
MYSTIC MEERABAI AND THE WOMEN BAUL SINGERS: EXPLORING FEMINIST READINGS THROUGH SELECT TEXTS

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Abstract: Meerabai was born around 1560, daughter of a Rajput King, whose contribution to the Bhakti movement was primarily in her music: she wrote hundreds of songs and initiated a mode of singing the songs. Meerabai's compositions express her love and commitment to Lord Krishna, almost always as Krishna's lover. The songs speak of both the joy and the pain of love. Meerabai's willingness to sacrifice family veneration as well as traditional gender, family, and caste constraints, and to devote herself completely and ardently to Krishna, made her an important role model in a religious movement that stressed ecstatic devotion and that rejected traditional divisions based on sex, class, caste, and creed.

In the East of India on the other hand, in the villages of Bengal, Baul composers and singers, brought about a change in the social fabric. The Baul community has over ages attempted to uphold and propagate through their melodious songs and artful dance, their deep philosophical understandings and deep-rooted thoughts in removing caste and religious divides and re-affirming faith in humanity and love. Yet what is the status of the women Baul singers in life and performance and what are the texts they perform?

This paper aims to study the feminist approaches of Meerabai's mystical songs as well as the women baul singers in a growing community. The paper also aims to find out how; both Meerabai and the Baul singers have through their songs, revealed the innermost agony and thoughts of women.

All mysticism has the same goal: a direct experience of the divine. This paper also aims to look into the selected texts to find out whether in the singing of the Baul women, there is a reflection of the desire to transcend the here and now and reach a communion with the cradle of all creation. It is the experience emerging from the combined power of music and poetry leading the mind to a state of tolerance and acceptance and making the listener feel love and harmony.

These wandering minstrels - women steeped in Bhakti, used literature/poetry and music as the medium to voice their selves and break the social and cultural taboos at a time when Feminism was unheard of. The paper also attempts to explore the feminist aspect in their poetry, thereby, granting them a distinct cultural and gender identity.

Introduction: Bhakti as a concept means dedication and renunciation to the Divine. The Bhakti movement propagated the awareness that God dwells in each individual and one could attain Divinity through belief and devotion.

It was a movement that liberated both God and man (inclusive of woman) from the fetters of Brahminical domination. The Bhakti movement created a space where irrespective of caste, class and gender; one could have a personal connection with God and removed all intermediaries, rendering all Brahminical practices, and the role of Brahmin priests futile.¹

With everyone alike in the eyes of God, the movement carried religion and spirituality to the marginalized classes – specifically women, whose religious expression was restricted in many ways. They were side-lined and relegated to the kitchen and meant fit only for child-bearing. The Bhakti movement led to an awakening. Little surprise then that many women and lower-caste individuals joined the movement and expressed themselves with no inhibitions. The quest for salvation no longer required Sanskrit mantras and rituals, but incorporated dignity of the individual.

Meerabai, the Bhakti poetess of the 15th century and a Rajput princess, declined to consummate her marriage to Raja Bhojraj. She spent hours at the temple worshipping Lord Krishna. When Bhojraj died, Meerabai would neither wear the mourning attire, nor follow any of the rituals expected of a royal woman grieving the death of her husband, by committing Sati on her husband's pyre.

Meera is a fortifying ideal of a woman who refused to be intimidated. She has survived through the ages through her songs and poems, describing her utmost devotion and love towards Lord Krishna. She sang “Mere toh Giridhar Gopal Doosra na koyi...” (My Giridhar Gopal is only mine, and I belong to none other..) She also sang in glee, “main toh sanwari ke rang raachi...”

(I danced before my Giridhara.
Again and again I dance
To please that discerning critic,
And put His former love to the test.
I put on the anklets
Of the love of Shyam,
Worldly shame and family custom
I have cast to the winds.
I do not forget the beauty of the Beloved
Even for an instant.
Mira is dyed deeply in the dye of Hari.

Metaphorically, Mirabai points to the yearning of the personal self, atman, to be united with the universal self, or paramatma, which is the mystic poet's representation of Krishna.

I perceive Meera as the leading advocate of feminism in India, who stood for Bhakti, not only as a path of spiritual liberation, but also as a path of deliverance from male chauvinism, which was dominant in the Rajput kingdoms of her times.

“In the Bhakti movements, women take on the qualities that men traditionally have. They break rules of Manu that forbid them to do so. A respectable woman is not, for instance, allowed to live by herself or outdoors, or refuse sex to her husband- but women saints wander and travel alone, give up husband, children and family.”² Medieval India had an atmosphere of immense discrimination, sati, child marriage was rampant and patriarchy was held in the highest regard. Hence, women sought Bhakti to move out of the constrained domestic spaces and oppose patriarchal domination and Brahminical hegemony. The rejection of the power of the male figure that they were tied to in subordinate relationships became the terrain for struggle, self-assertion and alternative seeking.

Meerabai in many ways led the way for women in India to go beyond the limits of home and hearth in the quest for the Divine. With sheer valour befitting a Rajputani, tenacity and her devotion to the Divine, she refused to be tied down by derogatory societal norms. She displayed the true strength of a woman's spirit and created her own path to freedom to follow her heart.³

Meerabai is deeply aware of her feminine identity. She finds herself tossed to the common feminine destiny of suffering and her poems convey a deep sense of pain and despair caused by frustration in love. In a particular song, she says ‘Ho ji hari kit gaye..’ (O my Hari, where are you been hiding after having giving me hope...) She hopes for the final Union with the Divine and the end of all sorrows.

On the other hand, a little younger than Meerabai is the Baul community and their mystic songs. Bauls are the wandering minstrels of Bengal who lead the listeners to the blissful path of spirituality, beyond all divides of class, caste, creed, religion, race or nationality. The Bauls often flout the norms of the society by their divine madness. This cult expounds universal brotherhood Baul songs have been accorded ‘Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity’ on November 25, 2005 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

During one of my conversations with Parvathy Das Baul, she mentioned that there are many Baul songs where the spiritual seekers looks at life, death gender through the experience of Radha's love which is unconditional towards her beloved, she opens her heart. In one of the Baul song, Radha says, “Kala amaye pagol korili re, aar kemne ghore roi re... O dark Krishna, you have driven me crazy, how can I stay at home...Your love has bound me to you at the same time unbound me to the world...”

Even the male Baul poets believe that man must find the woman within...When one finds the opposite gender within himself, that is when one questions one's existence by delving into the beyond. And only divinity lies beyond.

The best example is the following song: Mon tumi purush ki nari bhebe pelam na kichu...amar bhetor ami ke ta khobor rakhli na..

(Is the heart man or woman? I have heard from the wise ones

That in this entire creation there is no man or woman...there is only Prakriti (nature)

The ideal 'Man' is One - eternal, unattached, formless and unwavering.

You have no clue who, the I is residing within the I...

In another song, Krishna says, "my beloved Radha

If I sink in your love, I'll never be able to go to work.

You know everything about me, but I know nothing about love. You will have to teach me to give up my ego to find the true love in Divinity!"

Jaggannath Das Baul calls his wife 'The Mother' and sings a traditional Baul song for the likes of her:

Jyamon Maye Jaanay Cheler Ador/ Oray Mon Ojana baloker kaalay

Only a Mother knows how much she adored you son/ O Spirit of Your unknown infancy

Shei Roop Guru Jaanay Shishwer ador/Monay Monay mishalyeelay

The Maker knows the love of his seekers, if you seek him in Your Spirit

This text implies that what is unknown to us and not to our physical creator our Mother, the Eve, is the love and care that went behind our upbringing. Life to re-amplify is a sacred moment of procreation that we simply cannot roll back. The Spirit that reigns within us during infancy and exactly when do we come to a realization as living, breathing, eating, walking beings capable of having our own strains of thinking and prejudices is unknown.

Manas Roy is among the Baul scholars of postmodern Bengal who lighted a crucial issue on longing motherhood among the female partners (Sadhan-sangini) of Bauls.⁴

Through Roy's research, we come to know about the statement of Padmabati Dasi, one of the 'rebel' Baul mothers who dared to take that courage to appreciate her forbidden motherhood.

"I am not doing any sin to bear children. All desires and sukh (pleasure) of a woman lies in her conceiving. The main aim of our sadhana is to get mahasukha. I am a woman, then a baul. I get my mahasukha in conceiving. Am I doing any sin to my religion?"

This question is valid.

It is the Bauls' belief to seek and return to that perfectly blissful state of 'nothingness', when our manifest physical self as we come to understand it after 'understanding' has grasped us, and sometime numbs us into semi consciousness, and often takes an unfair toll, is one that ideally should be assigned the back seat.

It is only in delving deep into actions of the highly disadvantaged Spirit that came with us and the actions of our Mothers, who cared for us and reared us to what we are today, may lead us to some 'clues' to our Maker if not 'answers'. The importance the Baul attaches to procreation is underscored.

The Baul Sadhana combined the Deha Sadhana and Domo Sadhana. Their religious beliefs and practices are based on an expression of body and mind (soul). They concentrate much of their mystic energies on the char - Chand (Four Moons) which are the four body fluids: urine, male semen, menstrual blood and faeces for their divining gain. They also concentrate on the nine doors that are the openings of the body, Prakriti which implies mainly WOMAN as well as nature and a control of breathing, known as Domo-Sadhana. Deha Sadhana is the base for Domo Sadhana which ultimately helps the Bauls to reach into the spiritual divinity. So women are indispensable companions in their Sadhana.

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Many Baul Songs Also Advocate Equality and Liberation of Women:

'Kuler bou hoye mone kotodin thakbi ghore Ghomta fele chol na re mon shad-bajare...'which discourages women to confine herself within the home and encourages her to go out and explore her land on her own will. Further Tuntun Fakir, one of the famous sadhak-baul singer says 'nari hoye nari bhojo, nari holo cheton-guru..' (worship a woman by converting yourself into a woman because Women are spiritual gurus). According to June Mc Daniel ⁶, 'In the history of religion, it is rare to find a tradition in which women are ritual equals, in which non-procreative sexual activity is more valuable than the reproductive variety, in which menstruation is both positive and spiritual and in which women's body is considered sacred and the dwelling place of a deity which is neither male nor female, but includes aspects of both.'

Again Fakir Lalon Shah Says:

'mayere bhojei hoy tar baper thikana
Nigom bichare sotto gele je jana...'

Roughly translated, the lyrics mean:

By occult consideration, truth reveals itself by worshipping the Mother.

He who says he knows the mother to whom Lord has bestowed the world.

By worshipping the mother, one can also know the father. Whom did he see after coming out into the world?

Lalon says he saw

Mother, in the form of a river.

In a community which confirms that the individual's identity can be confirmed by worshipping his or her mother, there is little doubt then about the honourable status of women in Baul Sadhana. There is an irony though that needs deeper study...

According to Lisa I. Knight⁷, 'Baul women are encumbered actors. Unlike their male peers, they are never completely carefree and unencumbered by societal restraints and expectations.'

Leena Chaki and Ratna Rashid were among the few female Baul scholars who investigated the feminist approach towards the Baul cult. According to Leena Chaki's statement –

"the female members in baul sect were deeply under the influence of Guruvaad. They even did not allow sharing their views without the permission of their Gurus. Sometimes they had even been treated as polygamous creatures against their will as per the instruction of the Guru and forced to sexual union with many other disciples."⁸

Kangalini Sufia, a Bangladeshi Baul singer is often heard singing a Baul song, which when loosely translated states, "Burning suffering at home.

Burning suffering outside.

My suffering is everywhere.

There is suffering in the whole world, and I have gained absolutely nothing...

These songs of longing and discontent connect with Kangalini's frustration about her current situation, a life in Dhaka where she is the caretaker and provides sustenance to eight members of her music troupe.

Another contemporary Baul singer Phulmala Dasi has composed the song, "mon ekbar Hari bol din phuralo..."

(O mind, chant Hari's name the day is coming to an end

Detach yourself from the play on this earth and move on,

What strange rules govern the people of this world?

Young men get disabled.

All old men and women have to leave their homes... Phulmala says

Do not neglect this golden body of yours, chant the name of Hari!

While she decries the losses around her in her own family, the second part of the song focuses on the bigger world around her, the environmental degradation and its effects on human mind and body. Phulmala thus urges her fellow beings to care well for their golden bodies and attain spiritual bliss by chanting the name of the Lord.

Despite her illiteracy and ignorance, Phulmala has the courage to adapt to the significant changes around her and urges others to follow suit. What is significant is that like the Baul singers who came centuries before her, the only things constant are the struggle to live life and the fact that the Divine resides within one's 'golden body'.

From the times of Meerabai to the times of Parvathy Das Baul, centuries have changed but struggles have not. Marginalization in different forms persist.

Questions about the women in the Baul community abound: to what extent do women who serve as sadhan-sangini actually get equal rights, dignified position and true fulfilment in religious and social life. Do even supposedly alternate religious cults remain entangled within tropes of deception, authority and subjugation? Are there really alternate emancipatory spaces for women?

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