

## ***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.*

## Introduction

The Bhakti movement, which swept across India between the 7th and 17th centuries, marked not only a spiritual awakening but also a profound socio-cultural shift. At its core, the movement rejected ritualism, caste hierarchies, and the monopolization of religious authority by the Brahmin elite, advocating instead for a direct, personal connection with the divine. While its anti-caste ethos is well recognized, the movement also provided a unique space for women's spiritual expression and resistance. In a deeply patriarchal society where women were often relegated to domestic and subordinate roles, the Bhakti tradition enabled female saint poets like Mirabai, Akkamahadevi, Lal Ded, and Andal to assert their spiritual agency. Through their poetic compositions, these women voiced personal devotion in ways that defied societal norms—questioning male authority, rejecting marital and familial obligations, and challenging rigid religious orthodoxies. Their work became both a spiritual offering and a form of protest, making devotion a potent tool for gendered dissent and self-liberation.

Women saint poets utilized devotion not only as a path to the divine but also as a means of self-expression and resistance against the patriarchal systems that sought to confine them. Their poetry—deeply spiritual yet radically dissident—challenged established social hierarchies, particularly those based on gender. This paper explores the intersection of gender, devotion, and dissent in the works of these saint poets, examining how their spiritual narratives served as a critique of patriarchy.

Each poet exemplifies a unique mode of resistance—Akkamahadevi through her ascetic renunciation and mystical verse, Mirabai through her defiance of royal and familial norms, Lal Ded through her rejection of institutionalized ritual, and Andal through her subversion of marriage and gendered devotion. Likewise, in Maharashtra, **Muktabai** embodied resistance through her philosophical and compassionate questioning of ritual orthodoxy, asserting a wise



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and assertive spiritual voice despite her young age. **Janabai**, as a fearless and rebellious Dalit woman, used devotion to challenge caste hierarchies and gender roles, reimagining divinity as a co-participant in her domestic labor, thereby sacralizing the everyday. **Bahinabai**, with her introspective and emotionally powerful verses, revealed the inner turmoil of a woman caught between oppressive domestic life and deep spiritual yearning, courageously asserting her autonomy and divine connection. Together, these women saint poets employed devotion not just as worship, but as a transformative and subversive discourse that defied the patriarchal constraints of their times.

### **Women in a Patriarchal Religious Landscape**

Indian society, deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, historically marginalized women in both public and spiritual spheres. Religious institutions and practices often reinforced gender roles, casting women primarily as daughters, wives, and mothers. Sacred texts and ritualistic practices largely excluded women from priestly and scholarly roles. However, the Bhakti movement opened up new avenues for spiritual expression. Its emphasis on personal devotion over ritual and its challenge to Brahminical orthodoxy provided women an opportunity to engage with spirituality directly and assert their voices.

### **Akkamahadevi: The Naked Mystic of Rebellion**

Akkamahadevi, a 12th-century saint from Karnataka, exemplifies spiritual dissent. Her Vachanas (short devotional poems) challenge not only male dominance but also societal norms governing female behavior. Renouncing marriage and clothing, she wandered naked, covered only by her long hair, symbolizing both vulnerability and fearlessness. She addressed her beloved deity Shiva (Chenna Mallikarjuna) in deeply personal terms, rejecting the control of earthly authorities:



"For hunger, there's the village rice, cooked for thirst, there's the stream water, for sleep, the temple ruins. For company, the Self is enough."

Her life and poetry defied the traditional expectations of modesty, marriage, and obedience, establishing spiritual autonomy as a form of resistance (Ramanujan 135).

### **Mirabai: Love as Resistance**

Mirabai, a 16th-century Rajput princess and devotee of Krishna, exemplifies how devotional love can serve as a form of political and personal dissent. Married into the royal family of Mewar, she openly defied her in-laws and societal conventions by refusing to worship family deities and embracing Krishna as her sole beloved. Her bhajans express a love that transcends physical boundaries and social dictates:

"I have found a love who is beyond all limits. I have found my Krishna."

Mirabai's refusal to conform to the patriarchal roles of wife and queen incited both admiration and backlash. Her poems became a vehicle to assert her identity and autonomy in a world that denied her both (Hawley 98).

### **Lal Ded: Spiritual Iconoclasm in Kashmir**

Lal Ded, also known as Lalleshwari, was a 14th-century mystic poet from Kashmir who belonged to the Shaiva tradition. Her *vakhs* (poetic sayings) critique both Hindu orthodoxy and male-dominated religious interpretations. She abandoned her marital home and took to a life of wandering and mystic reflection. In her verses, Lal Ded emphasized inner realization over external rituals:

"Shiva resides not in the temple, Nor Linga made of stone. Seek Him in your heart, And in the formless truth alone."



Her rejection of ritualism and insistence on personal spiritual experience undermined the religious structures that excluded women. Lal Ded's poetry exemplifies how mystical insight can become a tool of defiance (Hoskote 72).

### **Andal: Divine Love and Poetic Subversion**

Andal, the only female Alvar among the twelve Vaishnava saints of South India, lived in the 8th century. Her devotional poems, especially the *Tiruppavai* and *Nachiyar Thirumozhi*, express a passionate, romantic love for Lord Vishnu. Yet this love is not submissive; it asserts Andal's agency in choosing her spiritual path. She refused marriage to a mortal, claiming she was already wedded to the divine.

In *Nachiyar Thirumozhi*, she writes: "My heart is His, my soul His slave. I dream of His eyes, like lotus waves."

Her poetry blurs the boundaries between devotion and desire, challenging traditional notions of female chastity and obedience (Cutler 45). By positioning herself as both lover and devotee, Andal subverts the expected roles for women in a deeply patriarchal society.

### **Women Saint Poets in Maharashtra: Devotion and Dissent in the Varkari Tradition**

Maharashtra's Bhakti tradition, particularly the Varkari movement, was a significant site of devotional egalitarianism that welcomed the participation of marginalized voices, including women. Women saint poets such as Muktabai, Janabai, and Bahinabai emerged from this milieu and used their poetic compositions not only as expressions of spiritual yearning but also as a subtle critique of patriarchal and caste-based oppression. Their work demonstrates how devotion was transformed into a space of gendered resistance—where the divine became both a refuge and an ally in challenging the social order.

**Muktabai**, the sister of the renowned Varkari saint Dnyaneshwar, was a 13th-century poet who articulated a deep philosophical understanding of spiritual and social suffering. In her *abhangs*



(devotional verses), Muktabai voiced concern for the marginalized and criticized superficial religious rituals. Her famous line—“*Let wisdom be our hut, and compassion our food*”—illustrates her spiritual egalitarianism, which inherently challenged the patriarchal and Brahminical control over religious knowledge. Despite being a young woman in a male-dominated religious landscape, Muktabai asserted herself as a philosophical thinker and spiritual authority.

**Janabai**, a 14th-century saint poet and domestic servant in the household of Namdev (another prominent Varkari saint), offers a particularly radical voice. A Dalit woman, Janabai wrote about her servitude and the pain of her social status, while simultaneously asserting her unbreakable bond with Lord Vitthal. In her verses, she imagined God participating in her household chores, blurring the lines between sacred and mundane. Her poetry revealed the intersections of gender, caste, and labor, offering a unique critique of the social structures that sought to confine her identity. By portraying herself as God’s servant and companion in daily life, Janabai inverted traditional hierarchies and placed the divine within the sphere of feminine labor, thereby elevating her role and questioning the very foundations of patriarchal religious practice.

Bahinabai, a 17th-century saint and a Brahmin woman, faced both domestic violence and spiritual longing. Her *abhangs* depict the tension between her duties as a wife and her spiritual desires. Trapped in a conservative marital life, Bahinabai used poetry to negotiate her identity between social obligation and inner devotion. She often described the conflict between her soul’s yearning for Vitthal and the rigid norms imposed by her husband and society. In doing so, she not only gave voice to the inner struggles of countless women but also legitimized feminine spiritual experience as a source of divine connection and moral authority.

The contributions of these saint poets in Maharashtra demonstrate that the Bhakti movement was not only a theological reform but also a socio-cultural revolution. Through their *abhangs*, these



women articulated a vision of the divine that was intimate, accessible, and responsive to the suffering of marginalized individuals—particularly women. Their spiritual dissent, woven into the devotional fabric of the Varkari tradition, offered a quiet but powerful resistance to patriarchy, casteism, and religious orthodoxy. These women did not seek to overthrow systems through confrontation but rather to transcend them through poetic devotion, reconfiguring the sacred as a space of equality and liberation.

### **Devotion as Subversive Discourse**

What unites these saint poets is their use of devotion as a mode of subversion. They did not directly engage in political activism, yet their spiritual defiance had far-reaching implications. By redefining the relationship between the self and the divine, they implicitly questioned the legitimacy of male authority in both secular and sacred realms. Their poetry foregrounded the personal over the institutional, the experiential over the dogmatic. In doing so, they created a literary and spiritual canon that empowered not only themselves but also generations of women to come.

### **Legacy and Contemporary Relevance**

The legacy of these women saint poets endures in contemporary feminist thought, literature, and activism. Their lives and works are revisited in modern scholarship, theatrical adaptations, and translations that highlight their defiance and relevance. In an age where gender equality and spiritual agency remain contested terrains, these poets serve as powerful archetypes. They remind us that devotion is not passivity; it can be a potent form of resistance.

### **Conclusion**

The poetry and lives of women saint poets offer a radical rethinking of gender, devotion, and power. By turning inward and asserting their spiritual autonomy, these women challenged the patriarchal order not through confrontation, but through transcendence. Their devotional



expression became a sanctuary of dissent, enabling them to voice their resistance in ways both poetic and profound. In doing so, they redefined not only the landscape of Indian devotional literature but also the parameters of female empowerment.

The poetry and lives of women saint poets like Akkamahadevi, Mirabai, Lal Ded, and Andal present a profound reimagining of the interconnections between gender, devotion, and power in pre-modern India. These women, each rooted in their unique cultural and regional contexts, used the language of devotion not merely as spiritual expression but as a transformative force that disrupted normative gender roles and redefined feminine identity. Their voices, emerging from a deeply patriarchal and often exclusionary religious environment, challenged the expectations imposed on women to be obedient wives, chaste daughters, or silent devotees. Instead, they embraced the divine as an intimate beloved, a supreme truth, or a source of inner strength—thus relocating spiritual authority from the hands of institutionalized religion to the personal and experiential realm.

By turning inward and asserting their individual spiritual journeys, these women transcended the limited identities society imposed upon them. Their dissent was not revolutionary in the conventional political sense, but radical in its quiet insistence on selfhood, choice, and divine intimacy. Akkamahadevi's renunciation of societal norms, Mirabai's unyielding love for Krishna over royal duty, Lal Ded's mystical rejection of ritual orthodoxy, and Andal's divine marriage—all reflect a deliberate assertion of spiritual autonomy. Their devotion became a space where patriarchal boundaries dissolved, allowing for the articulation of a liberated self.

In this act of turning devotion into dissent, these saint poets not only created some of the most enduring works of Indian mystical literature but also carved a legacy of female empowerment grounded in spiritual resilience. Their lives remind us that acts of transcendence can serve as acts of resistance, and that poetic devotion can become a revolutionary language. In reclaiming the





sacred as a space of self-expression, they laid the foundation for a feminist spiritual discourse that continues to resonate in contemporary society.

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