

Introduction

What is today known as the Bhakti Movement had its genesis in the South of India in the 6th century C.E. It is characterized by the writings of its poet-saints, many of whom were female, that extolled passionate devotional love for the Divine. The Bhakti Movement gained momentum from the 12th centuries in the central western regions of India, then moved northward coming to an end roughly in the 17th century.

The Bhakti Movement: Context and Overview

The Hindu tradition has generally been divided into a number of important historical and religious periods through its long development. The formative time frame from 2500—400 B.C.E. is highlighted by what are known as the sacred texts, the Vedas, and a nomadic people known as the Indo-Aryans; this period is classified as the Vedic Period. Central to the Vedas was the visionary figure of the *rishi*, or seer, one who was able to communicate with and about the various gods of the Vedic pantheon through a complex system of rituals that could only be conducted by an increasingly powerful priesthood. Liberation, or *moksha*, was to be found through the precise performance of ritual.

The Epic and Classical Periods, from 400 B.C.E.—600 C.E. are so named because of their focus on important texts, namely, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. These epics are concerned with heroes and heroic battles, kings, queens and ideal roles of individuals. Also of central importance to this time frame were Law Books concerned with the ideal nature of society. Social order and stability were to be found in a hierarchical ordering of people as well as specific roles assigned to each individual's life stage (*ashrama*) and position in society (*varna*) or caste. On the upper rung of this system was the Brahmin priesthood, followed by Kshatriyas (warriors) and Vaishyas (merchants), also known as twice-born classes. Only these groups were enabled to take part in an initiation ceremony known as the "sacred thread," study the Vedas and take part in Vedic rituals. Beneath these three groups were the Shudras, those who were servants to the upper three varnas. Underneath this rung came another subsection, the Untouchables, those whose occupations were so polluting that they did not even qualify to fit *within* an ordered society. The way to liberation from rebirth or *moksha* was in a true understanding of *dharma*, recognition and maintenance of the good of the social order, as exemplified and regulated by the Epics and Law Books.

The Medieval Period followed, of which the Bhakti Movement was an integral aspect. This was due in part to the rise of a new line of kings, the Gupta lineage (320 C.E.) that supported the pantheon of gods through worship of divine images (*puja*) and also included the building of temples and support for devotional groups. Alongside these developments came a flourishing of mythical compositions about the gods, known as the Puranas, or, "ancient stories." Central to this pantheon were the gods Vishnu, the cosmic king, and Shiva, the great yogi and ascetic known by many names, and his feminine counterpart, Shakti, or divine energy. Shakti was worshipped both as wife and consort of Shiva, but also in her own right as the Great Goddess in a variety of manifestations.

Most Hindus today identify themselves with the worship of one of these gods. Devotees

of Vishnu in his many incarnations known as *avatars*, Krishna and Rama being the most popular of manifestations, are called Vaishnavites. Those worshipping Shiva are known as Shaivites, whereas followers of the feminine divine are Shaktas. Devotees within each strand focus on their god or goddess as Ultimate Reality, thus having a distinctly monotheistic outlook, while at the same time acknowledging that the Divine takes many forms for the benefit of humanity.

The Bhakti Movement

The term bhakti is defined as “devotion” or passionate love for the Divine. *Moksha* or liberation from rebirth was not in the following of rules, regulations or societal ordering, it was through simple devotion to the Divine. Within the movement at large, useful distinctions have been made by contemporary scholars between those poet saints who composed verses extolling God *with* attributes or form, namely, “*saguna*” bhaktas, and those extolling God without and beyond all attributes or form, “*nirguna*.”

While the differences between these two branches are indeed important, their overarching similarities cannot be minimized; both focused on singular devotion, mystical love for God and had a particular focus on a personal relationship with the Divine. Given their belief in the centrality of personal devotion, poet-saints were highly critical of ritual observances as maintained and fostered by the Brahmin priesthood. For many, their critique also included the caste system that supported the traditional religious hierarchy, with Brahmins at the head of this hierarchy. Many poet-saints, particularly as the movement developed northward were themselves of lower caste lineages. Another commonality was their usage of the vernacular or regional languages of the masses, as opposed to the sacred language of the elite priesthood, Sanskrit. This practice too stemmed from the movement’s focus on inner, mystical and highly personal devotion to the Divine.

Women in the Bhakti Movement

Many of the bhakti poet-saints rejected asceticism as the crucial means toward liberation; some bhaktas were instead householders. As well, themes of universalism, a general rejection of institutionalized religion, and a central focus on inner devotion laid the groundwork for more egalitarian attitudes toward women and lower caste devotees. Women and *shudras*, both at the bottom of the traditional hierarchy ordering society, became the examples of true humility and devotion.

Female poet-saints also played a significant role in the bhakti movement at large. Nonetheless, many of these women had to struggle for acceptance within the largely male dominated movement. Only through demonstrations of their utter devotion to the Divine, their outstanding poetry and stubborn insistence of their spiritual equality with their contemporaries were these women reluctantly acknowledged and accepted within their ranks. Their struggle attests to the strength of patriarchal values within both society and within religious and social movements attempting to pave the way for more egalitarian access to the Divine.

The imagery of bhakti poetry is grounded in the everyday, familiar language of ordinary

people. Women bhaktas wrote of the obstacles of home, family tensions, the absent husband, meaningless household chores, and restrictions of married life, including their status as married women. In many cases, they rejected traditional women's roles and societal norms by leaving husbands and homes altogether, choosing to become wandering bhaktas; in some instances they formed communities with other poet-saints. Their *new* focus was utter devotion and worship of their Divine Husbands.

Caste status and even masculinity were understood as barriers to liberation, in essence a rejection of the hierarchy laid out by the Law Books of the Classical Period. Male bhaktas often took on the female *voice* calling to her Beloved, utterly submissive to His desires. However, while male bhaktas could engage in this role playing on a temporary basis, returning at will to their privileged social status as males, women bhaktas faced overwhelming challenges through their rejection of societal norms and values, without having the ability to revert back to their normative roles as wives, mothers and in some cases, the privileges of their original high caste status.

While it is tempting to see women's participation within the bhakti movement as a revolt against the patriarchal norms of the time, there is little evidence to support this perspective. Injustices and the patriarchal order itself were not a major focus of these poet-saints. Women bhaktas were simply individuals attempting to lead lives of devotion. Staying largely within the patriarchal ideology that upheld the chaste and dutiful wife as ideal, these women transferred the object of their devotion and their duties as the "lovers" or "wives" to their Divine Lover or Husband. Nonetheless, that their poetry became an integral aspect of the bhakti movement at large is highly significant and inspirational for many who look to these extraordinary women as ideal examples of lives intoxicated by love for the Divine.

Further, it would appear that with the movement's northward advancement (15th through 17th centuries), its radical edge as it pertained to women's inclusion, was tempered. Greater numbers of women took part in the movement's earlier development (6th to 13th centuries); it is largely male bhaktas and sants that are today perceived as the spokespersons for the movement in its later manifestations. The poetry of women bhaktas from this latter time period is generally not indicative of a rejection of societal norms in terms of leaving family and homes in pursuit of divine love. Instead, some of the later poet-saints stayed within the confines of the household while expounding on their souls' journeys, their eternal love for the Divine, as well as their never-ending search for truth.

Female Bhaktas

The poets outlined below represent a panorama of female poet-saints within the Bhakti movement. Some were extraordinarily radical in their rejection of social norms and values, leaving husbands, families, and society behind in order to extol their love for God. Others attempted to fit into more traditional roles in society by maintaining their responsibilities as wives and mothers. All wrote exquisite poetry that has been passed on through bards and singers throughout India.

Akkamahadevi, also known as **Akka** or **Mahadevi** was a bhakta from the southern

region of Karnataka and devotee of Shiva in the 12th century C.E. Legends tell of her wandering naked in search of her Divine Lover; her poetry, or *vacanas* tell of her frustration with societal norms and roles that restricted her. They also bear witness to her intense, all-encompassing love for Shiva, whom she addresses as Chennamallikarjuna. Through Shiva and Shiva alone is her love fulfilled; through separation from her “lord white as jasmine” is her heart broken.

Janabai was born around the 13th century in Maharashtra in a low caste *sudra* family. As a young girl she was sent to work in the upper-caste family of Namdev, one of the most revered of the bhakti poet saints. While within this household, she continued to serve Namdev, both as a servant and as his devotee. Janabai wrote over three hundred poems focusing on domestic chores and the restrictions facing her as a low caste woman.

Mirabai, or **Mira** is said to have been born into a ruling Rajput family. Mirabai’s poetry tells of her vision of Lord Krishna when she was a child; from that point on Mira vowed that she would forever be his bride. Despite her wishes she was married into another princely family at a young age. Yet the numerous legends surrounding Mira tell of an undying devotion toward Krishna, her *true* husband. Central to these accounts are Mirabai’s struggles within the family she had been married into, including unsuccessful attempts made by her jealous husband to kill her. Others focus on her sisters-in-law’s efforts to obstruct Mirabai in her desires to join the company of wandering saints, actions deemed utterly improper for a woman of her high-caste status. Eventually, Mirabai left her husband and family in pilgrimage to various places associated with “her Dark Lord,” including Brindavan, Krishna’s holy city. There she was initially rejected because she was a woman. Yet Mirabai’s reputation of devotion, piety, and intellectual astuteness eventually led to her inclusion within the community of the saints of Brindavan.

Mirabai’s poetry portrays a unique relationship with Krishna; in it she is not only the devoted bride of Krishna, but Krishna is ardent in his pursuit of Mira. Because of Mirabai’s singular focus and intense devotion of her Husband, the “lifter of the mountain,” she can be perceived as simply upholding the “wifely” duties of women and patriarchal norms in general. On the other hand, she remains for many a symbol of resistance of social order of the day.

Bahinabai or **Bahina** was a poet-saint from 17th century Maharashtra, writing in the form of *abangas*, women’s songs that accompanied their labours, especially in the fields. Her writings are particularly autobiographical, recounting her childhood, puberty and married life. Despite having obvious conflicts with her husband due to her overarching and ecstatic love for her Divine Lover in the form of Lord Vithoba, another name for Krishna, she took her role as wife and responsibilities to her earthly husband seriously. Her husband was also critical of her allegiance to the Bhakti poet-saint Tukaram. Nonetheless, her poetry reflects an attitude of duty and respectful empathy toward both her marriage and her spouse. This becomes clear through her writings on the responsibilities of women toward their husbands.

Though highly unusual, it is believed that Bahinabai received some classical training from her father, a Brahmin scribe. Her poetry recounts visions she experiences of the low-caste poet-saint Tukaram; despite her high caste status, she became his devotee, thus choosing the path of devotion over brahmanical norms of ritual purity.