

Primary Source Packet

1. Poem, Janabai

Bhakti poets, who were often lower caste Hindu women, and their audiences drew emotional sustenance from these verses which expressed a pure devotion to Hindu deities. Their poetry, written in local languages beginning in the 3rd century in South India and the 10th century in North India, attracted large audiences among the marginalized in Hindu society, such as women and “untouchables.”

In this poem, Janabai, a 13th century poet from a low-caste *sudra* family, presents herself as shrugging off social conventions enshrining women’s honor (covering her body), taking up musical instruments, (cymbals and the veena) to go sing and dance in the marketplace. Janabai, though a low caste woman, was brought up in the household of Namdev, a popular poet-saint, and thus treated with a certain amount of respect in light of the egalitarian ethos of Namdev’s message.



Nonetheless, she is still well aware of her “place” in society; she is a servant, one who is perhaps more aware of social conventions because of her associations with Namdev, is here apparently flaunting these very conventions, imagining herself as a woman who is utterly outside the bounds of respectability. Shedding these bonds of respectability, she is left with nothing. In essence, there is nothing standing between herself and her Beloved Vithoba, another name for Krishna, incarnation of the god Vishnu in human form.

Source: Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, eds., *Women Writing in India. 600 B.C. to the Present. Volume 1*, New York, The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1991, p. 83

“Cast off all shame,
and sell yourself
in the marketplace;
then alone
can you hope
to reach the Lord.

Cymbals in hand,
a *veena* upon my shoulder,
I go about;
who dares to stop me?

The pallav of my sari
falls away (A scandal!);
yet will I enter
the crowded marketplace
without a thought.

Jani says, My Lord
I have become a slut
to reach your home.

2. Poem, Mirabai

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In Caturvedi 42, Mirabai [c. 1498 – c. 1546], famous devotee of Krishna, speaks of her struggles within the domestic sphere, particularly with her in-laws, as a high caste woman who chooses to defy conventional expectations and family roles. Here we see how her extended family through marriage is attempting to dissuade Mirabai from her associations with fellow devotees of Krishna. Her in-laws (particularly the king, the *rana*) are said to have attempted to poison Mirabai who was breaking all societal norms in search of her true love, Krishna. Krishna here presented as the “Mountain Lifter” refers to a story of Krishna widely known in Rajasthan, where Krishna held up Mount Govardhan to protect the cattle and herders from the rain-god Indra’s wrath; Indra’s anger was directed at the people of Braj because they turned their devotion away from him and toward Krishna instead.



Krishna

Source: John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, eds. and trans., *Songs of the Saints of India*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 134.]

“Life without Hari is no life, friend,
And though my mother-in-law fights,
my sister-in-law teases,
the *rana* is angered,
A guard stationed on a stool outside,
and a lock is mounted on the door,
How can I abandon the love I have loved
In life after life?
Mira’s Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter:
Why would I want anyone else?”

3. Poem, Mirabai 2

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In Caturvedi 27, Mirabai’s (c. 1498 – c. 1546) “unshakable” belief in her “marriage” to Krishna (the Lord of Braj) is highlighted. Perhaps the most famous female Bhakti, Mirabai’s description of the “wedding,” though in dream, is highly sensual and palpable; her devotion to her “divine spouse” has replaced her actual relationship with her earthly husband. We are given a description of the number of wedding guests, the wedding ritual (Hindu wedding ceremonies are solemnized by walking around the sacred fire), and her sense of well-being as the bride of Krishna.



Krishna

Source: John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, eds. and trans., *Songs of the Saints of India*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 137

“Sister, I had a dream that I wed
the Lord of those who live in need:
Five hundred sixty thousand people came
and the Lord of Braj was the groom.
In dream they set up a wedding arch;
in dream he grasped my hand;
in dream he led me around the wedding fire
and I became unshakably his bride.
Mira’s been granted her mountain-lifting Lord:
From living past lives, a prize.”
(Caturvedi, no. 27)

4. Poem, Mirabai 3

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Here Mirabai [c. 1498 – c. 1546], famous devotee of Krishna, speaks of the depth of her longing for her Lord, a longing that has left her physically weak and visibly ill. The doctor is called in to examine her condition, yet Mirabai already knows what the cause of her “illness” is, as well as its cure: to be caressed by her Lover’s lips, to experience fully the love of the Divine, and only thus be fully made well.



Krishna

Source: Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, eds., Women Writing in India. 600 B.C. to the Present. Volume 1, New York, The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1991, p. 92.

“I am pale with longing for my beloved;
People believe I am ill.
Seizing on every possible pretext,
I try to meet him “by accident.”

They have sent for a country doctor,
He grabs my arm and prods it;
How can he diagnose my pain?
It’s in my heart that I am afflicted.

Go home, country doctor,
Don’t address me by my name;
It’s the name of God that has wounded me,
Don’t force your medicines on me.

The sweetness of his lips is a pot of nectar,
That’s the only curd for which I crave;
Mira’s Lord is Giridhar Naagar.
He will feed me nectar again and again.”

5. Poem, Mirabai 4

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In this poem Mirabai [c. 1498 – c. 1546] writes of her devotion to her Lord Krishna, which included ecstatic dancing and singing out of sheer love for the Divine. Certainly her behavior was not appreciated by her in-laws, who made many attempts to subdue Mirabai’s passion for her Lord. Here Mirabai is referring to the coloring of her lord Krishna, generally pictured as blue or black. Krishna is an avatar of the Supreme God Vishnu, who is also associated with the color blue, given his association with water. Mira here is making a connection with her own longing which is having the effect of making her ill and thus explaining the discoloring of her complexion. She also writes of the attempt made on her life by a member of the royal household, through poisoning. The Rana (king) simply could not accept her strange behavior, and particularly, Mirabai’s detachment and even rejection of her earthly husband. Just as Krishna had been poisoned by the nursemaid Putana in order to thwart the powers of the infant Krishna, yet ultimately was killed by the child, so too the poison of the Rana could have no adverse effects on Mirabai, except for her discoloring.



Krishna

Source: John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, eds. and trans., *Songs of the Saints of India*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 134.

“I’m colored with the color of dusk, oh *rana*,
colored with the color of my Lord.
Drumming out the rhythm on the drums, I danced,
dancing in the presence of the saints,
colored with the color of my Lord.
They thought me mad for the Maddening One,
raw for my dear dark love,
colored with the color of my Lord.
The *rana* sent me a poison cup:
I didn’t look, I drank it up,
Colored with the color of my Lord.
The clever Mountain Lifter is the lord of Mira.
Life after life he’s true-
colored with the color of my Lord.

6. Poem, Akkamahadevi

Bhakti poets, who were often lower caste Hindu women, and their audiences drew emotional sustenance from these verses which expressed a pure devotion to Hindu deities. Their poetry, written in local languages beginning in the 3rd century in South India and the 10th century in North India, attracted large audiences among the marginalized in Hindu society, such as women and “untouchables.”

In this 12th century *vacana* [poem], Akkamahadevi, or Akka, is lamenting her separation from her lord, Siva, (Lord White as Jasmine). At times in Akkamahadevi’s poetry, Siva is her illicit lover, and at times, he is her legitimate husband. In this poem she writes of her wandering, in search of Siva. Her travels took her to various parts of India, where, traveling naked and forlorn in search of her true love, Akkamahadevi often had to ward off molesting men and the harsh criticism of other wandering saints who were aghast at her imprudent nakedness.



Siva

Source: A.K. Ramanujan, trans., *Speaking of Siva*, London, Penguin, 1973, p. 121.

“O mother I burned
in a flameless fire

O mother I suffered
a bloodless wound

O Mother I tossed
without a pleasure:

loving my lord white as jasmine
I wandered through unlikely worlds.”
(Vacana 69)

7. Poem, Akkamahadevi 2

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12th century poet, Akka, perhaps more than any other female-saint, utilizes carnal expressions to convey her love for her Lord. But it is not to portray her femaleness that she wanders naked through the streets; instead, her nakedness is a symbol of her having forsaken all in search of her divine love, Chennamallikarjuna [Siva], the Lord White as Jasmine.



Siva

Source: Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, eds., *Women Writing in India. 600 B.C. to the Present. Volume 1*, New York, The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1991, p. 79-80.

“Brother, you’ve come
drawn by the beauty
of these billowing breasts,
this brimming youth.
I’m no woman, brother, no whore.

Every time you’ve looked at me,
Who have you taken me for?
All men other than Chennamallikarjuna
Are faces to be shunned, see brother.”

8. Poem, Bahinabai

Bhakti poets, who were often lower caste Hindu women, and their audiences drew emotional sustenance from these verses which expressed a pure devotion to Hindu deities. Their poetry, written in local languages beginning in the 3rd century in South India and the 10th century in North India, attracted large audiences among the marginalized in Hindu society, such as women and “untouchables.”

The possibility of Bahinabai’s Vedic training, or training in Hindu religious hymns, comes to the fore in her 17th century poetry, in that she consistently refers to the Vedas

and their regulations on married life. In this *abhangā*, a song that accompanied women's work, readers become aware of Bahinabai's anguished decision-making process. The Vedas are clear on the duties of women toward their husbands, particularly women's deference to their husband's wishes. But Bahinabai is called to a different life, a different object of affection and duty than her husband, namely, reverence and affection toward her teacher, the low-caste poet-saint Tukaram. Bahinabai's husband initially scorned Tukaram and stressed the invincibility of the Vedas and Vedic rituals over and against Tukaram's message of devotion over ritual.

Source: Mary McGee, "Bahinabai: The Ordinary Life of an Exceptional Woman, or, the Exceptional Life of an Ordinary Woman," in Steven J. Rosen, ed., *Vaisnavi. Women and the worship of Krishna*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1996, p. 137.

"To leave a husband is against the teachings of the Vedas, and thereby one can never acquire the supreme spiritual riches.

At my door there seemed a great serpent hissing at me. How could I live under such conditions?

It is the teaching of the Vedas, that one should not neglect one's duty, but my love was for the worship of God (Hari).

Says Bahini, 'I was in a sea of troubles. How can I describe the increasing anguish of my heart!'"
[Abhanga 62]

9. Poem, Bahinabai

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In this 17th century *abhangā* [women's labor song], Bahinabai appears to have come to a more substantive conclusion about her place in society, as the wife and daughter of a Brahmin, and thus members of the priestly class. She has reconciled her duties as a Brahmin and a wife with her own devotion to the mystic Tukaram, partially perhaps because of her husband's change of heart toward the low-caste poet-saint.

Source: Mary McGee, "Bahinabai: The Ordinary Life of an Exceptional Woman, or, the Exceptional Life of an Ordinary Woman," in Steven J. Rosen, ed., *Vaisnavi. Women and the worship of Krishna*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1996, pp. 153-4.

“In worshipping Thee I can still be true to my duty of devotion to my husband. Thou, O God (Meghashyama) must thus think also.

The Supreme spiritual riches are surely not contrary to the Vedas. Therefore, think of this purpose of mine.

Says Bahini: ‘Oh God (Hari), think at once of my longing, by which I can accomplish both.’

[Abhanga 68]