

THE ROLE OF HINDU WOMEN SAINTS IN INDIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Women have always been 'stereotyped' as ideal wife and as child bearers due to the impact of patriarchy and gender socialization. However, there are women who have separated themselves from such stereotypification and have earned respect as women saints by abstaining from worldly pleasures. These women saints are accorded great honour and are even deified. Women saints protested against any kind of tradition, puridanticism, stereotypical norms and conventions of society and sought the path of salvation and spirituality which later helped them to gain popularity as scholars, thinkers and renowned artists.

Against this backdrop, the present research explores the role of Hindu Women Saints in India – MIRA BAI, AKKA MAHADEVI, BAHINABAI, SRI SARADA DEVI and the impact of their contribution on Indian society followed by their role in challenging the puridantical norms of patriarchal Hindu society. Methodologically, the present research has been carried out by using Secondary Data, especially Book Review of the aforementioned five major Hindu women saints of India. The findings revealed that all the Hindu women saints challenged the patriarchal norms of society and have also fought against casteism which is one of the major social menaces. Despite facing hurdles both in their personal life and their work, all of the women saints denounced the orthodox and obnoxious social problems - child marriage, casteism, puridantical social customs associated with marriage or marital status.

Keywords: *Saint, bhakti, MiraBhakti, Vachanas, madhuryabhav*

INTRODUCTION

The term 'saint' (Latin word) signifies *guru or acharya* (a spiritual guide) or *sant* (a virtuous person). India is a holy land where individuals have left their household and family in order to attain the goal of salvation and also for the purpose of seeking alms. In Hindu religion, women are socially constructed in a way that they are relegated to the domestic sphere, i.e, home. Since women are less capable of enduring any pain or tolerance, so they are socialized to stay secluded at home under the protection of their courageous father, brother or their husband. Women have always been 'stereotyped' as ideal wife and as child bearers due to the impact of patriarchy and gender socialization. However, there are women who have separated themselves from such stereotypification and have earned respect as women saints by abstaining from worldly pleasures. These women saints are accorded great honour and are even deified.

Women saints protested against any kind of tradition, puridanticism, stereotypical norms and conventions of society and sought the path of salvation and spirituality which later helped them to gain popularity as scholars, thinkers and renowned artists. They broke away from the limitations of their family and society in order to become '*brides of the Lord*'.

NATURE AND SCOPE OF RESEARCH:

The present research explores the following objectives;

1. It finds out the role of Hindu Women Saints in India – MIRA BAI, AKKA MAHADEVI, BAHINABAI and SRI SARADA DEVI.
2. It critically explores the contribution of women saints and their impact on Indian society.
3. It finds out whether these women saints have also been a victim of patriarchy or they have challenged the puridantical norms which are the products of patriarchal ideology through their contribution and works.

NATURE OF RESEARCH METHODOLOGY USED:

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The present research has been carried out by using Secondary Data, especially Book Review of five major Hindu women saints of India- MIRA BAI, AKKA MAHADEVI, BAHINABAI and SRI SARADA DEVI. Five books have been reviewed summarizing the contribution of five major women saints in India.

CONTRIBUTION OF HINDU WOMEN SAINTS IN INDIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Mira Bai:

One of the greatest women saints of India was Mira Bai. She was a devoted follower of Lord Krishna and regarded Him as her spouse. Being a stern follower and devotee of Lord Krishna, she sang beautiful bhajans (religious songs) and even vraja-bhasha mixed with rajasthani in order to show her love and devotion for Giridhara Gopala (Shri Krishna). Besides being a devotee and a singer of her Lord Krishna, she was also a renowned poetess and a major proponent of *Prema Bhakti* (Divine Love).

Mira Bai was born in A.D. 1504 in Merta district of Rajasthan. Her father was the descendant of Rao Jodhaji Rathor, who was the founder of Jodhpur. Mira Bai, who is regarded as an important figure in Hindi literature abstained from all kinds of worldly pleasure and abandoned her family in order to become a dauntless devotee (bhakta) of Lord Krishna. Mira Bai's compositions were articulated both in classical music and folk songs which became popular as bhajans sung by various renowned singers of India ----Lata Mangeshkar, Subholakshmi.

Mirabhakti:

The term 'bhakti' (devotion) has been derived from the root word '*√bhaj (to share)*' which denotes '*love for love's sake*'. Mira bhakti was defined as, "*natural, spontaneous and so strong that it enables her to break all bonds, confront all opposition*". Her strong affection for the Lord was regarded as natural in opposition to the social traditions, family norms and material pleasures which were regarded as artificial.

Mira Bai's bhakti towards God distinguished her from other male bhakts of her time who surrendered themselves to God's service and sought blessing; but Mira was the only bhakt who regarded God as 'madhuryabhav' where God was regarded as both lover and husband. Nevertheless, Mira bai who participated whole heartedly in the bhakti movement was given a forum to succeed as a poet-saint through her poetries, bhajans and her unconditional devotion for Lord Krishna.

Mira Bai's Resistance Against Marital Status:

Mira Bai rejected and protested against the norms and traditions which were associated with institutions - family, marriage, clan, caste. Although she disregarded social norms and conventions, Mira could attain the honour which was different from the honour of the powerful social and political elite who believed in adherence of norms and social customs.

By declaring herself as the wife of Lord Krishna and denying status of a wife to whom she was married (coerced by her family), Mira disregarded to portray her marital status. She even denied of any sexual relation with her husband as a result of which she deprived herself from the status role which was associated with the honour and respect that an Indian woman is known for: '*devoted wife and mother*'.

Mira Bai's Resistance Against Caste And Gender Inequality:

Mira Bai strongly rejected any kind of caste and clan restrictions and prescriptions. Her affection for the lower castes of society was reflected in her attachment with Raidas who was a chamar (leather worker) saint. Her sincere affection for the downtrodden sections of society could be reflected in her bhajans which were sang by these deprived castes where they strongly rejected casteist norms of Rajput family of Mewar. Mira even rejected the code of the warrior class of Rajput, the community where she belonged.

She rebelled against the conventional norms which controlled and regulated lives of women. Mira Bai resided in a society which was characterized by '*feudal ideas of duty and service to the master and lord*'. Mira Bai's strong devotion for her Lord followed by her refusal to

sacrifice herself on her husband's funeral pyre was a blow to the patriarchal norms of medieval Indian. She followed the path of bhakti which rejected any kind of caste and gender inequalities and helped her to form a new community which was based on '*shared beliefs and forms of worship*'.

Moreover, Mira Bai was successful in attaining an independent identity by denouncing all kinds of traditions and social customs. She always remains one of the legendary figure who challenged the traditional social roles by breaking away from the stereotypical identity of 'devoted wife and daughter' and sought to attain the path of salvation where her unconditional love and affection for Lord Krishna distinguishes her from any medieval and contemporary male and female saints of India.

Akka Mahadevi

The most predominant and prominent figure of the Virasaiva Bhakti movement in 12th century was Akka Mahadevi. She is regarded as one of the greatest saints of Bhakti movement and greatest mystic of India.

The twelfth century of the Christian era witnessed a major significance in the history of Karnataka. It was during this time that Saiva religion was reshaped by the great social reformer Basaveswara along with his fellow workers into a new form, *Virasaivism*. Among all the luminaries, Akka Mahadevi was the one who initiated the religious principle, "*Sarana sati Linga pati*" (Siva is the husband and devotee is his wife).

Akka Mahadevi continued being a staunch devotee of Lord Shiva after marriage where she spend the entire day by singing vachanas and staying with Siva's devotees. Although initially Mahadevi's husband accepted Mahadevi's condition regarding her devotion but later on he violated one of her conditions due to which she was bound to leave him along with her house carrying with her the *Linga* (the emblem representative of God Siva). She denounced all kinds of worldly pleasures and spend the entire life as a poet-saint and travelled around the world by singing praises of Lord Siva.

Vachanas:

The best contribution of Akka Mahadevi to Kannada Bhakti literature was the Vachanas in Kannada (didactic poetry). Akka Mahadevi's religious experience can be found only in her 'vachanas' which means 'sayings' in rhythmic prose or 'poetry'. "The mode of expression was widely used by the devotees of Virasaiva sect and formed their unique contribution to the Kannada literature" (TNS 30 (Mudaliar: 1991: pg 3). Mahadevi's vachanas has been regarded as one of the best vachanmkaras among the Sharana (s). A large portion of Veershaiva philosophy has been exposed in her vachanas. She had written a total of 360 vachanans which carried with it in-depth meaning and mysticism. All her vachanas were compiled and arranged according to Shatsthala (Six stage/phase system) and these compilations happened after Shoonya Sampadane.

Akka Mahadevi's Contribution Towards Women Empowerment:

She also worked for the empowerment and welfare of women. She launched a movement due to which she became an inspiration for women empowerment and enlightenment. She struggled throughout the entire 12th century for an egalitarian (caste-free) society and even fought against the emancipation of women and the downtrodden sections of society. As a woman of dignity, she was strongly against the belief that woman's body could be regarded only for the purpose of sensual pleasure and nothing else. She even rejected those men who approached her for sensual pleasure after she got detached from her married life claiming herself to belong only to Lord Siva.

Bahinabai

Bahinabai (1628-1700 A.D.) or Bahina or Bahini was a renowned Varkari female saint of the *bhakti movement* of Maharashtra. She was born in Deogaon in northern Maharashtra. She was the daughter of a Brahmin named Aooji Kulkarni and Janakibai. She was regarded as a disciple of her guru *Tukaram, a Varkari poet-saint*.

Since childhood, Bahinabai felt a deep spiritual attachment towards God. While her friends would come to play with her, she would be engrossed in deep thoughts of the Divine Being.

Bahinabai's Strong Resistance From Her Husband Against Her Spiritual Attachment:

Bahinabai's husband Gangadhar resisted against her staunch devotion towards God and her *guru*, Tukaram, who was a Shudra (lower caste). Being unbothered by his resistance, Bahinabai continued her bhakti towards the Lord and her guru. As a result of this behaviour, her husband abused her physically and decided to leave her to her parents when she was pregnant. However, he could not do so as he suffered from severe illness due to which Bahinabai had to stay back to look after him. Bahinabai, despite being physically abused by her husband continued to look after him and regarded him with due respect. This revealed her devotion and commitment towards her husband despite his severe tortures. Bahinabai believed that it was the duty of an obedient wife to serve her husband no matter how harsh he has treated her. She regarded that serving her husband is more important than devoting herself to (another) God. This portrayed her self-sacrificing, forgiving and her commitment towards her husband which was typical of the women in traditional India.

Resistance Against Her Devotion Towards Tukaram (Lower Caste):

Bhainabai along with her husband and family visited a pilgrimage at Dehu in order to pay respects to Tukaram after Gangadhar's illness. At Dehu, a Brahmin named Mambaji-Swami refused to provide any shelter to Bahinabai and her family after knowing that Tukaram is their guru. Mambaji-Swami could not accept the fact that they being Brahmins have regarded a Sudra as their guru.

Not being able to bear a Sudra's importance as a saint, Mambaji-Swami reported Appaji Swami of Poona to expel Tukaram from Dehu and impose punishment over him. As a result of this, Bahinabai along with her family were forced to leave the place.

Mambaji-Swami's protest against Tukaram, the Sudra's preachings revealed Mambaji's casteist mentality. Mambaji-Swami couldn't bear a lower caste individual to be as powerful as

him and also Bahinabai's unconditional devotion for the Sudra saint incited jealous rage in him. However, Bahinabai remained a staunch devotee of Tukaram even after such resistance. This incident portrayed the prevalence of casteism in traditional Indian society.

CRITIQUE OF BAHINABAI'S TEACHINGS:

Though Bahinabai faced criticisms for her religious experience, still she never limited the spiritual freedom of women and continued to uphold the authority of Brahmins. Her compositions (abhangs in Marathi) revealed the patriarchal ideals of a self-sacrificing and an obedient wife. She was unable to provide any fruitful solution to the problems of her female devotees. Instead, her works contained details of how she helped high-caste women by providing them with the model for religious living '*by integrating the role of the pativrata into the spirit of bhakti.*'

However, Bahinabai's strong devotion towards her guru Tukaram and God, her resistance against casteism (Mambaji-Swami), her obedience and commitment towards her husband despite receiving physical abuse from him ----- helped to portray her role as a woman saint of India.

Sri Sarada Devi

Sarada Devi born as Saradamani Mukhopadhyaya was the wife as well as the spiritual counterpart of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who was a Bengal mystic. She played a significant role in Ramakrishna movement and was addressed as Holy Mother (Sri Maa) by the followers of Ramakrishna order.

Born on 22nd December 1853, in the small village of Jayrambati, in the Bankura district of West Bengal, Sri Sarada Devi was extremely spiritual since childhood. Her parents, Ramchandra Mukhopadhyaya and Shyamsundori Devi dreamt about their daughter being born as a divine being. Since childhood, Sarada Devi expressed interest in playing with the toys of goddess Kali and Lakshmi and also worshipped them with flowers and *vilwa* leaves. Gradually,

she identified with the Divine Mother which fostered her religiosity and helped to increase spiritual lessons for the rest of her life.

Sarada Devi As The Obedient Wife And Her Service To Sri Ramakrishna:

Sri Sarada Devi followed all instructions of Sri Ramakrishna including the spiritual disciplines taught by him. She gave regular service to him by cooking and serving him with care and comfort and inculcated all teachings from him. Sarada Devi regarded Ramakrishna as her Teacher with the help of whom she could attain 'divine consciousness.' The bond that they both shared was eternal ----- mixed with feelings of love and reverence. Sarada Devi regarded Ramakrishna as one of her divine Master and instructed her disciples to worship him devotedly in order to attain his glimpse.

Sri Sarada Devi's Teachings:

Sri Sarada Devi's teachings are regarded as revelations of Saviour which possesses mystical power to influence any human being. Some of her influential teachings are:

1. *If you do not pray to God, what is that to Him? It is only your misfortune.*
2. *The conjunction of the day and the night is the most auspicious time for calling on God. The mind remains pure at this time.*
3. *The mantra purifies the body. Man becomes pure by repeating the name of God. So repeat His name always.*
4. *Practise meditation, and by and by your mind will be so calm and fixed that you will find it hard to keep away from meditation.*
5. *One cannot escape from the effect of one's past karma. But if a person lives a prayerful life, he gets off with only the prick of a thorn in the leg where he was to suffer from a deep cut.*
6. *Ordinary human love results in misery. Love for God brings blessedness.*
7. *Many take the name of God after receiving blows in life. But he who can offer his mind like a flower at the feet of the Lord right up from childhood is indeed blessed.*
8. *The goal of life is to realize God and to be always immersed in thought of Him.*

9. *First offer to God whatever you eat. One must not eat unoffered food. As your food is, so will be your blood. From pure food you get pure blood, pure mind and strength. Pure mind begets ecstatic love (prema-bhakti).*
10. *Everything depends on the mind. Nothing can be achieved without purity of the mind.*

Sarada Devi As A Symbol Of Ideal Motherhood:

Sri Sarada Devi ----- the Holy Mother is an ideal symbol of both ancient and modern motherhood. Despite being a homely Brahmin daughter and wife, her contribution as a woman saint and her deportment reveals her signs of dignity and her superhuman nature. Sarada Devi treated all individuals equally, irrespective of their caste, creed and colour. Many of her female devotees kept her as a prime example of a devoted wife and who served her family and society unconditionally. Her kindness, forgiving nature was divine and unattainable by any ordinary being. She helped the downtrodden at times of distress and even protested against any kind of injustice meted out to women. She raised her voice against a drunkard husband of one of her disciple and asked him to desist to which the man obeyed her orders being flawed by her calm nature. Thereby, Sri Sarada Devi is an incarnation and a true representative of God who even after her demise remained immortal among her devotees. Her devotion towards Ramakrishna, her love and concern for the masses, along with her spiritual consciousness helped Sri Sarada Devi to carve a niche in the spiritual as well as in the contemporary society.

CONCLUSION:

A question in mind arises, what triggered these women to become saints? Some of the married women may be unhappy in their marriages, some are not, some women are poor and some are rich, some are from upper castes while others are not. It cannot be said with validity.

It may be in search of social equality or purely in love for God or Spiritual Enlightenment may be the reason. History tells us that all these women saints believed in equality in terms of religion, caste and gender.

Saints across the world are respected by the people for their altruistic service to the society. Men who want to renounce the world can easily attain sainthood because the society does not put much pressure on them but it is not the same in case of hindu women saints. Married women sometimes are unable to leave their families and led the life of an ascetic due to their husband and children. They require permission from their family members in order to leave the family. Due to social pressures, families are perturbed and do not give permission to their daughters to go in the path of God.

Women, who have pursued in the path of God, were born with charismatic or special powers. Their families have always tried to restrain these powers. As we have seen in case of Meera Bai, Sarada Devi, Akka Mahadevi, Bahinabai, Anandamoyi Maa, whose family married them off to get rid of social stigma. But later on, the higher order of these women saints enforced their husbands to receive their thinking and enable them to serve the people and the almighty.

Many social reformers worked for the upliftment of women in India. Swami Vivekananda believed that the life and message of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi had great importance for the upliftment of women. In one of his letters to a brother monk, Swamiji wrote: *'Mother has been born to revive that wonderful Shakti in India; and making her the nucleus, once more will Gargis and Maitreyis be born into the world.'* On several events he expressed the wish to have separate women's monastic order on the lines of Ramkrishna Math, with Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi as its ideal and inspiration. Swamiji's wish became fulfilled on 2nd December 1954 when a new monastic order for hindu women saints known as Sri Sarada Math, was built on the eastern bank of river Ganga, near Dakshineswar Kali Mandir. Sri Sarada Math runs with Sanyasinis (Hindu women saints) and this institution worked for the upliftment and betterment of women and children in educational, cultural, religious, spiritual and medical spheres.

Everyone should have the opportunity to live the highest life. Women could affect a spiritual awakening in the world and they have the greatest impact on the future generations in our society. Still it is very challenging for a woman to achieve sainthood not only in India but also in the world. All these women saints attempted to bring an egalitarian society, they raised voices against the monopoly of Brahmins. They tried to teach people that everyone is equal in the eyes of God. They focussed more on socio-religious equality than individual salvation. Their teachings liberated both men and women from the chains of Brahminical orthodox

principles. These women saints challenged the Brahminical patriarchy and they broke the stereotypes and tried to live their lives as they pleased. The Bhakti movement led by several hindu women saints traced the root of feminism in India.

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