirituality in South India*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2007 p.19

³Ibid p.20

for concerns that were worldly. Both ‘Lalla’ and ‘Akka’ are titles of respect and reverence ordained to them by the society. Radical in their own ways, both women walked out of their respective marriages. Each of their lives lurk with

narratives of immense suffering and strife. It was a formidable challenge for both women to go against their gender, which is reflected in their boldness to shun clothes and at the same time, both asserted themselves against the prevailing grounds based on which worship was conducted in the Brahmin society.

So on one hand, their idea was to deconstruct gender dichotomies by using their nudity as a fulcrum of expression of their personal desires and on the other hand, these women mystics were determined in their attempts to achieve salvation through their reliance not on any particular religious sect, but on the sense of their belief in *Yoga, Tantric sadhana*, Kashmiri Saivism in the case of Lal Ded and Virasaivism in the case of Akkamahadevi. Their aim was not to preach any particular philosophic strain of thought, but to make others realize the loopholes in the conventional framework, for instance, both Lal Ded and Akkamahadevi problematised the tradition of idolworship .

One of the other notable factors determining the radical temperament of Lal Ded and Akkamahadevi lies in their outspokenness pertaining to their sexuality. The fact that they boldly walked away from what is regarded as the world of constructs, the made world, is one, but on the other hand, their means of protest against it is where the real breakthrough lies. Which is to say that, nakedness is a metaphorical expression of disdain, disregard and disobedience for social conventions and the community values at large. In the case of our female mystics into consideration it symbolizes being open to the experience of god. It is considered as one of the purest of all states of being, likewise in the Jaina tradition, a whole community values nakedness, it is called the *digambara*, clad in the sky and eight directions.

Rejection of socio- cultural norms by women saints and therefore marginalised

Although nude male *sadhus* (wandering ascetics) had long been a feature of the Indian Landscape, it was a socio-ethical stigma to witness a woman walking along the street without clothes. Asked why she refused to wear a sari, Mahadevi explained that she no longer took orders from men. She had renounced the world completely, her only possession was her love for god. As she elucidates in the following vaakh,

“To the shameless girl,
Wearing Malikarjuna’s light, you fool
Where is the need for cover or jewel.⁴”

⁴ Ibid p.173

Similarly, Lal Ded escaping the bonds of marriage continued to live an unconventional life, defying social norms and taboos. Likewise, Akkamahadevi, Lalla was a keen devotee of lord Shiva, a rebellious figure who overturned the paradigms of modesty in Kashmir. According to Lalla, she wandered naked because there was no 'real man' around her. Her consciousness was beyond worldly covers of femininity, as she expressed freedom from norms vividly in her vaakhs and symbolically through her nudity. As Durre S Ahemad observed, "the naked figure set against a background of the legendary beauty of Kashmir represents a powerful image: it evokes an unbridled, intense passion which is clearly not sexual. Yet the nakedness speaks of femaleness as does the cryptic story about the real man."⁵ As we see in the following vaakh of Lalla;

"The Guru gave me the word of wisdom
From the outside bade me turn within
That word for me, Lal, is the surest prophecy,
And that is why I danced naked in abandon!"⁶

To conclude, our women saints into consideration, both Akkamahadevi and Lal Ded are to be regarded as bold figures of formidable courage, known and acknowledged widely for their vigorous attempts at attaining spiritual salvation. Despite hindrances of several kinds these women mystics sailed through emerging conflicts including the society and its norms. They not only attained their willful union with their lords, but at the same time, also merged into their lord's image, which is how they achieved both renunciation and eternity. Their naked conditions play a vital role in order to understand them as figures of audacity and intrepidity.

Oral Compositions by Women Saints : Exemplifying Community Identity and Folk Culture

Bhakti movement has had a profound influence of Indian culture. It not only enriched various aspects of culture, but also initiated new modes of cultural expressions. Perhaps the most profound influence and contribution of the Bhakti movement to the Indian culture is in composing of songs and poetry and in revitalizing music and group singing . The intertwining of Bhajan and Bhakti, song and devotion is largely due to the fact that the path of Bhakti from its very beginning was preached through songs.

The intense emotional attachment the Bhakti saints had towards their Divine, inspired copious volumes of excellent, religious mystic poetry and played a major role in propagating religious aspirations and sentiments in the form of popular songs. Thereby, along with devotion they were also strengthening the foundation of oral tradition in India.

⁵ S Ahemad, Durre . *Gendering the Spirit: women, religion and postcolonial response*. London: Zed Books

⁶Mattoo , Neerja. Lal Ded: The poet who gave voice to women. P.4

Mirabai composed more than twelve hundred songs, conveying her surrender to Krishna and her longing to unite with him in simple rhythm and repeating refrain that encouraged millions to repeat the songs and relieve the moods of intense longing. In many parts of North India, especially, Rajasthan, her Bhajans have become part of religious gatherings and folk culture. Surdas is said to have composed more than a hundred thousand songs, collectively called the Sur Sagar, apart from writing Survali and Sahitya Lahiri.

Indian literature has always compounded the deepest attention of any inquisitive scholar on Indian culture with its overwhelming volume, profundity and sublimity. Since the earliest sacred writings of the Vedas there had been a dynamic development of literature through the ages, especially in Sanskrit. The Bhakti movement has its own contributions to the Sanskrit literature through the learned theological and devotional works of the Acharyas and rapturous masterpieces like Gita Govinda by Jayadeva (twelfth century). However, the Bhakti movement had something more to contribute to the literary heritage – the development of regional languages in India.

Alvars and Nyanmars composed their mystical songs in Tamil. Ramananda initiated philosophical and theological discussions in Hindi through his works like Matanbhuj Bhaskar, Sri Ramranchan Padhti and Anandabhashya. Surdas and Meera, enriched Hindi literature through their entreating songs. Tulsidas, though attempted to compose songs in Sanskrit, ended up writing his classics in Awadhi and Braja dialects, thereby giving scope for these dialects to develop and flourish. Kabir's compositions were in a pithy and homely style, replete with imageries and similies. He expressed his poems orally in Hindi, freely mixing it with expressions of dialects like Awadhi, Braj and Bhojpuri. A considerable number of songs and poetry of Kabir have been passed onto next generation through oral traditions. Thus oral tradition was revitalized.

In brief rendering the intricate doctrines of religion and truths of highest spirituality in a simple and familiar language, so that it is comprehensible to the common man, has been the most important contribution of Bhakti movement to literature. The expression of emotion in a vernacular tongue, broadly corresponds to the saint's belief in the value of personal experience, as an inevitable phenomenon of deep faith. The communication a devotee could establish with his/her personal god of love, grace and surrender was recognized as contrary to the sense of exclusiveness that predominates the Brahmin worship culture. In other words, most saints of the Bhakti tradition tend to frame and register identities through their use of the vernacular. This identity is categorized by a sense of belongingness, both to the lord and also simultaneously to the community.

Akkamahadevi's Vachanas

Akkamahadevi composed some of the finest Vacans of her times. She took up not only issues pertaining to her spiritual path, but her vacanas were a quagmire of her views on religion, gender, society and its ills; in other

words, she touched upon both the internal and external aspects. The internal comprising of her expression of relentless love for Cennamalikaarjuna, wherein she defines her relationship with her lord and the external comprising of her suggestions in order to reform the society.

According to Alka Tyagi, “in her vacanas, one does not find any theological exposition or rather a religious propaganda, rather a simple statement of immediate urgency of the experience of a different state of consciousness.” Her vacanas are infact an outcome of her natural outpourings of her pure emotions, wherein we see her on a different plane, merged and drowned in the nectar of blissand love for her lord. Nevertheless, along with pleasure we also witness her suffering, longing, the way in which she pines likea bride, whose desires are left unfulfilled.

I have come
through unlikely worlds,
guzzled on
pleasure and on pain.
Whatever be
all previous lives,
show me mercy
this one day,
O lord
white as jasmine.⁷

Besides acknowledging her devotion to Cennamalikaarjuna, Akkamahadevi problemtised the whole notion of religion and the manner in which it is pursued by human beings at large. As the Virasaivite movement was realized to have been based upon its stance against the malignant ways in which Brahmins worship. Akkamahadevi too articulated her disapproval for meaningless rituals,the practice of sacrificing animals in the wake of pleasing god, conducting elaborate poojas idol worship and most importantly, caste system. For instance,she articulates the issue of caste bias and gender prejudice in the following vacana;

“O brothers, Why do you talk to me,
Who has given up caste and sex,
Having united with Cennamalikaarjjuna.⁸”

⁷ ibid

⁸ Ramaswamy, Vijay. *Walking Naked : Women, Society and Spirituality in South India* . p.185

Rather, she popularized devotion wherein there is an emotional attachment realized between a bhaktin and her lord. A form of devotion in which emphasis is laid upon diminishing the gap between the lord and his devotee, that is usually regarded as wide in the case of Brahmin idol worship. Akkamahadevi made rigorous efforts to bridge this dichotomy of perceiving the lord on an unassailable plane. On the contrary, through her allegiance to *Tantric Sadhana* and *Virashaivism*, she plunged on a metaphysical domain, a state of bliss, wherein her soul merged with her lord.

Notably, most of Akka's vacanas were not only orally transmitted among the masses, given her popular appeal, after a period of time, but her verses were included in many important anthologies, the most worthy of all being the *Sunya Sampadane*. Besides Vacanas, she wrote four other works, including, *Yoganaga Trividhi* (about her views on Tantric Sadhana), *Srstiya Vacana*, *Padagalu* and *Akkagala Pithike*.

Another important strand pertaining to the Vacanas is the radical shift that their composition marked from conventional to commonplace. The fact that the Lingayat movement comprised of weavers, craftsmen, smiths, tanners etc., therefore the idiom was folk. The dominant narrative forms (*kathana*), were challenged and altered by speech or song modes (*vacana/pada*). The Vacana poets strove to take metaphors for their poetry from all walks of life. Their brevities and personal agonies as expressed in the vacanas imbue them in content and tone with a kind of intensity found rare in *marga* poetry. Also, freedom from the fixed rules of metre and rhyme enabled the best of the vacana poets to experiment with new rhythmic patterns.

Nevertheless, Akkamahadevi was the most famous of all women poets, her vacanas are endowed with lyrical depth, in fact are a combination of both the luminosity of mysticism as well as personal intensity. A sense of poise and eagerness are some of the key characteristics of her verses. Mesmerized in the divine light of her Lord Cennamalikarjuna, she sings of his glory.

Dwelling in the lush, green surroundings and piety of nature, away from the human world, she finds solace in narrating her angst to living beings around her. In other words, the poetic landscape that she creates and weaves in her verses constitutes of birds, trees, flowers, mountains, river and the sky, in a way, she is blurring the lines of communication by making it possible with beings other than the humans. Most importantly, these metaphors from nature drawn by her, are directed towards Cennamalikaarjuna. For instance, in the following vacana;

“You are the whole forest,
 You are the divine trees in the forest,
 You are all the birds and beasts,
 Spotting amidst trees,
 O Cennamalikarjuna,
 Though all is filled with you
 Why don't you show me your face,
 Turned away from me⁹”.

Lal Ded's contribution in the formation of Kashmiri identity through oral compositions:

Lal Ded stated her ideas and experiences neither in Persian nor Sanskrit, rather preferred to express herself in the common tongue (which is Kashmiri), easily comprehensible to the innocent masses. Significantly, the source of imagery that we witness in her compositions is derived by her from the Kashmiri countryside. In the essay titled, “I drank the wine of my own verse”- ‘The life and work of Lal Ded, Kashmiri poet and mystic’ composed by Manushi based on a book titled *Lal Ded* by J Kaul, it has been observed that; “Lal Ded drew her images from the ferry across the river, the creaky bridges on the causeway, the bloom of a cotton flower, the saffron field, water, snow and ice, the washerman, the shepherds with their flock, the flowing and the harvesting.¹⁰”

Remarkably, Lalla occupies a significant position within history and development of Kashmiri Language. She is regarded not only as a saint poetess, but also the first modern Kashmiri poet and the maker of modern Kashmiri language and literature, thereby, she is realized to have been communicating and framing the essence of Kashmiri identity through her oral compositions. In the essay titled, ‘The Great Mystics’, Trilokinath Raina elucidated that “Lal Ded's poetry is a significant landmark in the linguistic transition from old to modern Kashmiri. It also provides a valuable example of how our language has imperceptibly changed in the course of centuries¹¹”.

Her vaakhs in Kashmir have a particular traditional significance, in the sense that they are regarded by the common people as words of benediction in the form of blessing. According to Trilokinath Raina, “Vaakh or shrukh are Kashmiri words for vaakya and sloka. The disciple would ask the guru or saint to bless him with a vaakh to gain peace that passeth understanding . Those who revered Lal Ded came to her , “Give us the word”,

⁹Shiva Prakash, HS. *I Keep vigil of Rudra: the Vacanas*

¹⁰ MANUSHI Pg 22 , No. 32 (January-February 1986)<www.manushi.in/docs This article is based on J Kaul's book titled *Lal Ded* .

¹¹ Raina, Trilokinath. *A History of Kashmiri Literature*, pg. 18

they said. And they treasured what she uttered, while also passing it on from generation to generation¹²”. Which is to say that, her vaakhs along with being merely oral compositions were also of tremendous cultural significance within Kashmir.

Lal Ded helped Kashmiris to discover their mother tongue thereby, opening new channels of communication between the elite and the common people and also amongst the common people themselves. Kashmiris still continue to tailor their lives based on her verses which survive as folk idioms, common proverbs and cryptic aphorisms. Casual in tone and personal in expression she begins many of her vaakhs with the phrase ‘I Lalla’, which inturn gives an impression of a sense of acquaintance. But at the same time, it can be seen as an idiom used by her to address the common people, and it evocates her personal concern with her readers.

As rightly observed by Trilokinath Raina, “the vaakh are her spiritual autobiography¹³”, which is to say that Lalla in her compositions has tried to entwine the spiritual and personal, particularly in the way in which she refers to philosophical concepts in her vaakhs in an extremely simple manner, so that she is at the same time, well grounded with the roots of the commonfolk. For instance, in the following vaakh she has tried to synchronize both her spiritual leanings and personal views;

“I saw a learned man dying of hunger,
Trembling like dried leaves, falling in harsh winter wing,
An utter fool I saw beating his cook,
(for not having prepared a delicious dish),
Since then I am waiting for being free of worldly attachments¹⁴”.

According to Durre S Ahemad, in the chapter titled, ‘Real men, naked women and the politics of paradise’, he espoused the idea that, “the vaakh itself is in great tradition of spiritual versifying of the subcontinent. The reader encounters not an organized set of narratives, but rather a collection of compositions emerged out of spontaneity of Lalla’s intensely experienced realizations.¹⁵” Ahemad in his above observation has tried to highlight the fact that our saint poetess into consideration has composed her verses with a tint of ease, unlike conventional poets who have to labour their minds for words, rhyme or metre.

¹²Ibid p.20

¹³ibid

¹⁴Lal Ded : A hundred poems. Classic poetry series. Poethunter.com

¹⁵ Ahemad, Durre. ‘The Archetype of Lal Ded’ *Gendering the Spirit*; p.159

Now if we look at the concept of 'identity' and 'community', Lal Ded played an integral role in shaping the Kashmiri identity, not only in her attempts to integrate the common folk within the mainstream society, but at the same time to bring forth the real essence of *kashmiriyat* by freeing it from the clutches of Brahmin orthodoxy and also giving the Kashmiri tongue an idiom, an identity of its own.

This however, can be seen as another landmark example of how sometimes oral traditions can be used as tools or mediums against meaningless beliefs of the religious communities. Though Lal Ded was keen in shaping the identity of Kashmir, but at the same time, her verses do not preach any particular creed, instead, are critical with regards to external trappings and rituals.

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