

# DEVOUTNESS, REBELLIOUSNESS, TRANSGRESSION, SPIRITUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY OF SAINT MIRABAI'S POETRY

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## **Abstract**

*Mirabai, a quintessential saint poet belonging to Bhakti Poetry, is known in the Indian literary canon as a mystic poet writing beautiful songs sung as Bhajans worshipping Hindu religion over centuries. She has penned beautiful songs intertwining love, female independence and empowerment, mysticism and devotion in her poetry, granting her a canonical place in Bhakti Poetry transcending class, creed, culture and religions. Her poetry gave voice to otherwise voiceless and neglected women facing the brunt of patriarchy; it was transgressive in nature and against the conventional norms of society. Facing the insurmountable odds, hostility and disparagement from society in general and her family in particular, she became an exemplar of female independence, carving a significant place in the pantheon of Bhakti Poetry. Her sonnets are her authentic impressions, highlighting her emotions, philosophies and predilection to divinity and mysticism. Her poetry is the testimony of her devoutness, self-confidence, strength of mind, unparalleled love for Lord Krishna, and courage to break the glass ceiling, challenging patriarchy, social norms, and religious dogmas—all of these aspects exhibit her empowered self through her life and poetry. The present paper delves deeper into unravelling the contribution of Mirabai as a saintly poet and how, through the sheer sense of individualism, transgression and spirituality, she foregrounded the women's concerns through her poetry and canonized as a powerhouse of strength, empowerment and a trailblazer to Indian feminism through her conduct and songs.*

**Keywords:** *Mirabai, Devotion, Mysticism, Spirituality, Individualism, Women Empowerment, Bhakti Poetry.*

## **MIRABAI AND BHAKTI MOVEMENT:**

Born in a royal family in 16th century, Mirabai, an incandescent prodigy, had propinquity for divinity and religion as she was born in a family of the devotees of Vishnu; hence, "Mirabai grew up amidst Vaishnava influence" (Priyamvada Par.2). She is widely revered woman saint poet known for her persuasive nature of her life story and poems that transcend boundaries of caste, class and gender. On a personal level, she showed immense grit and determination by defying the conventions of a deeply feudalistic and patriarchal society: She considered Krishna to be her only spouse, thereby refusing to consummate her marriage. The resultant suffering and discrimination owing to her fearlessness and defiance of the rules of a male-dominated society, she became an icon for feminist movements, which came into existence in the 19th and 20th centuries. She struggles and eventually triumphs over all adversities due to her courage, a sense of empowered self, and her unshakeable devotion to lord Krishna find expression in her poetry.

Mirabai belongs to the Bhakti Movement, which popularised devotional surrender, or bhakti, to a personally perceived supreme God and represented a revolutionary epoch that challenged the very idea of conventional orthodoxy and feudalism. She has dedicated her poems to Krishna. Initially, historians held that the Bhakti movement was a literary and ideological movement inspired by spirituality and religion. However, later, it became clear that it aimed at bringing about an egalitarian society or as a protest against female subjugation and socially and culturally elite sections of the society. The movement held the view that, ...everyone equal in the eyes of God, the movement brought religion and spirituality to the marginalized classes—specifically women, whose religious expression was restricted in many ways. It was a movement that not only aimed at individual salvation and a mystical union with God but also towards socio-religious egalitarianism. It liberated both God and man (inclusive of woman) from the shackles of patriarchy. The movement created a space where one could have a personal relationship with God and removed all intermediaries, rendering all existing traditions...futile (Thaosen Par.2).

Bhakti movement was not a concerted, planned movement having its ideological base; it had a "radical spirit and style of worship that some liken to the Great Awakening in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America" (White para. 1). Bhakti movement came to be known for its songs, spirituality, equality, female empowerment;

it was an “intensely emotional, participatory, demotic and demonstrative ... a glorious disease of the collective heart” (Hawley 02). The canon of bhakti is extensive and sublime. Mirabai’s poetry embodied the essence of Bhakti poetry--sublimity, spirituality and egalitarianism, mystical union with God and the rebellious spirit--all these elements are present in poetry.

Feminism was not a powerful movement at a time when the Bhakti Movement started spreading its influence in the regional literature of India. In this milieu, Mirabai and other poets in the Bhakti movement played a crucial role by sowing seeds of Indian Feminism—they raised the voice of women’s issues through their songs and ways of life. It possibly led to the beginning of Indian feminism. These women poets attempted to define their truths through devotion to bring about a change in relationships, politics, society, and religion. This is indeed a steller development for women as they did not have much freedom and agency to decide their models of reality (Oza and Pawar 89). These bohemian poets lived life on their own terms and rejected all conventions and stereotypes of patriarchal society. “Women in Bhakti movements take on attributes that men have historically had. They break Manu’s regulations prohibiting them from doing so. A respectable lady is not permitted to live alone or in the open air or to refuse her husband’s sex, but women saints wander and travel alone, abandoning their husbands, children, and families” (Ramanujan 53).

Mirabai was a true apostle of this movement. Mirabai, a Rajput by clan, lost her mother at a tender age, so she lived with her parents from her mother's side. She was taught in detail the subjects like music, religion, and even the basics of her Rajput clan. The society of her times was deeply patriarchal; it laid a significant premium on chivalry, physical courage, martial skills, and masculine honour—women had no vital role to play in showcasing their knowledge and skills. But Mirabai, upon her marriage with Bhojraj, a prince of the Mevar Rajput Kingdom, showed her boldness; she challenged the conventions of her time, took patriarchy and its norms head-on: “She denied the legitimacy of her marriage and refused to consummate it, causing outrage among her family and crippling shame to Bhojraj, her new husband” (White para. 3). Neither the pleas to uphold her honour did influence her nor the threats of violence. Mira was totally in love with a man, “an impish blue-skinned cow-herder named Krishna, an avatar of Lord Vishnu” (White para. 3). In his service and affection, she penned countless songs revering and idolizing Krishna as the sole object of her love and life.

As a woman poet, she showed great artistic talent, uniqueness, courage, and defiance against female discrimination, exemplifying progressive, rebellious themes in her poetry. One critic notes that “...she fired the imagination with her fearless defiance... the only one of her gender to have earned a place on the honour roll of north India Bhakti saints, she exerts a fascination that none of her male counterparts can match” (Hawley 133).

Mirabai’s poems allow us to trace the theme of defiance, female independence, empowerment, rebelliousness, subversive nature of poetry, an attack on patriarchy and religious dogmas—all of these aspects lead to finding the trace of feminism. Rebelliousness, one of the attributes of her poetry, has an irrefutable link with her personality. She practiced what she propagated through her poetry. She lived amongst poor, voiceless, religious seers and people from marginalized communities; she highlighted the same rebelliousness through her poetry as well. Hence, “Mirabai accomplished the impossible in her poetry by making it an instrument of rebellion through a perfect blend of asceticism and aesthetics” (Garg para.06)

Mirabai’s love and devotion were so profound for Krishna that she always lived in the accompaniment of the statue. She broke all the social conventions of the ideals of patriarchy and reposed her faith in Girdhar Gopal. She says, “My sole faith and repose of heart is none other than Girdhar Gopal/ Keeping constant company with saints and sadhus/ I have shaken off the false sense of worldly modesty/And the matter being noised about, all know about it” (Mehta 68). Mirabai had a close and deep association with Krishna since childhood, became a perfect devotee and would spend all her time with her beloved. She built a place for herself where social, religious, and gender norms were nonexistent. It is only through her love that she could tide over cross traditional barriers and carve out a place of her in a patriarchal society. Mirabai was a complex figure; a combination of many things—“a fearless, passionate, defiant, clear-eyed, rebel...who walks with those poets who during periods of oppression, war and social unrest cast everything into the fire that they may pursue a dignified human life- a life blazing with spirit and intellect” (Schelling 14). She transgressed the social, religious and patriarchal bondages and proclaimed: “My lord is the courtly Girdhar, none else/ My husband is the one who wears the peacock crown” (Chaturvedi 63).

The urgency and passion of her love were unparalleled—she could not think of any other worldly issues as she was deeply engrossed with her beloved’s spirit, existing and experiencing a different realm of reality: Her pure, unblemished, and ethereal feelings for Krishna gave her strength and resistance to defy traditional role of a woman and assert her independence. Transgression is a vital theme of Mirabai’s poetry. She transgressed all the boundaries of tradition and the conventional order of society on multiple levels. She was primarily a mystic poet, but her poetry is suffused with elements of rebellion and defiance. Hence, Women from different sections

of society facing different ordeals identify their predicaments with her. Oppression, cruelty, and other forms of subtle injustices meted out to women because of their caste, creed, religion, and culture find resonance in Mirabai's poetry as these experiences are similar, if not fully but partially, to Mirabai's experiences.

Women in her times were reeling under forces of patriarchy, masculinity, and family honour; their sufferings were distressful. Women meekly suffered painfully under the yoke of patriarchy, but Mirabai "turned things upside down by emerging as the radical denouncer who shuns off her shoulders everything that confined women to patriarchal premises" ("Mirabai and the Poetry of Protest" 102). She says, "Family, honour, word of scorn/ I care not for these one jot" (Bahadur 56). Mirabai's devotion and resolve were quite strong; hence, she became a spiritual force calling women not to fall into the trappings of love and not become the handmaiden dominant patriarchal order of the society. She openly decried the forces of patriarchy, tradition, and customs; she was fearless in saying, "Mira has dedicated herself to Girdhar/ And roams about in ecstatic mood arising out of deep love" (Behari 43).

Mirabai's rebellious nature came to the fore when she went against her family, abandoning her role as a dutiful wife. She broke the orders of her family, neglecting the rigid societal norms of behaviour imposed on women; she became a villain in the eyes of her family and society. Despite being hounded for breaking the established order of family code and honour, she remained steadfast, saying, "None dare come in my way/I go enchanted/Kicking aside the glories of my ancestors" (Subramanian 48). Her approach towards established order—social, religious and political—is palpable through her poetry. Her poetry highlights how steadfastly the poet straddles the personal self-being of a woman and how she deals with her public life through her forceful defiance of social norms. After an extended conflict with her in-laws, they reportedly attempted to poison her.

Her rebellion against the tradition in general and her family in particular turned into a bitter feud; her in-laws supposedly attempted to kill her by poisoning. She decried her husband, "Why must I not hate your palace Rana?/ You, sent me the cup of poison to kill/ Lo, I drank it as the offering to my lord" (Subramanian 25). She would have been dead if it were not for her unflinching devotion to Lord Krishna, who saved her from the jaws of death. She spent her remaining life sojourning places related to Krishna and celebrating his ideals, finally reaching Dwarka. Mirabai's devoutness turned her into an intensely lyrical poet foregrounding emotive and sensual poems; even it helped her debunk the myths around the role of women, lampooning the flawed social norms and traditions. Through the amalgamation of emotional, sensual, and subversive elements in her poetry, she rebels against the deeply misogynistic and patriarchal order of society.

Mirabai is a nonconformist poet of the Bhakti canon. The sheer force of devotion and the passionate intensity with which she devoted her songs and life to Krishna turned her into an iconoclast figure: She subverted and rebelled against the traditional order and existing social conventions relating to marriage, caste, and family not only through her songs but through her conduct too. Her conduct was an example of her empowered self; it helped her acquire a distinctive position in the pantheon of Bhakti poetry along with respect and reverence for breaking the dominant patriarchal traditional order of society, asserting her individuality and claiming a life of respect and dignity. Her defiance, rebellious spirit and strong resistance to social norms and family honour have been epitomized in the following song:

I will fasten the bells of his love to my feet  
And dance in front of Girdhar.  
Dancing and dancing I will please his eyes;  
My love is an ancient one.  
My love is the only truth.  
I do not care about social norms  
Nor do I keep my family's honour.  
I cannot forget, even for a moment,  
The beauty of my lover.  
I am dyed in Hari's colour (Poem Hunter).

Mirabai emerges as an embodiment of women's empowerment, authentically merging human and spiritual attributes into a being. She does not care about the traditional role of a woman, which restricts her to familial responsibilities. She is so immersed in her love for Krishna that the conventions, code of behaviour, social norms and family honour would not imperil her from singing and dancing in her lover's honour. She advocates the only truth of the self, defying the traditional order of society and embracing psychological healing and spiritual transformation.

Mirabai's songs afford an analysis through the prism of spiritual liberation and women's empowerment. Her poems openly challenge the codes in religious doctrines. Mirabai opposed the widely held belief that women can achieve salvation only by their submission to husbands and serving them, obeying their instructions and following the code of culture. Like a powerful iconoclast, she broke the stereotypes of male domination by subverting these doctrines. She abandoned her husband, started worshipping God and accepted Him as her husband. She broke herself free of suffocating earthly servitudes and "invested the state of marriage with spirituality that had no place in the socio-patriarchal marriage relation but was a large part of women's narratives, autobiographies and folk songs" (Wasia 11). Mirabai lived a free and independent life despite her problems; she visited many places singing songs of Krishna with fellow devotees. She not only preached progressive ideas such as women empowerment, independence, traditional approach to life, freedom, and dignity of life but also lived her life adhering to those philosophies.

She rejected traditional markers of femininity such as wearing jewels, decorating the self with material things and following a code of behaviour in line with patriarchal notions of society. Her only source of strength and empowerment was her profound and unadulterated love for Krishna (Jain & Sharma, 4647). She says, "I have given up pearl, diamond and gold ornaments/ Now I wear the garland of Tulsi beads and apply/ Sandal paste on my forehead/ The pride of royal family is gone" (Subramaniam 80). The poet "aimed at making the world understand that choosing a lifetime ideal was an effective way to counter medieval Rajput patriarchal ideology. She highlighted the gender-specific self-alienation of the Rajput women" (Wasia 11). She held that a woman leads a distressful life as she is estranged from her children and family, and deprived of property rights. The prejudice and stereotyping around women hobble their strength, resilience, and creativity in shaping and influencing society as an individual. Mirabai symbolises the voice that "represents a particular configuration, expresses a particular social relation and accounts for a humble yet powerful subalternity" (Wasia 11).

## CONCLUSION

Mirabai's poetry is nonpareil, for she demonstrates a multiplicity of strands dexterously woven in it: Her love for Krishna, mysticism, power of resistance, and spirituality, thereby making it a template for women's empowerment. As a poet, it can be assumed that she threw down a gauntlet and fiercely challenged the social, political, cultural and religious structures of society deeply embedded within the patriarchal structures of society. She staunchly followed Krishna, a true lover, and by that power, she broke every rule and debunked every myth, shattering all constructs which confined women to the fringes—household chores, taking care of family, leading pliant and submissive life, thereby adhering to the male-established order. She tore all male-centric constructs imposed on women by celebrating individualism, womanhood and independence by women to break free from conventions and celebrate themselves. She epitomized the strength of women who can withstand all the injustices, bias, and stereotyping by donning the role of true litterateur, liberating women from the bondages of patriarchy. Her poetry and life are a testament to her tenacious devotion, her rebellious spirit against the tyranny and injustices meted out to women, her spirituality and women's empowerment.

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