

Introduction

by
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WITH this issue **Manushi** has entered its eleventh year. We celebrate this occasion by putting together the lives and poetry of a whole range of extraordinarily courageous and creative women who asserted their right to their own life as they defined it. They have left a powerful social and cultural legacy for us. This legacy constitutes a living tradition even today, not only in the sense that their songs are an integral part of popular culture in their regions, but also because they are remembered and revered for having stood

by their chosen ideals in defiance of prevalent social norms.

The work of these women and the legends surrounding each of them testify not only to their creativity but also to their joyous exploration of their own truth, even when this involved radical departure from the life legislated for most women. Though the memory of them that is preserved in legend identifies them as symbols of pure selfless love, they are also renowned for songs and verse sayings of deep wisdom and philosophical thought. The vigour and

sheer audacity with which they expressed their thoughts still have the capacity to move, to inspire and to surprise us.

The *bhakti* movement, which moved in continuing waves from one region to another, beginning in the south in the sixth century, is known to have played a crucial role in shaping the social, cultural and religious life of people of all religions in the subcontinent. It continued and enriched synthesising traditions in theology, so that the debates it triggered off rarely resulted in persecution and

martyrdom of the kind that Europe saw for centuries. The religious establishments continued a dialogue with the *bhaktas* and the many streams of thought and practice frequently coexisted, and at times merged with one another.

An example of this synthesising is seen in the interaction of *bhakti* and *sufism* in north India. Drawing heavily on the idiom of mysticism in various Hindu and Islamic traditions, the *bhaktas* and the *sufis* in the subcontinent shared many philosophical conceptions. Many of them had followers from both communities, a tradition which continues even today in many rural areas where a *baba*, a *fakir*, or a *sadhu* will be received with reverence by both Hindus and Muslims. Shrines of *bhaktas* and

tombs of *sufis* and *darveshes* are visited by both communities. A number of eminent *bhaktas*, mentioned in hagiographical chronicles, were from Muslim families, and did not renounce Islam when they used the idiom of *bhakti*; for example, Rahim, Raskhan, Malik Mohammad Jayasi, Kabir and his son Kamal.

The liberating aspects of *bhakti* movements are well known. The *bhaktas* asserted the equality of all souls before god, regardless of caste and status, even indicating that high status and wealth were impediments to finding oneness with god. They emphasised love as much more important than knowledge gained from book learning, positing self realisation as accessible even to the lowliest; and

denounced the pride and self righteousness of religious and other authority figures.

However, the specific social dimensions of the lives and work of women *bhaktas* have, by and large, been neglected by scholars. By emphasising that god dwelt in all — high and low alike — and by rejecting book learning as a way of reaching god, the *bhakti* movements opened their doors not just to supposedly low status groups but also to women. Even though most *bhaktas*, including the women *bhaktas*, rarely address themselves specifically to women, the shift in the language of worship from Sanskrit to the languages spoken by the common people brought about a new opportunity



Detail from a mid seventeenth century Mughal painting. The painting shows Sufis dancing at the shrine of Muinuddin Chishti, Ajmer, at the annual festival, while other Sufis look on. Below the main body of the painting, in a separate smaller compositional space, are a group of 12 Sants and Yogis. The detail shows six of these, from left to right: Raidas the cobbler (Mira's Guru); Pipa, said to have been a king who abdicated sovereignty; Namdev; Sena, a barber; Kamal, son of Kabir; 'Aughar' — not a person but a group of Sbaivite ascetics; and Kabir.

This miniature illustrates a vision of common religious experience among Muslim and Hindu mystics, and strongly suggests the patronage of Prince Dara Shikoh, who was executed by his brother Aurangzeb on the pretext, amongst others that he mingled with Sants and Yogis, regarding their scriptures as the work of god, and tried to identify the philosophic essences of Hinduism and Islam.

for women's creativity to express itself in devotional religion.

These women poets are among the shapers of the modern Indian languages. Through their work they helped make the vernaculars more flexible, suitable for expression ranging from proverbial wisdom to complex philosophical thought. Most of the regional languages boast of one or more eminent women *bhakta* poets whose work became an essential component in the growth of the contemporary language. In some cases, such as that of Lal Ded of Kashmir, a woman poet is even given the status of the mother of the mother tongue.

In most cultures, for most of history, women's creativity has generally been confined to certain limited spheres. Their poetic compositions have tended to be in the oral tradition, generally anonymous, while in written traditions, women have, in most cultures, been vastly outnumbered by men. However, the *bhakti* traditions in many regions of the country, through an amalgam of the written and the oral, preserved not only the names and life stories of many women *bhaktas*, but also their compositions. While some of this poetry has been incorporated into established literary tradition, much has survived on the lips of the people.

It is significant that the work of many of these women has survived in the popular culture not as a subterranean tradition but as a major contribution to the mainstream. There are important regional variations here. In the Indo Gangetic plain, Mira is the only woman *bhakta* poet whose work has substantially survived, even though many other women are named in the historical record, and a few poems by others survive. In some other parts of the country, the work of many more women *bhaktas*, major and minor, survives. The writings of some even appear as part of basic textbooks in schools and colleges. This is in contrast to many other cultures where women's creative output has received little official social recognition. For example, while it is possible to study English literature up to postgraduate level

without encountering a single woman poet, it is not possible to study Marathi or Hindi or Tamil literature at school or college level without being exposed to the verses of Mira, Mukta or Andal.

The extent to which these women's work reached universities and schools was due to their much more widespread acceptance in regional popular culture. In their own regions, the songs are sung in religious and social gatherings, in some cases even incorporated into religious ritual. The stories of their lives grow and change, and are reinforced in the popular

difference was that while male *bhaktas* could follow their chosen path while remaining householders, this was near impossible for women. The vast majority of women *bhakta* poets in one way or another opted out of married and domestic life, and remained childless. A Tukaram could deal with a noncooperative wife by ignoring her, for she could only object to his way of life; she could not actively obstruct it. But for a Mirabai or a Bahinabai, the impediments created by husband or in-laws took the form of violence that could easily have proved fatal. Thus, most



Storehouse of a Vaishnav Math — the Bhaktas found alternative sources of sustenance

imagination through oral transmission, paintings, including even calendar art, and today, through films on their lives.

Yet, most of them are not known outside their own regions. Even in their regions, their memories are kept alive mostly by members of certain religious sects. Very little scholarly research has been done on the lives and work of these women, even in their own language. The heritage has been kept alive more by ordinary people than by the formally educated of today.

Despite several commonalities between male and female *bhaktas*, coming to *bhakti* inevitably meant different things to women and men. One significant

women *bhakta* poets could proceed on their chosen path only by discarding the marital tie altogether. Some refused marriage, others walked out of oppressive marriages. Bahina, the only one among the major women *bhakta* poets who remained married, gives a poignant account of the suffering she underwent before she could convert her tyrannical husband into a fellow devotee.

In addition, some of these women dramatically renounced the tyranny imposed by crippling notions of respectable feminine behaviour — Mira by wearing the tabooed *ghungroos* and dancing in public; Mahadevi and Lal Ded by discarding clothing altogether. Most



of them renounced not only marriage but also material wealth and status. Many of them chose the life of mendicants and are revered for this more than any king or queen.

Though none of these women seem to have founded sects as many male *bhaktas* did, they were accepted as *gurus* and important religious thinkers in their own times. Some became wandering teachers and imparters of knowledge, others brought their husbands to their path. Most of them, however, had to make exceptional sacrifices — leave home, give up youth, die young. Therefore, their choices could

not have been seen as viable for ordinary women. Nor did any of them build a special following amongst women. They remained rare exceptions, yet as exceptions they performed an important social role.

It is significant that these women who defied convention in many startling ways were not, by and large, persecuted as heretics or dismissed as lunatics, but revered in their lifetimes and incorporated into living and growing traditions. This is evidence of a very positive aspect of our cultural tradition — its capacity to make social space available for women with exceptionally outstanding abilities and

courage, even when they have outrageously defied what are ordinarily considered the fundamental tenets of *stri dharm* — marriage and motherhood.

Thus, these women contributed to building a culture wherein women who devote themselves to the pursuit of some goal higher than self interest, and who demonstrate an ability to stay steadfast to their chosen ideals, are not made objects of derision, but are given special respect, even homage. This is true even when they choose to opt out of marriage in an otherwise marriage obsessed culture. This is also evident from the easy acceptance of women in India as figures of authority in spheres normally considered male preserves. Just as the social acceptance of the women *bhaktas* did not result in expanding options for ordinary women, so also the easy acceptance of outstanding women in unusual roles today does not indicate our society's willingness to grant ordinary women their basic human rights.

This duality pervades all aspects of our social and cultural life. Power, learning, art, music, prosperity, are embodied in Hindu traditions as goddesses. Yet, while Saraswati is worshipped as goddess of learning, most families still are more willing to sacrifice for a son's education, and consider a daughter's education a relative waste. Communities which legislate a life of utter powerlessness for women fervently worship female deities as incarnations of power, destroyers of evil. In most parts of the subcontinent, women are not allowed even to be present in community decision making bodies such as *biraderi panchayats*, yet our society accepts women as political figures, even as prime minister, with much more ease than many societies which profess to practise equality between women and men.

This space available to exceptional women is by no means sufficient today. We have to work to expand it so that women need not be exceptional in order to claim their fundamental rights.

One contemporary, supposedly progressive, argument often put forward against recognition of the legacy of the

women *bhaktas* is that since they operated within a religious framework and used a religious idiom, they can only become useful symbols for reactionaries. This criticism ignores the fact that for most of history, protest the world over has been couched in a religious idiom. The development, on any significant scale, of a non-religious idiom of protest is a relatively recent phenomenon. Religious protest always had social as well as religious dimensions.

In terms of a lived actuality, the chosen god of a woman *bhakta*, whether or not posited as husband or lover, was not the simple equivalent of a male authority figure, for the very good reason that the god was not present to dictate or obstruct as the father, husband or his family were.

The woman *bhakta's* god, whether dwelling within herself or in an image to which she ascribes attributes, justifies her actions which may seem unjustifiable to others. Thus, "with god's help", by appropriation of god to herself, the woman *bhakta* negotiates that social space for herself which is not available to other women. She finds a new community and sets out on her quest. God's voice is the decisive voice a woman can cite as a legitimate authority for rejecting familial authority.

The women *bhaktas* do not receive god's orders from any external authority except, in some cases, the *guru* they themselves choose. The interpretation of what god requires is essentially made by each woman. One may discard clothing at god's command, another her husband; one may refuse marriage, another refuse slavery to family honour—all this is legitimised only because she does so for god. The religious path was, perhaps, the only legitimate path available to women as an escape from the narrow confines of domesticity.

The *bhaktas'* poetry is not protest literature as the term is understood today. Nor does it carry an easily decipherable social message for other women. Most of it is celebration of an individual choice. Nor does it contain a call for overall gender

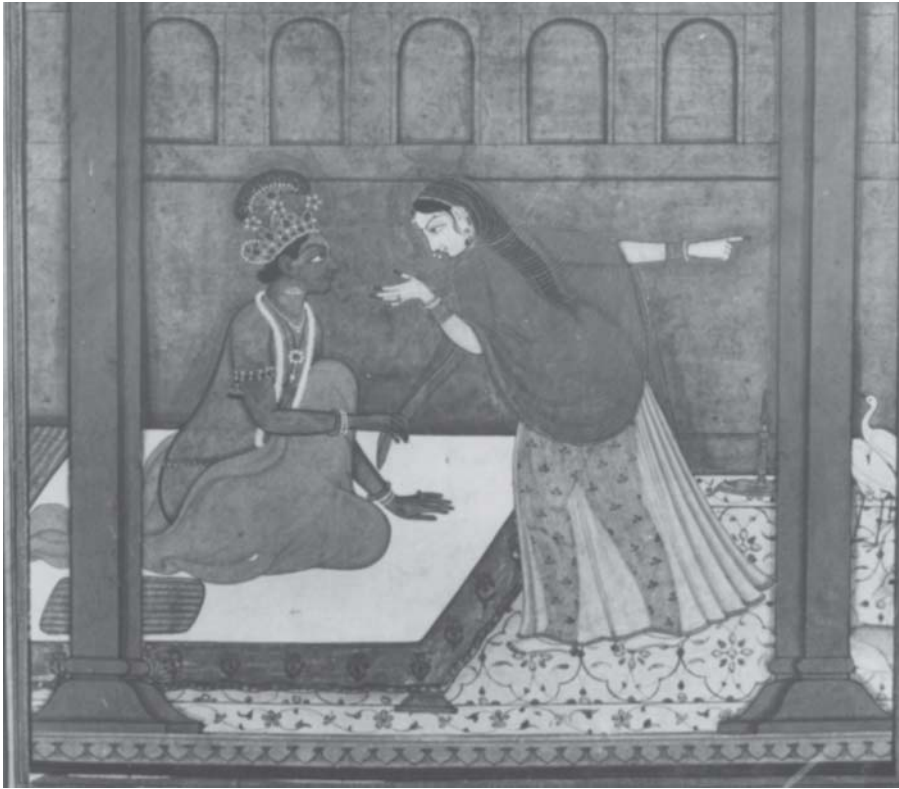


God not an authority figure—Krishna washing Radha's feet

equality. To say this is not to view it as somehow inadequate. The idea of gender equality as a desirable and obtainable social and political ideal is a relatively new idea in human history, although in some societies it was occasionally envisaged much earlier in Utopian writings. To look for its expression in contemporary terms by these women would be to do both the past and the present an injustice. We need

to understand the past on its own terms rather than saddle it with our own current preoccupations.

In order to move our society in the direction of greater justice and freedom we need to develop a creative relationship with the more humane and potentially liberating aspects of our cultural traditions. **A people without a sense of their own past are a people without a sense of self. To**



God as delight giving, not as commandment giving presence

understand the past is not to glorify it or to perpetuate every tradition. We are not suggesting that today's protest movements express themselves in the

idiom used by these movements. As Gandhi said:

“It is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide.”

This issue of *Manushi* is intended as another small effort to educate ourselves, the formally educated — or, more accurately, the maleducated — about the richness of our own historical legacy. Much of what we say will seem superficial to those steeped in these traditions. We may have made errors because of our own limitations, the extreme difficulty of getting material from regional literatures, and the paucity of good research work on the subject. As a result, we have not been able to cover several regions and traditions.

Many of the songs, even from regions we covered, had to be translated by us and these translations are frequently inadequate. This selection is intended only as a beginning in the process of acquainting the nonspecialist reader with the work of women *bhakta* poets from regions other than their own. It may appear flawed in a number of ways. We hope that our work will be rapidly superceded by more and better attempts. We also hope that each reader will find here at least one poet or poem that will strike a spark, for, as the twelfth century Kannada Virashaiva poet, Basavanna, put it:

“...things standing shall fall, but the moving ever shall stay.” □

Women Sufis in Medieval India

We have not been able, with our limited time and resources, to locate the poetry of women *sufis* of medieval India, although there is evidence that many women received initiation and also acted as spiritual guides in *sufi* traditions and that they continue to do so today.

In *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 1975, her comprehensive study of *sufism*, Annemarie Schimmel says that “Names of women saints are found throughout the world of Islam but the area in which women saints flourished most is probably . . . India. . . In all the provinces of . . . India and Pakistan one may see shrines of women saints to which men are not admitted....”

Another authority on *sufism*, K.A. Nizami, in material sent in to **Manushi**, relates the story of Bibi Fatimah Sam who came to Delhi between 1210 to 1236, and whose tomb at Kaka Nagar, New Delhi, is still visited by the devout as a shrine. She remained unmarried, and is believed to have been renowned as a teacher in different parts of the country and visited by many seekers after truth. Her religious gatherings are said to have resembled those of Rabia. One of her famous sayings emphasises the importance of love over ritual: “Nothing will earn greater reward in this or in the next world than the piece of bread and the water given to the hungry and the thirsty. The blessings of god for this are greater than for hundreds of thousands of *namazes* and for many days spent in fasting.”

The other women whose life stories we know of from oral tradition and who are revered as saints were mostly wives and mothers of eminent male *sufis* like the wife of Shaikh Hamiddudin of the Chishti order, in Rajasthan, and Bibi Rani the wife of Syed Kirmani of Punjab, who is said to have herself become a teacher and initiated her four sons as *sufis*. —**Manushi**