

BYPASSING WOMEN – THE UNSUNG HEROES, BY MEMORY, HISTORY AND HAGIOGRAPHIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The Medieval Bhakti movement as well as Sufism witnessed an outpouring of literature in the Indian subcontinent. The female bhakti-poets, such as Andal Ranganayaki Alvar, Akka Mahadevi, Gangasati, Muktabai, Janabai, Lal Ded, So-yarabai, Nirmala, Kanhopatra, Tallapaka Thirumalamma (Timmakka), Molla, Meera (Mirabai), Bahinabai, etc., and the women Sufis, such as Bibi Fatima Sam, Bibi Hafiz Jamal, Mai Sahiba (Bibi Zulekha), Bibi Jamal Khatun, Bibi Ajiba, the Mughal princess – Jahanara Begum, etc., who came from all walks of life, also left their unforgettable impressions on these movements. Mostly, they stood as individuals asserting their identities in their own right. Many of them were even persecuted by the state and religious authorities when their popularity threatened their male counterparts or when they supposedly entered the so-called “male domain”. Most of them gained only posthumous recognition and reverence. Similarly, Sikhism also narrates legends about the Sikh gurus and warriors but the published record about various Sikh women such as Rani Jindan, Mai Bhag Kaur, Mata Sahib Devan, etc. is not more than a couple of inches of print. Have women not been written out of history? Do women really deserve no place in the memories of the generations to come? Should they play no role in shaping their spiritual lives? The paper seeks to highlight, investigate and question the discriminatory treatment meted out to women by historical narratives and hagiographies in the light of the Medieval Bhakti movement, Medieval Indian culture, society and norms; Dadu Panth, Sikhism and Sufism.

KEYWORDS: *Aestheticism Vs. Feminism, Bhakti, Cosmopolitanism Vs. Feminism, Dadu Panth, Hagiographies, History And Culture – Ancient, Medieval, Post-medieval, Marginalisation of Women, Sikhism, Sufism*

INTRODUCTION

Women are an indispensable part of every society but since time immemorial they have been discriminated against in all spheres such as at the time of their birth, marriage, education, employment and even after their death.

Historically speaking, references to women appear only as a slice of the whole pie of description of the upper class and symbolise more often than not, a mystified image of the attractive, beautiful or altruistic beings. Historical and literary texts of the subcontinent occasionally portray them as rebellious and dangerously portioning out a few women for their special attention only when their accomplishments are significant by the androcentric standards.

The discriminatory attitude of the traditional religion of India towards women is very well-reflected in many of its aspects. For example, the four ashrams and purushartha were designed by men, for men. Certain samskaras were also aimed towards the development of a man, for him to become a worthy member of the society. The ritual of giving away of one's daughter in marriage to another man by a father (kanyadaan), along with dowry, was and is still considered as a highly 'noble offering'. It is also responsible for the objectification of women. Patriarchy, as a structure of power, has always sustained oppressive gender relations through a firm, semi-permeable and inescapable control over women's labour, and their power of procreation and sexuality; through many oppressive and unjust practices such as the denial of property rights to them, emphasis on their virginity at the time of marriage, restrictions on the remarriage of widows, etc. Majority of women could only bask in the light of the achievements, fame and recognition of their father, husband or son. They were left with no option to earn the same for themselves in their own right for their talents and capabilities were suppressed and buried. It was in this male-dominated society that some women, who were as worthy as their male counterparts, became aspirants of bhakti (devotion). Their participation in the movement invited only strange gazes, rather than followers and only raised brows, rather than awareness.

In order to understand the participation of women in the Bhakti movement, it is also important to understand the cultural differences between the Bhakti movement of North India, and that of Deccan. Not only were they culturally, geographically and linguistically different from each other, but also in terms of the status of their respective female bhakti-poets. Unlike several social evils such as child marriage, dowry, female infanticide, polygamy, sexual slavery, violence against widows (enforced widowhood), etc. that the women of the north as well as of the south were subjected to, sati pratha was not much prevalent in south India. The Medieval Bhakti movement of the north was highly influenced, and at times, even challenged by Islam and Sufism, as well as by the Muslim dynasties and rulers. In contrast, the Bhakti movement of the south, despite being attacked by the Islamic rule in the medieval period, soon retained most of its original traits with hardly any borrowings from the latter.

After several successive invasions and influx of Muslims into the subcontinent from the northern parts of India, the political misfortunes of the Indian subcontinent increased which were followed by numerous, long spells of anarchy disastrously affecting the position of women in the society. Also, it became imperative for men (father, brother, husband, son, etc.) to protect their women (daughter, sister, wife, mother, etc.) against the other men which necessitated a curtailment in the movements and liberty of women. This fact resulted into a more stringent practice of the purdah system practised among the Muslims as well as the non-Muslim communities and ghoonghat (veil or headscarf) worn by married Hindu, Jain and Sikh women (which solves the purpose of a burqa, chador, hijab, jilbab, khimar, niqab or shayla worn by Muslim women), which did not find any place in the south for a considerable period of time. Such practices, even among the women of the non-Muslim communities of the north India was aggravated by the Muslim invasions and rule, and the religion of Islam in northern India, which prevented the majority of women from actively participating in the public sphere. According to some, the claim made by the advocates of the veil or purdah system that it was meant to guard women against wantonness and disrespect, carried an idea of self-deception. For example, Sikhism criticised the purdah system and Guru Amar Das (1479-1574) – the third Sikh guru, condemned it for he was against the seclusion and veiling of women.

In my previously published article – “Chaudhavin ka Chand – The Viewpaper”, I have briefly discussed the significance of the usage of purdah (Web). Purdah was used to separate the space of women (zenana) from the space of men (mardana) (Web). It was also the symbol of a space of seclusion, inclusion and exclusion (Web). It might not have much to do with a particular religion or faith but rather with the familiarity of interaction between the people of opposite sexes (Web). Purdah, curtains, blinds or screens did the work of segregation and exclusion, and also intervened in the relationships which could or could not culminate into marriage (Web). It was the thickness of the purdah which decided the level of interaction between men and women (Web). Both purdah and ghoonghat, being considered as the symbol of honor and shame for respectable married women, were adopted by women in order to avoid public gaze. Furthermore, they were also entwined with the concepts of safety, modesty and chastity of a woman. A woman’s bold act of unveiling herself, before someone besides her husband or a close relative, may not only suggest her act of extending friendship to someone but it may also be an act to prepare oneself for some significantly bigger roles to be taken up in the public sphere, outside the four walls of one’s house.

For example, in Medieval India, several women who belonged to the ruling class, such as Raziya Sultan (1205-40) – a capable ruler of the Mamluk dynasty (1206-1290); Rani Jindan (Jind Kaur) (1817-63) – the regent of the Sikh empire (1843-46), the youngest wife of the first ruler of the Sikh kingdom – Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) and the mother of Maharaja Duleep Singh (1838-93) – the last ruler of the Sikh kingdom, etc., have been known for casting off their veil in public.

Contrarily, Chand Bibi (1550-99) – the Muslim regent of Bijapur (1580-90) and Ahmednagar (1596-99), the daughter of Hussain Nizam Shah I of Ahmednagar and the wife of Ali Adil Shah I (1558-79) of the Bijapur Sultanate; best known for defending Ahmednagar against the forces of the Mughal Emperor – Akbar (1542-1605) in 1595, did not cast off her veil even while fighting on the battleground. Several Mughal women, who were known for attending the session court, participating in public sphere and possessing the right to issue official documents (firmans), such as Hamida Banu Begum (1527-1604) – the mother of Akbar; Mariam-uz-Zamani (1542-1623) – the first Rajput wife of Akbar and the mother of Jahangir (1592-1666); Nur Jahan (1577-1645) – the Empress Consort of the Mughal Empire, wife of Jahangir; Mumtaz Mahal (1593-1631) – the chief consort of Shah Jahan (1592-1666), niece of Nur Jahan; Nadira Banu Begum (1618-59) – a Mughal princess and wife of the crown prince – Dara Shikoh (1615-59) (the eldest son of Shah Jahan); a Mughal imperial princess – Jahanara Begum (1614-81) – the daughter of the fifth Mughal ruler – Shah Jahan; Roshanara Begum (1617-71) – a Mughal Imperial Princess and the younger daughter of Shah Jahan, etc., also never formally or publicly cast off their veil. The rules of purdah were extremely stringent during the Mughal period.

In terms of wearing ghoonghat or abiding by the purdah system, the only thing which could make sense could be that the donning or discarding of such practices was left completely to the woman’s prerogative, wherein nobody would dictate to her as to what she should or should not wear. In “Going the Whole Nine Yards: Vignettes of the Veil in India”, *The Veil: Women Writers on its History, Lore, and Politics*, Roxanne Kamayani Gupta writes that the double standard is based on the classic division between home and the world, between inner and outer realities, which plays out in traditional gender roles (63). Menfolk work outside the home where the social change requires at least a superficial adaption whereas, in contrast, the home, the psyche and the women’s bodies are still considered as sanctuaries in which the sari equals the tradition (63). The

same rule is applicable to the garments used as a veil by women. The act of veiling becomes a metaphor for the feminine itself, and for the way one enters into nature, into bodies, into life (62-3).

Participation of Women in Medieval Bhakti Movement

Although worn due to several practical reasons in some regions such as in order to protect one's face and hair from the harsh sunrays, winds or sand, or against extremely hot or cold climatic conditions, the veil also drew a so-called line of limitations between the women and rest of the society which would threaten to throw them into the hands of persecution, if or when crossed. This is also evident from the various incidents of the lives of those female bhakti-poets who were left stranded between their desire to follow the path of devotion and the call of their social and domestic responsibilities. For example, Lal Ded (1320-92), the female Kashmiri Shaivite bhakti-poet known for influencing the Sufi saint – Sheikh Noor-ud-din Wali or Nund Rishi (1377-1440), and also for her poems—vaakhs, was married at the age of twelve, but her married life was unhappy which made her leave the home at the age of twenty-four.

Similarly, Meera or Mirabai (sixteenth century) – a Rajput princess, who is widely known not just for her fearless disregard for the social and family conventions, but also for her devotion to the Hindu deity – Krishna (who she considered her husband), is said to have been persecuted by her in-laws (the royal house of Mewar) for her religious devotion. Meera is said to have taken to wandering and travelling like an ascetic to practise bhakti thereby leaving her royal life during her last days.

Likewise, Gangasati (twelfth/fourteenth century) – another Rajput female bhakti-poet of Western India, who composed several devotional songs in the Gujarati language faced restrictions, imposed upon her by her husband, on expressing her desire to attain samadhi.

Similarly, Kanhopatra (fifteenth century), a female bhakti-poet from the Varkari tradition of Maharashtra, who was a courtesan and dancing girl by profession, faced persecution when she chose to spend her life as a devotee of Vithoba rather than ending up becoming as one of the concubines of the Badshah of Bidar. Her ovis and abhangas speak of the struggle to strike a balance between her profession and bhakti. It is noteworthy that even if Kanhopatra could not successfully break the rules about the interaction of the participants of the bhakti movement and a certain subset of women that she was seen as a part of, she at least blurred those margins.

Another, female Varkari bhakti-poet from Maharashtra – Bahinabai (1628-1700), who was a Brahmin by birth, was married to a widower at a very young age, who despised her spiritual inclination but who finally accepted her chosen path of bhakti. Unlike most female-saints, who never married or renounced their married life for god, Bahinabai remained married her entire life. Her abhanga (hymn poetry) compositions in her autobiography – *Atmamanivedana*, written in Marathi, portray her compromise as being torn between her duties towards her husband and her devotion to Vithoba; and how she was subjected to verbal and physical abuse by the former.

Another female Varkari bhakti-poet – Muktabai (1279-97), bore the repercussions of the excommunication of her parents from the Brahmin society. She, along with her siblings – Nivruttinath (thirteenth century), Dnyaneshwar (1275-96)

and Sopan (thirteenth century), was again accepted into the Brahmin society on the condition that they would maintain celibacy throughout their lives.

Nirmala (fourteenth century), a female Mahar Varkari bhakti-poet from Maharashtra, the younger sister of Chokhamela (a Mahar Varkari bhakti-poet) (fourteenth century) and the wife of Banka (a Mahar Varkari bhakti-poet), was untouchable. She too regretted her married life and her abhangas describe the injustice meted out to her throughout her life by the rigid jati (caste) system which was prevalent in the then Indian society.

Soyarabai (fourteenth century) a female Mahar Varkari bhakti-poet from Maharashtra, the wife of Chokhamela too regretted being borne in an untouchable jati and accused god of forgetting the low-borne people – the facts that are very well-pronounced in her abhangas.

In contrast, the female bhakti-poets of the south exhibited an independent, rather a rebellious attitude, in their pursuit of bhakti. For example, Akka Mahadevi (c.1130-60) – a wandering Kannada bhakti-poet, who travelled singing the praises of the Hindu deity – Shiva (Channa Mallikarjuna), who she considered her husband, is said to have been married by arrangement to Kausika – a Jain King, but she chose asceticism over marriage for the king disrespected some conditions set by her. Her poetry explores the themes of rejecting mortal love in favor of the everlasting love of God. Like an ascetic of those times, she is said to have refused to wear any clothing — a common practice only among the male ascetics, but outrageous for a female ascetic.

The cautious attitude of the north Indian female bhakti-poets against their conservative society and the privileged position of the female bhakti-poets of the south are both clearly visible in their respective compositions. For example, several compositions of Andal (seventh/eighth century) and Akka Mahadevi are not publicly recited for their explicit erotic content. Some of Andal's verses express love for the Hindu deity – Vishnu, which is written with bold sensuality and shockingly fierce longing, hunger and probe. Unlike Meera, Akka Mahadevi takes the liberty to describe her love for Lord Shiva as adulterous, viewing her husband and his parents as impediments to her union with her Lord. She freely talks about cuckolding the husband with Shiva. She describes her relationship with the mortal man as unsatisfactory and compares it with the unfaithful thorns hiding under smooth leaves, and says that such mortals die and decay; and thus, deserve to be fed to kitchen fires. She expresses her tension of being a wife as well as a devotee and being unable to manage both the titles.

Unlike Ancient India, due to the purdah system in the north, a very small section of women, mostly, who belonged to the upper jatis or high class, could become educated in Medieval India – a fact which also affected the literary output of the women of the north. Still, it did not deter several illiterate women from composing bhakti compositions which were written down by others and collected posthumously. For example, Janabai (thirteenth century) was a female Marathi bhakti-poet who belonged to a low-jati and worked as a maid-servant in the house of Namdev's (1270-1350) father at Pandharpur. She composed around three hundred abhangas.

It was due to the purdah system in the north that an easy access to the holy texts and scriptures slowly began to be restricted only to the males who belonged to the upper jatis or high class. In contrast, Atukuri Molla (1440-1530) – a female Telugu poet, who ranks next only to Timmakka, belonged to the Kumar jati (potter), by birth. Atukuri was her parental family name. Being a single, unmarried woman who earned a living through pottery and poetry and whose mother died when she

was quite young, walked on the path of life which was not devoid of hurdles.

The article, “Molla – the Saint Poetess of Kadapa District”, mentions that Molla was of humble origin whose parents were ardent devotees of Shiva in his forms as Mallikarjuna and Mallikamba of Srisailam, and were the initiated disciples of the Siva Math (Web).

In her book review, “Balancing Pottery and Poetry: Molla Ramayana”, C. V. Bhuvanewari writes:-

The linguistic nationalism, pride in one’s mother tongue was spreading by 16th century all over the world (Web). Sanskrit was considered to be pedantic and outdated (Web). The upper caste males used Sanskrit for communication purposes (Web). The males of low castes, women, irrespective of caste, used... the Bhasha for writing, which was their spoken language (Web).

In “I am no Scholar”, Women Imagine Change: A Global Anthology of Women’s Resistance from 600 B.C.E. to Present, Eugenia C. DeLamotte, Natania Meeker and Jean F. O’Barstate that in all cultural traditions, some women find ways to participate in the creation of knowledge and, when they do, they often do so in distinctive ways (122). This is applicable to Molla too. She is known to have translated the Sanskrit Ramayana into Telugu and composed her own version entitled –Molla Ramayana.

According to Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, legends say that Molla accomplished the challenge of writing her own version of Ramayan – one of the major epic poems of the Hindu faith, given to her by the Brahmin court poets of the third emperor of the Tuluva dynasty (1491-1570) – Krishnadevaraya (1471-1529) of the Vijayanagara empire (1336-1646), in a mere few days (Tharu and Lalitha qtd. in DeLamotte et al 122). Despite her being invited to sessions court and getting an opportunity to recite her Ramayana in front of Krishnadevaraya and his poets, she refused to dedicate her work to the king or any other powerful person thereby boldly defying a customary for the poets of her time.

Though Molla was Shaivite (devotee of the Hindu deity – Shiva), who, along with her father, was a member of the Veershaivs movement of the Deccan, but she wrote the story of Rama, who is considered as an incarnation of the Hindu deity – Vishnu.

Bhuvanewari opines that Valmiki’s Ramayana seems to be only a platform for Molla for striking debates on various social and cultural issues, and for educating people (Web). She correctly points out that in order to perpetuate and strengthen its social system the patriarchal Indian society has the silencing, suppressing or making invisible the contribution of women, which becomes more visible regarding the linguistic and literary scene, for its agenda (Web). The sixteenth century in India was characterised by the rise of poetry in a large number in various regional languages, especially, bhakti poetry (Web). Its distinguishing feature which flooded the society was that the writers were mainly women and that too of the low castes, artisans, potters, etc. (Web). When such people started writing on a large scale, they had to use the Bhashas for this purpose (Web). Therefore, women not only wrote poetry at the very origin of Bhashas, but also contributed to its development (Web).

What is true for most of the medieval bhakti-poets is also true for Molla. Their diction is simple, yet appealing. Also, they were way too modest to accept the greatness of their work. For example, Bhuvanewari quotes Molla:-

Molla pretends to be ignorant about the poetic craft (Web). She says: I am no scholar, I know no rules, I am no expert (Web). She is aware of such complicated issues of grammar and semantics like the distinction between loan words

and native stock, rules of combination and vocabulary (Web). She is competent to discuss phonetics, case relations, roots of verbs and figure of speech, meter and prosody, and their role in obtaining effective poetry (Web). She puts on false humility: ‘untrained in composing poems and epics’, ‘Yet I do write poems’ (Web).

According to Tharu and Lalitha, such movements were led by artisan groups resisting the domination of the upper classes (qtd. in DeLamotte et al 122). Such resistance groups encouraged participation in rituals regardless of caste or sex, wrote in regional languages to maximise their accessibility to many people, and used everyday imagery (122). The poetry from these movements circulated for hundreds of years before being written down; and new oral as well as written versions appeared continuously for years (122). While the political origins and impact of the bhakti-poets are still a matter of debate among contemporary scholars, there is little doubt that many of them were female bhakti-poets (122). Though such movements opened space for women to combine their learning with their religious vocation, but still, their orthodox views sparked retaliation (122).

In the case of Molla, she “seems to have been consciously arguing for a new poetic diction that would appeal to the immediacy of the senses as much as to the learning of scholars (122). Like several other female bhakti-poets, Molla follows the convention of diminishing one’s own abilities adhered to by men as well as women but more often pronounced among women writers, yet goes on to produce a much-acclaimed work (122). Her rhetorical self-deprecation, which is echoed by several women writers at several places, represents one avenue by which women justified transgressing boundaries [. . .](122). Probably, these are some of the reasons which made her version of the popular epic more available.

Like Molla was the first woman poet in Medieval Andhra Pradesh, Chandravati (1550-1600) was the first woman poet in Medieval Bengal. Unlike Molla, she belonged to an upper-jati but was an impoverished Brahmin. She belonged to a small village in the eastern Bengal (now, Bangladesh) and had never been exposed to the urban culture or environment of her times. Just as Molla, she was also a devotee of Shiva but still, wrote the story of Rama. She too remained single and unmarried throughout her life and earned her living by writing poetry like her Telugu contemporary. Chandravati also wrote a short Ramayana in poetic verses in her mother tongue – Bangla. She also moved away from the tradition by discarding Sanskrit as a literary language in favour of the vernacular. But unlike Molla, her choice of one’s regional language does not hold much significance since it was not a conscious and subversive decision for Chandravati because her knowledge of Sanskrit was minimal. Linguistically speaking, she was a woman who hailed from North India whose Ramayana failed to give her as much success as her Telugu counterpart.

In her article, “When Women Retell the Ramayan”, Nabaneeta Dev Sen points out that out of the thirty-eight basic things upon which most epic narratives of the world are based, only nine of them are associated with women (18). According to her, the ideals of the epic world obviously do not have much to share with women, nor do the women enjoy the heroic values singing the glory of other men—armed men, to be precise (18). She opines that there is very little that the male epic poets can do about portraying the women in their work—other than getting them abducted or rescued, or pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or other (18). As a matter of fact, the study of a fragment of human past, which revolves around men in power alone, yields no balanced picture of any society, polity and economy at regional,

national or international level. Hence, there should be alternate ways of not only reading the classical epics and history but also of rewriting, rephrasing retelling and rethinking upon them.

Sen states the four major ways of retelling, rephrasing or rewriting a classical epic by a woman. Firstly, it could be retold, rephrased or rewritten as it is by borrowing the traditional eyes of the male epic poet just as Molla does in her sixteenth-century Telugu Ramayan (18). Secondly, it could be told as it is by looking at it with women's eyes, as Chandravati does in her sixteenth-century Bengali Ramayan(18). Thirdly, an ideological viewpoint could be borrowed like the Telugu feminist-Marxist – Mupapala Ranganayakamma (1939-present) does in her Ramayan Vishabriksham (1974) by rewriting the Ram tale from the Marxist point of view (18). Lastly, one could tell one's own story through Sita's story like the village women of India have been doing for centuries (18).

Sen opines that unlike the first three categories of retelling, rephrasing and rewriting a classical epic, the last category of the village women is the most direct, upfront and unconventional way for the village women care neither for the court nor for the critic and they are not out to change the world (18). They simply continue singing for themselves (18).

Ranee Kumar, in her article, "A Tale Simply Told", writes about Molla, who on rewriting her own version of the epic, states in the initial lines, "Ramayanam has been written many times but does one stop eating food just because it is eaten every day? (Web) So too is the story of Rama (Web). You can write, read and love it any number of times" (Web).

Sen pin-points what happens when a woman rewrites, rephrases and retells a classical epic from a woman point of view; how it is received by the male readers and audiences. She exemplifies this by citing the examples of Chandravati and Molla. On one hand, Chandravati composed a Ramayan which told only the story of Sita and criticised Ram from a woman's point of view (18). Her work is called 'weak' by the literary critiques despite the fact that Chandravati supported the view that women's traditions held an alternative perception of the Indian civilisation.(18). On the other hand, the Brahmins did not allow Molla's work to be recited in the royal court (18). Just as the myth of Ram has been massively exploited by the patriarchal Brahminical system for constructing an ideal Hindu male, the myth of Sita to has been built up as an ideal Hindu female, for serving the system (18).

The canonised literature in the south seemed more favourable to the female saints whose writings found a place in it. For example, the twelve Alvar saints of South India, who are known for their affiliation to the Srivaishnavam tradition, have Andal Ranganayaki Alvar as their only female saint-poet. Though her jati is unknown she is credited with the Tamil literary works such as Thiruppavai and Nachiar Tirumozhi which are in verse form. They are still recited by the devotees during the winter festival of Margazhi. Some scholars even consider her to be the Tamil counterpart of Radha of Vrindavan.

Similarly, Akka Mahadevi was one of the early female poets of the Kannada language, an inspirational woman for the Kannada literature and the history of Karnataka, and a prominent personality in the Veershaiv Bhakti movement of the twelfth-century. Known for her Vachana poems (a form of spontaneous mystical poems), and Mantrogopya and Yogangatrividhi, she was fondly called Akka (an "elder sister") – an honorific given to her by the male Veershaiv saints such as Basavanna (1105-68), Siddharama (c.1150) and Allama Prabhu (twelfth-century). Though her non-conformist ways caused much anxiety in a conservative society due to which even her eventual guru – Allama Prabhu had to initially face difficulties in enlisting her in the gatherings at Anubhava Mantapa but later, her contribution to the spiritual discussions were widely praised.

Likewise in Telugu Literature, Tallapaka Tirumamma or Timmakka (fifteenth-century) – the wife of singer-poet Annamacharya (1408-1503) and a Brahmin by birth, is considered to be the first Telugu woman poet whose Subhadra Kalyanam with one thousand one hundred seventy poems about the marriage of Arjuna and Subhadra, gained her a due place in the canonised Telugu Literature.

Unlike the courtesans of North India such as Kanhopatra, Muddupalani (eighteenth century) – a devadasi and courtesan of Tanjore, who later became a consort of Pratap Singh – the Maratha Ruler of Tanjore was an acknowledged poet, dancer, musician, literary scholar and translator of her time who received immense royal patronage. Her Radhika-Santvanam is a well-known work which gained her posthumous recognition too. It echoes her Vaishnavite point of view. Her Ashtapadi – the Telugu translation of Jayadeva's – Gita Govind, and the Telugu translation of Andal's Thiruppavai, also exemplify her Vaishnavite sentiments.

Similarly, Madhuravani (seventeenth century) was a female scholar and court poet of Raghunatha Nayak – the king of Tanjore. Her Vaishnavite devotion reflects in the fact that she translated the king's Ramayan into Sanskrit. Unlike her, no female poet or scholar neither received such royal patronage nor was historically ever assigned such position in North India.

Thus, it can be said that the marginalisation of the female bhakti-poets did not depend primarily on their identity as women, but several other factors also contributed to it such as their social status, economic condition, area of influence, etc.

Women Sufis in the Indian Subcontinent

There were several advantages that the female adherents of Islam and Sufism benefitted from unlike the non-Muslim females of Medieval India. Muslim widows and divorcees could remarry. Married Muslim women even had the liberty to initiate their divorce. They did not have to become sati after the death of their husband. But they too did not have the right to choose to marry a person of their choice though their consent was necessary at the time of their marriage. Literacy rate among the Muslim women was also comparatively higher than that of the non-Muslim women for it was necessary for them to be able to read the Quran – the factor that was responsible for a considerable amount of literary output mostly by the high-class Muslim women in Medieval India, often under pseudonyms. For example, the writings of the Mughal princess – Gulbadan Begum (1523-1603) – the daughter of the first Mughal ruler – Babur (1483-1530); a Kashmiri Mystic and poet Habba Khatoon (sixteenth century) – the wife of the ruler of Kashmir – Yusuf Shah Chak (r.1579-1586); Nur Jahan; a Mughal noblewoman – Jana Begum (seventeenth century) – the daughter of Abdul Rahim Khan-i-Khana (1556-1627) – one of the navratnas of Akbar; Jahanara Begum; Roshanara Begum; the Mughal princess – Zeb-un-Nisa (1638-1702) – the eldest child of the sixth Mughal ruler – Aurangzeb (1618-1707), etc., in forms of autobiographies, biographies, diaries, letters, memoirs, poetry, etc.

In "In Search of Equivalence: Interaction between Sufism and Hinduism", The Foundations of the Composite Culture in India, Malik Mohamed explains that just as a moral and spiritual way of life, a current of thought with a universal approach, Sufism's appeal found an exceptionally congenial ground for its growth and spread in India (140). No doubt that this was why the number of the venerated female Sufi saints found in the Indian subcontinent far exceeds the number of the female Sufi saints venerated posthumously anywhere else in the world.

In “Femalesufi sanits of the Indian subcontinent”, Female Stereotypes in religious Tradition, Netty Bonouvrie pinpoints that though only a few names occur in the official annals still, many shrines are dedicated to female Sufi saints (Annemarie Schimmel qtd. in Bonouvrie 108). In Sindh, Pakistan, many women became fakiranis (religious mendicants), Sufi saints, murshids, shaykhas, etc., and the tariqas like Qadiriyya and Rahmaniyya admitted women too (R. F. Burton qtd. in Bonouvrie 111). Rabia (eighth-century female Sufi mystic) argued that the woman who has successfully followed Sufism’s mystical path is considered by men, to be a man (qtd. in Bonouvrie 111).

According to Ursula King, it is the adventure of following the mystical path which gave women a possibility to free themselves from social ties and in obliterating the distinction between men and women (qtd. in Bonouvrie 111). King states that the spiritual authority of these women was recognised even by what she calls “anti-feminist ascetics” (111). As per her, it is the dominant and rocentric perspective that should be held responsible for describing such women as men (111).

It was Rabia’s footsteps that were followed by many other women who came to be recognised as the spiritual authorities within the mystical tradition of Islam and came to be venerated as saints posthumously (Bonouvrie 112). Despite the negative views of women in the Sufi literature, it was possible for them to attain similar positions as men within Sufism (112). Many a time, the female Sufi saints could serve as authorities too (112). The difference between male and female mystics with Sufism was not qualitative but only quantitative (E. Gursoy Naskali qtd. in Bonouvrie 112).

Various Sufis, including women, also faced persecution at the hands of the state or religious authorities, either due to the self-vested interests of the latter or because of some political reasons. For example, Jahanara Begum, like her elder brother – Dara Shikoh was also a practicing Qadiri Sufi and a poet but she was persecuted by Aurangzeb for taking side with the former. Another Mughal princess – Zebun-Nisa, whose compositions reflect a Sufi ideology, a talented musician and poet, was also sentenced to life imprisonment by Aurangzeb despite being his favourite daughter.

At times, even the Sufi women were also compelled to make a choice between one’s social and domestic responsibilities and aesthetic aspirations. For example, Bibi Jamaal Khatun (d.1647) of Sindh was a Qadiri Sufi who, after ten years of marriage, separated from her husband and secluded herself in her room to devote herself to a life of asceticism, prayer and meditation.

There is also a distinction between the female Sufi saints who are venerated because they are related to a male saint (sister, daughter, wife, mother, etc.) and the female saints who are venerated in their own right (F. Mernissi qtd. in Bonouvrie 114).

In comparison to those of men, there have been comparatively quite a few accounts when women Sufi saints were offered the kirka (robe) or Khilafat (Caliphate) or officially canonised as murshids, piris, sayyidas, shaykhas, etc. were officially canonised.

In *Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India*, Kelly Pemberton states that as rare as such accounts are, they obviously suggest the practical necessity of continuing a spiritual lineage has enabled some women to breach the boundaries which otherwise prevent them from assuming formal roles of authority in what are traditionally male spheres of influence. She further elaborates that during the formative period of institutional Sufism, Khalifas (Caliphs) used to serve as the representatives of their shaikhs (Sufi master) and engage in the work of expanding the tariqas (Sufi orders), but their roles naturally remained

quite subordinate to and within the shadow of the pir. To summarise, it can be said that out of many Khalifas appointed by the shaikh, few do the work associated with spiritual guidance but for assuming the responsibility of piri-muridi (master-pupil) is like getting a ticket to power where one can exercise one's authority over others. It seems to be the reason behind the investiture of women as Khalifas was accepted within many establishments of Indian Sufi tariqas.

The denial of women Khalifas' authority to make murid is related partially to nomenclature for she could recognise others as being equipped to assume the role of guidance but there were no actual mechanisms by which she could act upon such recognition. Moreover, her recognition of others might be accepted but there would be no acknowledgement of her act by the representative members of an order as a unit. She can make Khalifas but not murids.

Pemberton quotes Manzar ul-Haque who clarifies that while the position of Khalifa is open to women, the nature of Khalifa's role does not oblige a woman to sustain close personal ties with those who come to seek her guidance, just as in the case of a pir, who is supposed to maintain an intimate relationship with his closest murids.

Whether or not Sufism has looked upon women more favourably than the "orthodox" Islam dominated by men, it would be more appropriate to call its attitude towards women ambivalent (Bonouvrie 110).

Bhakti and Sufism: A Cosmopolitan Outlook

The shifting paradigms in the contemporary research studies show that the scholars have started to theorise the movements – Bhakti and Sufism in the light of cosmopolitanism. In "Problems in the Field of Cosmopolitanism", The Sociology of Cosmopolitanism: Globalization, Identity, Culture and Government, Kendall, Woodward and Skrbis remark that the idea of cosmopolitanism has 'a nice, high-minded ring to it' by quoting the American historian – Gertrude Himmelfarb, but while the inherently abstract utopian value of the term makes a good promise, it does not necessarily make a good analytical tool (13).

In "Cosmopolitan Openness", The Ashgate Research Companion to Cosmopolitanism, Zlatko Skrbis and Ian Woodward clarify that though the ideas of cosmopolitanism and openness are in a symbiotic relationship, the relationship is not merely a mechanical one and that one should not think of it as being one of the continuums. . . (53). This means that openness, as an idea, serves as a kind of an epistemological principle of cosmopolitanism for its limits and fixates the definitional horizon by reminding us that beyond openness lies a sphere of all things un-cosmopolitan (53). Still, its place in the discussions of cosmopolitanism is somewhat obscured: it is implicitly rather than explicitly spoken about; it refers to something abstract rather than concrete and articulated; it captures the 'spirit' of an idea of cosmopolitanism rather than its manifestations (53). This can be understood better with the help of the exceptions of Medieval Bhakti. Though, the Medieval Bhakti phenomenon is hugely marked by its cosmopolitan traits and known for its openness but its certain examples still remain questionable such as several acts of exclusion in the movement – most importantly, the exclusion of women from the canonised literature.

The anthology – *Panchvani* (Five Groups of Utterances) is a selection of the compositions of Namdev (1270-1350) from Maharashtra, Kabir from the Uttar Pradesh region, Ravidas or Raidas (1450-1520) from Rajasthan, Haridas (b.1450/51) from Bengal and Dadu Dayal (1544-1603) from Rajasthan, in a somewhat fluid verse, which includes no female bhakti-poet's compositions.

Dadu Anubhav Vani dedicates an entire ang (part/chapter) – “Nishkaam Pativrata ka Ang” (Chapter/Part/Section of the Virtuous, Immaculate Wife) to the saakhies (two-line verses) composed by Dadu in which he imagines himself to be the loving wife of his beloved god. Despite the usage of such imagery, Dadu Panth still witnesses various examples of discrimination against women. Dadu Dayal had several female shishyas such as Hawwa Bai – his wife, his twin daughters of Dadu Dayal namely Sabhakumari and Roopkumari (also, “Yugal Bai”), Rani Bai, etc. Though women shishyas are still found in Dadu Panth no woman, till date, has ever been assigned the pedestal of the head of the panth. Females are not allowed to enter into the nij-mandir (the place where the scripture is placed and worshipped) in a Dadu Dwara (just as a gurudwara in Sikhism). That is why no female can perform the rituals like an offering of flowers, perfume, food and arti (aarti or aarthi) in the nij-mandir which is similar to Hinduism where the ritualistic performances that are ascribed to a Brahmin priest cannot be performed by his female counterpart.

In “Mirabai: Inscribed in Text, Embodied in Life”, Vaisnavi: Women and the Worship of Krishna, Nancy M. Martin quotes Monika Thiel-Horstmann who remarks that a group of Dadupanthi nuns in Nagaur, Rajasthan, who have a special dedication to Mirabai, sing here padas drawing parallels between her devotion and that of their sect’s founder, Dadu Dayal but they do not constitute an independent panth (Horstmann qtd. in Martin 32).

In fact, historically speaking, almost all the religions in the world have cast women as sinners and temptresses. The fairer sex has been known to have been sequestered or contained for the fear that they might raise male lust and cause disorder in society. Primarily speaking, women are objectified as sexual creatures whose appearance invigorates desire. As per the Hindu worldview, nature is Maya or illusion, insofar as it is limited (Gupta 62). In Hinduism as well as Buddhism, divinity appears both males as well as female forms wherein nature holds a sacred status (62). Therefore, feminine is conceived as, and conceives nature (62). At the core of the tantric worldview, the secret that is metaphorically understood by both the religions is that the body and embodiment are feminine (62). All the souls, as long as they are embodied, veiled in the matter, one with and born of the Mother, are considered originally feminine (62). All matter is also feminine (62). The spiritual art forms of India such as dance, painting, literature, music, sculpture, etc. express a preoccupation with the feminine, the body, and the erotic as a mode of mystical awareness (62). If one’s spirit is imagined as masculine, then in relation to the divine all creation is feminine (62). Gupta exemplifies Sri Vidya – India’s preeminent tantric tradition which expresses this philosophy most profoundly in its elevation of the divine feminine (62). When the phenomenal world is focused, the entire cosmos takes the form of Sri – the goddess as embodied nature (62).

Maya or the world of illusions, with which several feminine attributes are associated, has been derogatory addressed to by several bhakti-poets. For example, Kabir and Dadu have called it a whore, concubine, etc. in many of their compositions. To put it in Vijaya Ramaswamy’s words, it is likely that Kabir’s and Dadu’s references to woman as Maya, as ‘a sweeper woman of the streets who is concubine of many sweepers’, ‘a female scavenger’, ‘Maya appearing as the beauty of gold and women’, ‘the wife of one but became the wife of many’, ‘a harlot having many mates’, etc. are not blanket statements but particularised metaphors in the context of the male spiritual aspirant for whom any contact with the other gender would be a sort of destruction. It could be because a woman, in those times, was considered impure because of her monthly menstrual periods (130). It could be because of a woman’s powers of procreation and attraction, which were looked upon as the greatest

deterrents to a man's spiritual progress, which made the male saints, as great as Kabir and Dadu Dayal, refer to Maya, in this manner, in their compositions (130).

Another reason behind the exclusion of women from the canonised literature of the Bhakti movement and the Sufi movement of the subcontinent can be attributed to the broad gender-based division of the public and private spheres. In "Cosmopolitanism and Feminism in the Age of War on Terror: A Twenty-First Century Reading of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*", *Cosmopolitanism in Practice Global Connections*, Gillian Youngs writes that the public sphere has historically been, and still continues, to be significantly dominated by men; gendered patterns of paid work and institutional influences are largely associated with masculine identities (146). Contrarily, the private sphere like those of domesticity, unpaid social reproductive work and care, has historically been the residual realm associated largely with women and the feminine identities (146). This is where the systems of patriarchy assert male power across public and private, not least through gendered access to resources; and gender identities which reflect the public (male) over private (female) hierarchy (146). To understand this, several examples from Sikhism can be quoted. In *Guru Granth Sahib*, there is a wide usage of the imagery of "the Lord Husband and Soul Bride", but no composition by any female saint, Bhagator Bhatt (not even Meera) has been included in it. Though several compositions of many male saint-poets from the regions of Bengal, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, etc. have been included in the scripture their contemporary female saint-poets have been absolutely ignored and overlooked.

If the reason behind the exclusion of Meera from the *Adi Granth* was her being a Sagun saint-poet (the Sikh scripture includes the compositions only of the nirgun saint-poets), then it is not true for there are two compositions in the scripture by the Sagun saint-poet – Jaidev, known for his *Gitagovinda* (one is in *RagaGujri* and the other one is in *Raga Maru*).

In "Bani Sri Jaidev Ji Ki", *The Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib: Sikh self-Definition and the Bhagat Bani*, Pashaura Singh analyses that Meera's hymn is another textual problem in the *Adi Granth* drawing great scholarly attention (145). He explains that though it is written in the *Kartarpur* volume in a different hand but has been deleted with a pen (145). His observation indicates the intervention of more than one scribe. He writes:-

Obviously the hymn was originally present, but was subsequently deemed unworthy of inclusion and hence was crossed out (145). All copies of the *Banno* version of the *Adi Granth* include this hymn (145).

Meera's hymn is in "Raga Maru" with Krishna bhakti as its central theme (145). The lotus-eyed Lord (*kaval nainu*) is an epithet for Krishna who was the object of Mira Bai's special worship (145-6). Her further employing an expanded version of her signatures – 'Meera's Lord the mountain-lifter' (*mira giradhar suami*) clearly indicates Krishna's image as a mountain-lifter who she holds most dear (146). Thereafter, her hymn's focus is the theme of the pangs of separation from the divine Beloved – Krishna (146). Then the intensity of this anguish reaches its climax in the symbolism of sharp arrows afflicting wounds in the body (*tikhan tir bedhi sarir dur gaio mai/laggio tab janio nahin abbi na sahio jai ri mai//*) (146). The phrase 'quenched the fire of my body' (*tan ki tapat bujhai*) points towards the erotic nature of Meera's love for Krishna (146). It should be noted that the erotic symbolism in the composition of the Sikh Gurus is toned down from the romantic love expressed by Meera in her poetry (146). I am playing hide and seek with him, robed in this smock of five colors (Meera qtd. in Singh 146). Disguised as I was, he caught me, and beholding his beauty I made myself over to his body and soul (Meera qtd. in Singh 146).

As per Singh, such an erotic symbolism is the reason as to why Guru Arjan Dev excluded it from the scripture (146). But this argument does not seem acceptable for several compositions in the scripture have much more intense erotic symbolism depicted in them.

Singh brings forth another argument which emphasises the fact that it was Meera's stress upon the Krishna bhakti which is contrary to the Sikh's devotional approach towards the non-incarnated Akal-Purakh (146).

The last reason which Singh gives for explaining the exclusion of Meera is the process of selection of the Bhagat bani which highlights both inclusive as well as exclusive aspects of Guru Arjan Dev's editorial policy (147). Guru Arjan Dev's policy intended to keep the Sikh tradition aloof from the Vaishnava influence (146). Hence, the selection logic favours those poems of the medieval Bhagats which stress their gun religiosity and social equality, conforming to the Sikh gurus' line of thinking (147).

Another prominent fact in the scripture is that it can be made out as to which guru composed which composition on the basis of the numbering of "Mehla" or "Mehl" (the term derived from the term 'Mahila' which means a "lady"). The term could have been used to refer to the Sikh gurus for the wide usage of the imagery of "the Lord Husband and Soul Bride". Still, there is no composition in the scripture by any actual lady or woman. It was in this patriarchal and gender-oppressive atmosphere that Sikhism claimed opposing gender inequity and ensuring an equal status to women as that of men, almost in all the spheres but still, the Sikh women have been hugely bypassed by the history.

In "Sikh Women: Bypassed by History but Why?", I. J. Singh exclaims that though the mainstream history informs about the Sikh women like Rani Jindan, Mai Bhag Kaur or Mata Sahib Devan, Chand Kaur, etc. but the published record about them is no more than a couple of inches of print (Web). He also puts up the questions, "Have we not, in fact, written women out of our history? (Web) Should women really have no place in our memories and no role in shaping our spiritual lives?" (Web) He goes ahead to comment that the traditional Hindu caste system which has penetrated into all existing religions in India, including Islam, Christianity and Sikhism, and exemplifies the Sikh Code of Conduct (Sikh Rehat Maryada), codified formally in the mid-twentieth century, to point out the gender inequity in Sikhism (Web). Though, the code has an intriguing clause that requires "a Sikh father to marry his daughter only to a Sikh", but it sets forth no dicta regarding marrying a son to a Sikh/non-Sikh bride (Web):-

A quick reading makes the blood boil at such a seemingly rank injustice against women, for it limits a young woman's choices of a marriage partner but not a young man's (Web). Ergo, it becomes critical that a young woman should marry an observant Sikh so that she, too, retains Sikhi and then do her progenies (Web). A provision on who a son should marry is unnecessary because no matter whoever he marries, his wife comes to adopt his religious ways, if there were any (Web).

It could have been codified in the backdrop of the partition of India in 1947, for conserving the Sikh community in the strictly patriarchal society of India, when abductions, rape and forced conversions of numerous Sikh women into Islam, were on the rise. Since the Sikh community of the Indian subcontinent badly suffered the partition (other than the Hindu and Muslim communities), especially, the Sikh women and children, therefore such a codification could be a necessity of that time; but since then, the code has not been amended yet. The author calls the code "arcane and outdated" (Web). Moreover, he exclaims, "Good heavens, we won't even let the women perform keertan on a regular basis, and in some gurdwaras never

(Web). But they can cook langar for zillions (Web).”

A blogger, Gurumustuk Singh, similarly points out in his blog – “Women in Sikhism: Gender Inequality” that “how can a religion with a core belief of gender equity not justify allowing Sikh woman to play Gurbani kirtan in Harmandir Sahib or certain sevas (services) being reserved exclusively for men” (Web).

The imaginaries of cosmopolitanism which are primarily locked into the public sphere have traditionally been shaped by masculine characteristics (Youngs 146). A familiar historical cosmopolitan archetype could be that of a lone male figure standing on the prow of a ship looking out across the waters and destinations to come, with a sense of being in command of all he surveys, with freedom of movement and thought, being excited about all he is yet to discover and how he relates it to what he has discovered so far (146). Contrarily, the feminist perspectives interrogate the gender assumptions of those dominant masculinist archetypes and their implications (147). Besides, they also investigate how their construction is linked to the social structures of gendered power and the ways through which they work for identifying man or woman as subject or object, and the diverse forms of empowerment and disempowerment which follow, including, contrasting, freeing and constraining of mind and body (147). Thus, cosmopolitanism can be looked at as part of understanding gendered (as well as other) power dynamics, and social and international positionings (147). Dynamics such as these and positionings relate to ‘self-transformation’. . .but such ‘self-transformation’ can be experienced as subject or object, and therefore, can be of quite different qualities (147). Such negligence towards women as subjects often tends to distort a proper understanding of historical processes and social reality. This can be exemplified through the article – “A Kaur Identity Crises”, in which Lakhpreet Kaur writes that the physical identity of the Singhs is quite simple (Web). Either the Singh choose to keep their dhari (beard) and wear a dastar, or they do not (Web). In fact, there are a few combinations of such options like wearing dastar but not having a dhari and vice versa, but generally, the visual portrayal of the Sikh male or Singhs is standard and universal (Web). Perversely, the Kaur physical identity is not so obviously put or well defined (Web). Some keep kesh while others do not; some cover their heads with dastars, patkas or chunis while others choose not to do so; some believe that different hairstyles can be tried while some stick to one (Web). Hence, it is necessary to point out that Sikhi (the Sikh teaching) defines no collective, communal idea of how a Kaur looks like (Web). This fact makes Kaur raise the question – “Are Kauras, as a collective, suffering from a physical identity crisis?” (Web)

CONCLUSIONS

The spirit of the greatest religious movements of Medieval India, Bhakti, Sikhism and Sufism, was quite cosmopolitan in nature, but the impeding social and cultural developments which they underwent, often let them imbibe the changes that are often associated with the negative stereotypes. That is why memory, history and hagiographies deliberately bypassed, ignored, neglected and even overlooked their unsung heroes – women.

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