

Teaching Materials

Teaching Strategies

Selections from the poetry from the Bhakti movement were chosen to cover and portray a wide variety of female experience, writing styles, attitudes, and subjectivity within a highly patriarchal society. It is recommended that students initially read the overview on the Bhakti movement, then focus on the section on women within the movement so that the actual primary sources are somewhat contextualized.

Read the poetry out loud! These women wrote out of sheer desperation, out of sheer abandon and utter devotion. The depth of their emotion can best be "heard" in actually reading their words out loud.

Focus on the images utilized by these poet-saints. It is not the esoteric imagery of the learned that is portrayed in these poems. It is the imagery of the everyday, grounded realities of women in medieval India that so vividly comes to the fore. Utilize the poetry to examine women's realities, and, focus on how varied those experiences were for women, without losing sight of their subjectivity as women.

Discussion Questions:

- In reading the poetry from the female Bhaktas, focus on the imagery utilized by them. Is it "other-worldly"? Is it "this-worldly," focused on everyday realities?
- Many of these poems emphasis women's relationships, with their husbands, with their in-laws. Why do you think this is the case?
- There is a great deal of diversity within the poetry and the actual experiences of female bhaktas in terms of the extent that they challenged the patriarchal system surrounding them. Discuss.
- The poet-saints often used wedding imagery, or even sexual images in portraying their love and devotion to the Divine. Why?

Lesson Plan: Bhakti Poets

Time Estimate

Approximately three 45-minute class periods and one additional day for writing the DBQ.

Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

1. describe examples of passionate devotion expressed in bhakti poetry.
2. explain how bhakti poetry illustrates both inner (personal) and outer (social) conflicts experienced by devotees.
3. evaluate the decision made by bhakti poets to defy social convention in order to pursue their passionate relationship with their Lord.

Materials

- Sufficient copies of the following sources (in this sequence):
 - Source 4: Poem, Mirabai 3
 - Source 6: Poem, Akkamahadevi
 - Source 5: Poem, Mirabai 4
 - Source 3: Poem, Mirabai 2
 - Source 8: Poem, Bahinabai
 - Source 1: Poem, Janabai
 - Source 2: Poem, Mirabai
 - Source 7: Poem, Akkamahadevi 2
 - Source 9: Poem, Bahinabai 2
- Colored paper or construction paper
- Plain white paper
- Colored pencils or markers
- Sufficient copies of the poem structure for Activity 4

Strategies

1. **Prerequisite knowledge:** Students should be familiar with Hinduism, with the identity of the gods Vishnu and Siva, and with the avatar of Vishnu Krishna. Explain to students that the gods Krishna and Siva have several names, some of which are used in the poems studied in this module (e.g. “Mountain Lifter” and “Lord White as Jasmine”). Ensure students are also familiar conventions of modesty and marriage in India in the period under consideration.
2. **Hook:** Ask students to describe God as represented in the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition. They may describe God as an old man with a beard who sits on

a throne in heaven, as a “father,” or as one who grants blessings, performs miracles, or distributes punishment. Then ask students to imagine their ideal boyfriend or girlfriend. What would he or she be like? Finally, ask students to meld the two ideas in their minds. What if they were to seek love with God instead of with a human partner? Students may react with a variety of emotions such as disgust, shock, or curiosity. Explain to students that “bhakti” means devotion or love. Bhakti poets expressed a yearning for passionate union with a deity. However, such desire often carried a high price as poets and devotees defied social convention in order to embrace their love for and with the divine.

3. Distribute copies of Source 4: Poem, Mirabai 3 to students. Have a student read the poem out loud. Ask students to discuss their initial impression of the poem. For whom does the poet long? Why does she defiantly tell the country doctor to go away? Have another student read the same poem out loud, instructing students to listen for phrases that express the poet’s desire to be united with the divine. Have students underline these phrases. Then ask students to circle phrases or images that express the poet’s pain.

Distribute copies of Source 6: Poem, Akkamahadevi. Repeat the same study of this poem. Give students sheets of colored paper and colored pencils or markers. Instruct them to write the word “bhakti” in the center of the page. Using the pencils or markers, students should copy onto their papers phrases from Source 4: Poem, Mirabai 3 and Source 6: Poem, Akkamahadevi that describe the poets’ passion and pain.

4. Provide students with copies of Source 5: Poem, Mirabai 4. Have a student read the poem out loud. Ask students to explain the actions described by the poem. Then ask students to study the poem for literary evidence of Mirabai’s passion. Finally, what lines in the poem indicate the ways Mirabai was viewed and treated by others? Assign students to emulate the poem by writing a poem of their own using this poem structure handout.
5. Arrange students in small groups. Provide each group with copies of Source 3: Poem, Mirabai 2. Instruct the students to read the poem and discuss the following questions among themselves:
 - To whom is this poem addressed?
 - What does the poem describe?
 - What details does the poet include?
 - What consequences might a woman experience if she chose marriage to her God rather than to a human man?

Have groups share their thoughts with the whole class. Distribute white paper and colored pencils or markers to each group. Instruct each group to illustrate the poem and write a toast for Mirabai to be made at her wedding to the Lord.

6. Students may remain in the small groups created for Activity 5. Distribute copies of Source 8: Poem, Bahinabai to each group. Explain that the Vedas are a body of ancient Indian literature that includes myths, hymns, and rules for worship and social conduct. Instruct students to read the poem and identify the primary conflict this poet experiences (between her desire for devotion to God and her responsibility as a wife). Invite students to interpret the image of the hissing serpent. Who or what might the great serpent be? Discuss.

Instruct each group to think of other examples from their study of literature or history in which women have made non-conventional choices, rejecting marriage and family in order to follow other passions or pursuits. What positive and negative consequences have these women experienced? Discuss.

7. Give each group copies of one of the following: Source 1: Poem, Janabai, Source 2: Poem, Mirabai, or Source 7: Poem, Akkamahadevi 2. Assign groups to read the poems and discuss the following questions:

- In Source 1, how does Janabai defy social convention? How does she express her defiance? Why does she call herself a “slut”?
- In Source 2, what conflicts does Mirabai describe? Are the battling in-laws or locked door metaphors? If so, what might they mean?
- In Source 7, why does the poet wander naked? Why does she say she is “no woman”? What is her attitude toward men who would see her as a whore?

Using the blackboard or an overhead, have students share their thoughts and collect the results of student work on a summarizing the struggles and conflicts described by female bhakti poets.

8. **Wrap up:** Have students review their notes and other work completed as part of this lesson. Ask students to imagine and discuss the qualities of a woman who would pursue her spiritual devotion despite the profound criticism and even danger experienced by female bhakti poets. Should such women be compelled to give up their spiritual passion for their duties as wives and mothers?

As part of the concluding discussion, have students read Source 9: Poem, Bahinabai 2 in which Bahinabai reconciles her devotion with her domestic duties. Should women make such a compromise? Or should a society find ways to accommodate that intensity of devotion and worship, even when it takes women away from the home and their families? Ask students to support their point of

view with evidence from the poems, or by drawing on their knowledge of literature or world history.

Differentiation

Advanced Students: Have students select one of the following options: a) research and report on the biography of Mirabai; b) compare and contrast a poem from the bhakti tradition with that of another devotional or mystical tradition (for example, that of Rumi); c) write a devotional poem.

Less Advanced Students: Complete Activities 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 as instructed. For Activity 7 choose Source 1: Poem, Janabai or Source 2: Poem, Mirabai to complete together as a whole class activity. Provide students with additional support in identifying supporting evidence in the poems. Make enlargements of the poems to display on an overhead projector. Demonstrate underlining and other annotations on the overheads. Prepare students to write the DBQ essay by deciding together what poems they might discuss as they address each bullet of the assignment. Outline the essay and consider permitting students to write the essay with the outline in front of them. Consider writing an introductory paragraph for the essay together as a class.

Document Based Question (Suggested writing time: 40 minutes)

Directions: The following question is based on the documents included in this module. This question is designed to test your ability to work with and understand historical documents. Write an essay that:

- Has a relevant thesis and supports that thesis with evidence from the documents.
- Discusses or refers to at least five poems.
- Analyzes the documents by grouping them in as many appropriate ways as possible. Does not simply summarize the documents individually.
- Takes into account both the sources of the documents and the authors' points of view.

You may refer to relevant historical information not mentioned in the documents.

Question: Drawing on specific examples from the poems studied in this module, write a well organized essay of at least five paragraphs in which you:

- *Describe* the spiritual yearning and passion experienced by devotees
- *Explain* conflicts experienced by devotees between their spiritual passion and their social obligations and responsibilities
- *Evaluate* the decision made by women who chose devotion over conventional responsibilities and duties

Be sure to analyze point of view in at least three documents or images.

What additional sources, types of documents, or information would you need to have a more complete view of this topic?

Bibliography

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This volume includes a number of important translations of women's poetry and folk songs from Maharashtra, one of India's largest states.

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Sharma, Arvind, ed.. *Women Saints in World Religions*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2000.

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Menezes, Armando and S.M. Angadi, tr.. *Vacanas of Akkamahadevi, with the original text in Kannada*. Dharwar, M.A. Adke, 1973.

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Ramanujan's overview, analysis, and comparison of the lives of women saints in India, including that of Mirabai.

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A collection of writings including: Dennis Hudson's "Antal's Desire," which includes translations of her poetry in prose; Andrew Schelling's essay on Mirabai, "Where is my Beloved"; and Nancy Martin's "Mirabai: Inscribed Text, Embodied in Life."

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Websites

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Disse <http://home.infionline.net/~ddisse/mahadevi.html#anchor186952>

An extensive website devoted to women's voices, pre-1700s from around the world, including a selection of Akka Mahadevi's poetry in the Tamil language from South India.

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Sri Vaishnava Home Page Mani Varadarajan <http://www.ramanuja.org/sv/alvars/andal/>

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An extensive website devoted to women's voices, pre-1700s from around the world, including a selection of Mirabai's poetry in English, originally from the Gujarati language.

Madhu Kishwar, "Traditional Female Moral Exemplars in India." The Infinity Foundation http://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/s_es/s_es_kishw_EAA.htm

An excellent article by Madhu Kishwar, Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi, India, and founding editor of *Manushi—A Journal about Women and Society* from India. This article focuses on female "moral exemplars" or "role models" from within the Hindu tradition, from the divine feminine creative energy known as "shakti," village goddesses, Pan-Indian goddesses (devis) such as Parvati, Sita, and Durga, as well as Bhakti poets, including Mirabai (spelled Meerabai in this article) and Antal (here spelled Andal).