

# CHOOSING THE *BHAKTIMARG* AS A STRATEGY OF EMBODIED RESISTANCE AGAINST SOCIETAL AND PATRIARCHAL TRAUMA: AN INSPECTION OF THE VERSES AND LIVES OF AKKA MAHADEVI AND MIRABAI

Ms. Devyani Balasra, Dr. Satyawan Hanegave

Research Scholar,  
Department of English,  
University of Mumbai

Research Supervisor,  
Department of English,  
University of Mumbai

## Abstract

Indian Knowledge System makes an attempt to revive the cultural traditions of ancient India. One of the positive outcome of this indigenous approach to literary and cultural studies is the spotlight on the Bhakti movement of Hindu tradition of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This tradition also has a good large of women poets who have mantled revolt, protest and survival strategies under devotional writing. Bhakti poets such as Mirabai, Karaikal Ammaiyai and Akka Mahadevi belong to this woman centric tradition of writing poetry with subtle undertones to it. Having endured trauma of varied kinds, Akka Mahadevi's life provides for a fertile ground to study the manifestations of trauma. This paper is an attempt to scrutinize the select verses of Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai to show how their work articulates resilience under the garb of Bhakti. This paper also attempts to document the traces of trauma and other strategies of coping seen in the lives and poems of these women. Verbal and poetic of manifestations of trauma and the mechanisms employed by these women poets to counter trauma and patriarchy are also within the purview of this paper.

**Keywords:** Bhakti Poetry, Trauma, Coping Mechanism, Resistance, Patriarchy

The sowing of the Bhakti Movement in India lie in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE. Although the term Bhakti movement, on the outset, is a devotional movement, the movement eventually took shape as a protest movement of sorts-protest against the social milieu of the time, protest against the Brahmanical values, protest against gendered subjugation etc. With its origin in South of India, Bhakti movement was a reaction to the Aryan-ic patriarchal ideologies, the dominant caste-system and the rigid gender roles. Indian women in the pre-Aryan age enjoyed a position of reverence and social equality. In fact, the Indian Society before the Aryan invasion was largely matriarchal. With the advent of the Aryan age, women lost their right to property and ownership and by the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, Women had already fallen a prey to ruthless practices like child marriage and sati. One can say that the path to female subjugation and the suppression of women in India was laid in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century. Towards the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, Societal oppression has reached a significantly culminating moment leading to women and men renouncing the material society to find solace on the path of devotion. While many bhakti saints like Lal Ded, saint Kabir, Thirrupanna Alwar etc. belonged to downtrodden castes and joined in up hailing the *Bhakti* principle of universal brotherhood, a multitude of women may have trudged the *Bhaktipath* as it would allow them access to the public sphere and provide them the autonomy over their body and social lives which the patriarchal family setup repudiated.

The then patriarchal expectations from a woman of being a stay-at-home mothers and wives, of considering the husband to be their lord and playing the role of a loyal and silent pativrata put women through a lot of emotional agony. Some women bhakti saints, infact, had extremely troubled domestic lives in the homes of their husbands. Karraikal Ammaiyar from Karnataka and Lal Ded from Kashmir are just a few names to begin with. One striking similarity between the lives of Akka Mahadevi, a 12<sup>th</sup> century Bhakti saint from Karnataka and Mirabai, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Bhakti saint from Rajasthan, is the manner in which both women overturned the idea of the husband as a deity by referring to two different male deities (Chennamallikarjuna for Akka Mahadevi and Lord Krishna for Mirabai) as their husband.

A closer analysis of the lives and works of these two women lay bare a similar protestive resistance scheme to the fatalistic society of the time. Akka Mahadevi, a twelfth century Virasaiva poet from Karnataka lived a short life of intense devotion to Lord Shiva, whom she addressed as Chennamallikarjuna in her Vachanas. Young

Mahadevi was born to devotional parents and since a young age, she had dedicated her time and life in her allegiance to Chennamallikarjuna. Hagiography narrates that a wandering hermit once addressed Chennamallikarjuna as little Mahadevi's groom and since then the little one dedicated her life to the worship of Chennamallikarjuna. Some mythological sources convey that when Mahadevi was only ten years old, a Jain king by the name of Kausika dictated marriage to her at the threat of killing her parents if she disobeyed his order. Mahadevi, indulging in 'Bridal Mysticism' – a postulate of the Bhakti movement, went on to marry the king if her granted three of her conditions:

I shall engage in the worship of Shiva, as I like it;  
I shall spend my time in the company of Maheswaras,  
As I like it;

I shall be with the prince as I like.  
I shall forgive only three violations of  
These conditions. (as quoted in Sreekantaiya, 30)

These three conditions, from a modern perspective, are nothing but a woman's call for autonomy. Though the king obeyed the first two conditions of non-interference in her worship, the autonomy to interact with mystics as and when she pleads but defied the condition of a platonic relationship under an instance of substance influence. Some narrations of Mahadevi's life suggest that Kausika tried to have non-consensual sex with her and ended up tearing her clothes by force. When Mahadevi felt threatened by the king's strength and experienced physical insecurity in the palace, she forever renounced all worldly artefacts including clothing. Mahadevi is said to have roamed around naked, on foot ever since. The nakedness that could have shamed her was skillfully used as a weapon of resistance by the woman. The very nakedness bestowed upon her by king Kausika was trivialized by Mahadevi when she decided to give up clothes and clothed herself only in her long tresses of thick hair for about half of her lifetime. The usual threat that a young beautiful woman would feel if wandering in the public space is the threat of sexual violation conducted against her by a man. When Mahadevi decided to walk out naked, she (unknowingly) put an end to the prospects of such violating acts on her. She, in a way, used her nakedness as a weapon of resistance.

It is interesting to note that when a woman saint demanded non-consummation of a marriage, the request was well received by their husbands. As pointed out by Dr. Venkata Ramiah Gampa in his paper titled "Indian Feminisms in the Light of Ammaiyar and Akka Mahadevi" such women were seen as goddesses by the husbands themselves and so they must have felt scared to transgress the boundaries laid out by the wives. On realizing this, one may receive an estimate about the amount of power their devotion lent to them. They could decide the clauses of sexual relationship between the couple – something that modern day woman are still trying to demand.

In the yesteryear, when women were made to fit into the mould of familial expectations, they would have felt a rage towards the society. Even back then, if a man wanted to devote his life to spirituality or devotion, his demand would be met with appreciation but when a woman demanded the same, usually she was forcefully married off by the family and relatives. Akka Mahadevi is also said to have given up her femininity post the incident. Femininity brings along a jeopardy of sorts. Mahadevi, in some of her vachanas declared herself as a male. This could be a resistance strategy use by the saint to protect her womanly sanctity:

A woman, though in name,  
I am, if you consider well,  
The male Principle. (As quoted in Bhoosnurmata and Menzes 120 )

Akka Mahadevi is remembered for her unreluctant expression of love for Chennamallikarjuna. The following excerpt presents her demand of a sexually-charged encounter between herself and Mallikarjuna:

In our embrace  
Chenna Mallikarjuna,  
The bones should rattle, in a welding  
The welding mark even should disappear.  
The knife should enter totally  
When the arrow enters,  
Even the feathers should not be seen. (Quoted in Ramaswamy, Vijay 150)

Mahadevi's anger and frustration towards the societal expectations is visible in the following excerpt:

Take these husbands who die,  
decay, and  
feed them to your kitchen fires! (Quoted in Ramaswamy, Vijay 151)

After her worldly renunciation when Akka Mahadevi arrived at the Anubhvmantapa, she wasn't taken in as is. Her devotion and nakedness were questioned by Allama Prabhu. Only when here devotion and love for Mallikarjuna was felt to be genuine by the male sages, was she allowed to be a part of the spiritual society. Though the Anubhvmantapa was a gender-colored space, Mahadevi was allowed access to the space due to her bold decision of renouncing worldly life. Opting for the Bhaktimarg did allow access of the public spaces and public sphere to these women poets.

Mirabai, one of the most reputed Bhakti saint-poetess was born in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the kingdom of Mewar. Born into a royal family, she was always inclined towards spirituality and devotion. She, just like Akka Mahadevi, had taken a supreme being as her wedded partner at a very young age. The daughter of Ratan Singh of the Methiya Rathore Clan, she was married into the family of Sisodia Rajputs of Mewar. It has been a common practice in most Royal families to arrange marriages of convenience: some marriages are performed to avoid a threatening enemy kingdom, some to expand one's own reign etc. Young Mira was also betrothed to Bhojraj of Mewar, possibly in one such marriage of convenience. Young Mira got married to the Rana on the condition of a platonic marriage. She is said to have never consummated the marriage. After the early death of her husband, Mirabai got all the more deeply involved in her devotion towards Shri Krishna.

The underlying irony of the situation is that both women saints had to ultimately associate themselves to a male figure in the very end – if not a human-being, a male god.

As a woman of the royal family, Mira was expected to follow the royal decorum and establish a correspondence with only the likes of the Royals but Mirabai is said to have widely interacted with the seers and serfs who belonged to the lowercaste. Pratibha Jain and Sangeeta Sharma observe "Meera broke caste and clan boundaries when she became a disciple of Raidas, a Chamar (leather worker) saint. As she intermingled freely with the bhakt community, she transcended the class and caste boundaries. In fact, she aroused the ire of her family who resented her association with low caste people." One may say that Mirabai denied to be tied down by regulations of patriarchy and the royal household alike. As the widow of Prince Bhojraj, she was expected to give up colored clothing and adopt white but she refused to abide by them and claimed that since Shri Krishna is her husband, she is not really a widow.

When, after her husband's death, her brother-in-law attempted to murder her she wrote:

I don't like your strange world, Rana.  
A world where there are no holy men and all the people are trash.  
I have given up ornaments and given up braiding  
My hair; and I have given up putting on Kajal.  
Mira's lord is Girdhar Nagar, I've found a perfect  
husband. (As quoted in Pandey and Zide, 58)

Mirabai's contempt for the hypocritical world was evident when she wrote:

Ranaji mhane ya badnaami lage mithi.  
Koi nindi koi vindo main calungi cal apuyhi.  
Sanskarli seryan ab miliya kyun kari phirun aputhi.  
Satsangi ya jnana sunечи durjan logan ne dithi.  
Miran re prabhu Girdhar nagar durjan jalo ja angithi.

Rana, to me this slander is sweet.  
Some praise me, some blame me. I go the other way.  
On the narrow path, I found God's people.  
For what should I turn back?  
I am learning wisdom among the wise, the wicked  
look at me with malice.  
Mira's lord is Girdhar Nagar: let the wicked burn  
in a furnace. (As quoted in Pandey and Zide, 58)

Though the modern day person may be tempted to title Mirabai or Akka Mahadevi as a feminist, critic Madhu Kishwar stresses on the view that Mirabai and other bhakti poem took a strong stance only to tackle the

societal paths that come in their devotional path. She writes, “Expecting Mirabai to be a feminist is as inappropriate as calling Gautam Buddha a Gandhian or Jesus Christ a civil libertarian.” The postulates of modern day schools of feminism may not align with the life choices or conduct of the bhakti poetesses but they definitely put forth up a brave stance of resilience against the patriarchal society of the times.

One may say that Mirabai’s devotion towards Lord Krishna provided her with a license of defiance towards the traditions of the royal household and towards the womanly expectations in an Indian wedlock. In fact, both Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai were able to access the public space, the devotional space as well as the authorial space because they gave up the domestic space and adopted renunciation. The *Bhaktimarg* did allow these women to skip the traditional womanly life carved out by Patriarchy.

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