

Gender, Devotion, and Dissent: The Role of Women Saint Poets in Challenging Patriarchy

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Abstract:

The Bhakti movement, which swept across India between the 7th and 17th centuries, also marked a spiritual revolution. While it sought to democratize devotion and transcend caste barriers, it also became a subtle yet powerful platform for women to challenge patriarchal norms. This paper explores the intersection of gender, devotion, and dissent through an analysis of the lives and works of some prominent women saint poets in India: Akkamahadevi, Mirabai, Lal Ded, Andal and Muktabai, Janabai, and Bahinabai from Varkari bhakti movement in Maharashtra. Rooted in the Bhakti movement, these mystic poets employed devotional expression not only as a means to spiritual transcendence but also as a vehicle for challenging patriarchal structures that sought to silence women's voices and limit their autonomy. While the Bhakti tradition is often celebrated for its egalitarian stance against caste and ritual hierarchy, its facilitation of female spiritual

self-expression remains a powerful, yet underexplored, area of feminist inquiry.

Their poetry reclaims the personal as spiritual and the spiritual as political, creating an alternative discourse that empowers female subjectivity within a restrictive sociocultural framework. By conducting a close reading of their poetic texts and examining their historical and cultural contexts, this study argues that these saint poets used devotion as a strategic form of dissent. Their legacy not only contributes to India's literary and spiritual heritage but also resonates with contemporary feminist concerns. In re-centering their voices, the paper asserts their position as pioneers of a spiritually rooted gender critique in pre-modern India.

Keywords:

Gender-Devotion-Dissent- Bhakti Movement-Women Saint Poets- Patriarchy-Feminist Spirituality.