

**WOMEN AND THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT :
STUDY OF MIRABAI'S AND TULSIDAS'S
POETRY**

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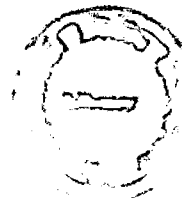
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation "**WOMEN AND THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT: STUDY OF MIRABAI'S AND TULSIDAS'S POETRY**" submitted by **ASHA YADAV** is in partial fulfilment for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY** of this university is her own work. This dissertation has not been previously submitted for the award of any other degree to this university or any other university. To the best of our knowledge this is a bonafide work.

We recommend that this dissertation to be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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DEDICATED TO MY FATHER

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CHAPTER 1

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON BHAKTI

The Bhakti movement which gained momentum in the medieval period has always been a debatable issue resulting in large variety of literature on its origin and development. Some scholars trace its origin to Christianity and others see it as an impact of Islam but now the consensus among of scholars is that it was very much a part of Hinduism. In the initial stages but in the medieval period Islam did make an impact on Bhakti. This chapter is an attempt to review the existing literature which will help us understand the nature of the Bhakti Movement.

Max Weber looked at the origin of *Krishna Bhakti* as a distorted form of Christianity because the doctrine of surrender to 'Guru' resembles the Christian doctrine of Christ going through the process of redemption(1). Added to it was the doctrine of eternal punishment, the life of eternal salvation and above all the believer having total faith in his personal saviour. But others call these similarities and points of contact between Bhakti and Christianity as superficial as most of

the features of the Bhakti mentioned above were pre medieval and even pre christian in origin(2). The concept of the role of '*Guru*' in *sadhana* is thoroughly Indian and ancient, as is the doctrine of *Prapatti*, kingdom of God and the doctrine of salvation. As all these are very much a part of Hinduism(3).

Scholars like Tarachand and Mohd Hedayatullah have argued that the medieval Bhakti movement emerged as an impact of Islam. They have tried to show similarities between the philosophy of Islam and those of the medieval Acharyas and saints. Even Sankaracharya is said to have been influenced by Monotheism of Islam⁴. At the base of the search for this influence are common features between the two. Firstly, devotion, physical exercise (especially restraining the breath), tolerance towards other religions and unorthodox attitude regarding rituals and ceremonies. Secondly, submission to *Pir* or *Guru* and thirdly similarities which have been drawn between the poetry of medieval saints and sufi poets(5). But this hypothesis is scarcely tenable as the work of Sankara and other Acharyas was a natural intermixture of Upanishadic and Puranic tradition and many of the ideas are from the Bhagavad Gita. Thus all these acharyas belong to the ancient traditions while each one of them emerged with his own religious and philosophical ideas, they do not show any similarity with

intellectuals of the medieval world(6). Where as Bhakti is pre-Islamic in nature.

Sushmita Pande and Prof Chattopadhyaya point out that the contact between Islam and Hindu religious ideas before the twelfth century was so meagre that the possibility of mutual influence on their fundamental religious doctrines was very remote indeed(7). No doubt, the situation certainly changed from the 13th century onwards when Islam became established in India and Sufism (a mystic movement) which took root in India borrowed many things from Hinduism like ecstatic love of God, use of poetry and music, worshipping lord and the combination of yogic practices with Bhakti.

A few scholars see Bhakti as a socio-religious reform in the same way as it occurred in the 19th century, (as a revival of old Hinduism and the whole process of refining and purifying it). They see the impact of Islam on Hinduism restricted to the stimulation it provided to Hinduism, to purify, itself from within and leading to socio-religious reforms, in order to make it more adaptable and acceptable to common people. Therefore the subjects (Bhakti) needs a detail study of factors which affected bhakti from the Vedic period to 16th century *sant* traditions.

One view holds that the word 'Bhakti' first emerged in Vedas and it (Bhakti) can be cultivated through good company (*satsang*) (8), faith (*sraddha*)(9) and sense of friendliness towards all beings of the world(10), charity and freedom from worldly things like anger, envy, sexual desire, pride and corruption(11). Besides this, most of the hymns referring to *Varuna* in Rig Veda are full of devotion and the spirit of Bhakti¹². Which means Bhakti in the vedic period was an expression of faith, a will towards turning to God and serving him whole heartedly. Seeing the social aspect of it we know that *Varnashrama* division of the society was based on *Karma* (action) and this *Karma* was determined by knowledge and every action. On the other hand was inspired by emotions through Bhakti. Thus, the vedic Bhakti is a sacred trisection of knowledge, action and devotion(13).

The basic components of vedic Bhakti were 1. Bhakti for mother, father and guru which logically extended to God. 2. Sublimation of all desires into one sacrifice, penance and patience 3. *Yagna* the basis for achieving material necessities 4. The learning, reading and practising of *ahimsa* (non violence), *satya* (truth) *Asteya* (trust), *Brahmacharya* (celibacy) and *Aparigarha* (14) were the foundation stone of individual and social happiness. In the vedic period Bhakti is also described in many mantras especially purity and purifying power of God and his

relationship with Bhakta-

Agni shuhi krat taman

Shuhi viprah shuhi kavih (14)

The embedded meaning of mantra is that whosoever dives deep into his Bhakti, can never be impure and inferior to anybody; if somehow one commits a lapse of duty, the dirt is washed away by chanting his name and meditating on him. But Tarachand in his book "Influence of Islam on Indian Culture" points out that the path of action was dominant in the vedas and the path of devotion emerged quite later.(15)

In the later vedic period there started a tendency towards formulation of rituals and importance was given to Bhakti through sacrifices(16). Due to rigid social order and the privileged position of Brahmans, this form of Bhakti became difficult for common people especially for lower castes who were not allowed to recite mantras. So, there was a lot of change in the nature of Bhakti in the Upanishadic period.

The *Svetasvara* is an old Upanishad which declares that only that man realises the truth who has intense devotion for the Lord and the

teacher. The *Chandogya* states that "what one performs with knowledge, faith and meditation that indeed becomes more powerful" Upanishads recognised Bhakti as a way of realising God head *Mahanaryana Upanisad* has given due importance to Bhakti and said "Bhakti yoga can be practiced by all because it is easier rather than *Nirlamba yoga* (17) which means Bhakti was given supreme position. *Katha* and *Sweteshwara Upanisads* contain the clear enunciation of the doctrine of Bhakti(18), where Upanisads clearly visualise the mystical way as one and illuminative. Besides all this the *Guru* gained importance in this period as *Savetasvatara* upanishad adds another point by saying "one should have the same devotion towards guru as one has towards God" .(19) Therefore, Upanishadic Bhakti was a shift from sacrificial rites to the personal relationship of an individual with God based on *sraddha* (faith), meditation and knowledge. Here, Yusuf Hussain agrees that Bhakti as a technical term was there in Upanisads but Max Weber argues, that the idea of spiritual salvation came with Christianity. But resemblance between the two is insufficient and those who came with Apostle Thomas were very small in number to influence anyone.(20).

In Bhagwad Gita Bhakti took a new turn, where emphasis on faith and devotion was quite in keeping with the demand of the time, As S.

Jaiswal(21) points out, by the end of the Mauryan age Aryan society was firmly established in social structure based on varna division and old feelings of uneasiness and apprehension at the break of tribal solidarity had given place to a sense of security and hope as the new order settled down and a stable government was formed based not on tribal loyalties but on *varna* organisation. To hold this form of society together devotion and loyalty were essential attributes, which could take the place of earlier tribal bonds and ensure the smooth functioning of the state. It was not necessary to question stability and to command the loyalty of their subjects based on devotion and faith, which also had a messianic aspect and it could have maximum appeal for people in the centuries preceeding and succeeding the christian era. Religiously thinking practically all the sects were deeply coloured by hopeful devotional ideas.

The idea of bhakti found its best expression in the Bhagwad Gita which preached devotion to a God, who incarnated himself repeatedly for the good of his Bhakta and maintained the social and religious laws(22). This was the first period when the whole concept of God was humanised and slowly the heroes of Kshatriya clan were worshipped and linked to God.

In Gita, Krishna emphasised the path of devotion because the way of knowledge is hard(23) so one has to offer with sincere heart whatever one has(24). It is clearly mentioned that there is no restriction of caste or sex or anything else in the domain of faith. Even, a confirmed culprit, a habitual sinner can get solace and affection if he turns to God with warmth and sincerity(25). Let the person surrender whatever he does by the way of penance to God, because God does not want anything more as he is pleased with the spirit of self surrender and complete dedication. Such people achieve the highest state as they are loved by God(26). Therefore, resort to this path of dedication and total surrender to God is recommended (seek my shelter alone). Secondly those who attain God through Bhakti attain the soul(27). R.G. Bhandarkar points out that Gita as a system came into existence as a protest against the atheistic systems which resulted from the intellectual ferment of the age of Upanishads". Theistic ideas were so scattered in the Upanishads that it was necessary for practical purpose to work them up in a system of redemption capable of being grasped easily. Beside, the emotional attachment to God also has a physical adorable form with which the devotee may experience a feeling of close intimacy comparable to that between friend and friend, father and son, lover and beloved. On the intellectual plane knowledge and faith also play an important part(28). Setting a code of social conduct it (B.G.)

mentions that those who are capable of pursuing the path of knowledge are under obligation to follow the rules of society and to be submissive by resigning one's self to the mercy of God who ordained the rules of *Varna* and worshipping him with leaf, flower, fruits and water whatever one could afford(29).

This type of Bhakti which emerged in the vedic period faded out with the advance of history and was the first systematic text written on the school of Bhakti(30). Where, devotion implies the dedication of all actions to him(31) and God is pleased with whatever is offered to him(32). Not only pure devotees but also sinful worshippers are promised that "they will be accounted righteous provided they worship with undivided heart(33) and they shall never perish". In the eyes of lord all devotees are equal whether they are born in sin or not and whatever caste or sect, they belong to (34) It is only by devotion that God may be believed, known and entered. The devotee is dear to God as God is father, husband and friend. Scholars, like Yusuf Hussain(35) and Tarachand(36) argue that *Bhagavad Gita* recognises the Social system and it was only with the contact of Islam in the later period that it called for equality of caste. Secondly, sacrificial devotion was another part of the *Bhagavad Gita* which was eradicated in the later period due to the impact of Islam.

The emotional feelings and love of a devotee towards Krishna led to erotic mysticism in the Bhagvata concept of Bhakti because of identification of *Narayana* with the shepherd God Krishna which eventually led to the introduction of such elements(37) as in human love where both God and devotee are eager to rush into each other's arms. Thus two aspects of love are dealt with in the text - Gods love for human beings and human beings love for God, where the first is divine grace and the second is bhakti. This grace is not merely the theoretical but a fact experienced by all devotees who feel how at every step of their spiritual progress they have been helped by God(38). Likewise man's love for God is inherent and perennial though temporarily dormant, as both are phases of the same attempt to reunite. Love develops only when obstacles to its manifestation are removed by congenial surroundings and proper spiritual practices constitute the lowest variety of Bhakti, *Vaidhi bhakti* or *Maryada bhakti* and may be undertaken even in childhood. Whereas *para bhakti* is the only perfect manifestation and expression in the life of natural bliss of soul and is one with *mukti* where it has nothing to do with karma(39).

The object of bhakti may be the personal God or *avatara* or the whole universe. Among these love and devotion to the *avatara* or saint is the sweetest as he can be grasped not only in thought and

imagination but also by senses. Especially, the concept of Krishna Radha and Gopis of Vrandavana(40).

The philosophy of Bhagvata is intensely practical and affects all aspects of life, as we find in God Krishna an ideal person who was a friend of the poor weak and distressed the champion of the rights of women, social and spiritual enfranchisement of the Sudra and even of the untouchables and the perfect ideal of detachment. In him again, we find the perfect harmony of Jnana, bhakti and Karma of head, heart and hand(41).

Bhagavad Gita speaks of Karma and bhakti but describes only the attitude underlying them instead of giving detailed practical prescriptions, whereas *Bhagavata Purana* describes how one can achieve lord. To achieve the goal by a devotee has to have intense love and single minded devotion which has to be purified by moral observances. These include renunciation of all desires, practice of *ahimsa*, truthfulness, non stealing, *brahmacharya* and greedlessness accompanied with desire to study scriptures. The devotee should have a pure mind, patience and self control at the same time he should avoid love for material things, laziness and immoral behaviour(42)etc. If he has done good deeds in his previous birth and he is never sorrowful

than he can achieve God.(43)

The seventh skanda of Purana (*Bhagavata*) refers to nine types of Bhakti and there are three paths to achieve salvation which are *Janana*, *Yoga*, *Karmayoga* and *bhakti* because highest bhakti requires the integration of knowledge and action. Wherever three yogas are discussed the path of bhakti is praised more(44).

At another place it is mentioned that for a person who does *karmayoga* and *sadhana bhakti* as soon as he becomes free from all attachments, he acquires pure *jnana* and *bhakti* giving supreme position to bhakti as it is written that a person who is involved in bhakti does not need *jnana* and renunciation and is liberated by bhakti alone(45).

Puranic bhakti is said to override the distinction of caste class and sex and shows a tendency towards secularism. Though, in the *Vishnupurana* it is stated that while the twice born attain Hari with lot of a pain, sudras attain him only by serving the twice born and women, by serving their own husbands. In *Bhagvata Purana* an attempt was made to enlighten the lower caste and women by reciting the name of Lord(46). As *Harivamsa Purana* refers to Ghantakarna the

demon who was low by caste but attained the status of being called Bhagata Bhakta(47). Bhavata also mentions that many women and sudras were not allowed to sing *kirtans* and *kathas* but with Bhakti they got right to do so(48) as Lord does not distinguish between the various caste and an ideal devotee looks upon Brahmana and *Chandala* equally.

For the first time in the puranas Radha is figured out which, formed the heart of Vaishnava Bhakti in later period. Here 'Radha' is not used as the beloved of Krishna but as the Goddess worshipped in *Varandavana*. Side by side *mantras* and *tantras* also gained importance which promote Radha Krishna Bhakti(49) and lots of ritualistic practice started around the idol as the idol was a product of Upanasadic period. These became more institutionalized with anthropomorphic devotion enshrined in the Bhagvad Gita. Historians, who divide the whole movement into three parts look at it as reaching God through the path of action (*karma*) where Bhakti has only a secondary role to play(50).

Sankara had tended to denigrate action and seemed to threaten the reality of spiritual life and action and gave importance to knowledge (51). But this idea is very well opposed by Krishna Sharma, who

rejects the idea that the Medieval Bhakti movement started as a reaction against advaita vedanta and the path of *janana* as advocated by Sankaracharya (52) but it was not because she emphasised that knowledge and action comprise devotion, and by cultivating attachment to God by worshipping him, by becoming his devotee a person attains selfhood, the highest stage reached by the path of knowledge too. To emphasize on the acquisition of knowledge which is necessary step in devotion he tells us that nothing that is devoid of faith can be efficacious, be it penance or an act of alm giving or anything like knowledge(52).

Sankara describes Bhakti as four fold and says that fourth or the last class of being *jnana bhakti* is ultimately identical with *jnana*. His philosophy provides a reconciliation between Bhakti and advaita by reinterpreting bhakti. Sankara's lower Bhakti is inseparable from *karma* and worship too is nothing except devotion. Higher Bhakti is identical with *jnana* (53). He was not against idol worship and hence called it a path to achieve the ultimate. But according to him idol (saguna) is not the end and one has to go beyond it to achieve the ultimate (nirguna). The rituals and ceremonial offerings have their own importance and influence on the minds of devotees as due to the faith, a mysterious 'aura' is built around God present before the devotee(54)

in the shape of idols and images and the deeper meaning of life is awakened in their hearts. He states, it is better if one understands and grasps the meaning and significance of the *mantras* that one recites but even if one does not comprehend the importance of the *mantras* one shall merely benefit if one recites them with faith.

The philosophy of Shankara's devotion can be summarised by stating that Shankara is of the opinion that thorough knowledge is needed for realizing the fact that the Brahman alone is the sole reality yet as every person is not capable of grasping this truth at once a person can seek the supreme even through the path of devotion(55). Devotion shall purge his mind of wordly impurities and ultimately he shall be able to realise the final truth. Devotion is however not divorced from knowledge and this was made quite clear in the later followers preachings(56).

But it is argued that Sankara's endeavour was to remove the fatal weakness of Hinduism, so he employed the whole power of his analytical mind and dilectical still in establishing one logical system. And it is because of these recognition of his genius that all later thinkers have taken Sankara as the starting point of their thinking. Sankara established that the sacred scriptures of the Hindus say the

same thing and there is only one God, the difference arose only due to lack of understanding. But his path of philosophy was later on overruled by the religion of love and devotion as supreme and knowledge as secondary(57).

Again, under Ramanujacharya Brahmanic tradition and vedic rites were received within bhakti. Ramanuja was an orthodox Hindu who performed all the rites and gave a lot of importance to idol worship and temples. He preached that people can put their devotion by worshipping images and by religious rituals(58). When it comes to the caste system there are contrary views as Yusuf Hussain points out that sudras had no access to the order provided by Ramanuja but S M Hunaslal mentions that Ramanuja opened the doors of the temple to untouchables(59). Every man, Brahman or sudra would have direct access to the temple deity though, sanskrit remained the official language. Secondly, to reach Nirguna, saguna is the way which is from form to formlessness. So he did not discard ritualism totally. According to him karma or ritualistic actions are just a means to the end of obtaining the blissful vision of God as such actions have utility because the purity of mind owing to this knowledge which arises in the mind with ever increasing brightness. Reviving the sacrifices, he justifies the slaughter of animals(60). As all actions should be done in seeking

liberation, though he opened the door of temple to women and untouchables he insisted that every one must do the duties assigned to them according to castes.

For Ramanuja 'Bhakti' is more important than *jnana*. He held the view that man has a real body and a real soul. The body constituted by matter is part of God and with Bhakti soul unites to God he says "Bhakti is a particular kind of knowledge which is a state that elicits absolute love towards itself which is an end in itself and estimates the desire of everything else". The supreme is attainable only through Bhakti which is way of spiritual development. For Ramanuja Bhakti and meditation are the same and bhakti means a constant and unflinching remembrance of God.

Ramanuja's concept of devotion does not mean any exclusion of *Jnana* and *karma*. One should not think therefore, that Ramanuja advocates any doctrine of devotion that is bereft of every trace of knowledge or even of action. On the other hand he declares that Bhakti succeeds the two fold training of the mind by *karma* and *jnana*. Knowledge has its own function to discharge. It consists in "knowing the *atman* to be that which is distinct from body"(61). Being a staunch supporter of Bhakti, Ramanuja held that the *jnana marga* or the path

of knowledge can be fruitful and redeeming only when it is coupled with moral efforts like self control etc. The ultimate purpose of knowledge is to purify mind and heart(62) and this purpose can be achieved by a personal faith without much difficulty. We clearly find in Ramanuja a tendency of synthesizing the elements of *jnana*, *karma* and *bhakti* as knowledge, action and devotion.

Some scholars say that Ramanuja was the one from where the path of *bhakti* gained importance and became an advantage over knowledge and action(62). His theories were the refutation of Sankara's absolute monoism. During the time of Ramanuja Arab traders and Turks, Mongols & Afgans came as conquerors to the south with them came the prechers who settled in Malabar coast in 9th century were making conversions on the western and esatern cost of India (in 12th century). This intence prosclytizing activity of Islam, a religion based on faith and devotion should have made the influence of Islam on Ramanuja (63). The vary fact the Ramanuja wanted to open the doors of temples for out cates was equall to establishing and egalitarian society. Other charecteristics of his religious thoughts were - monotheism, emotonal worship, addoration of *Guru* and his indifference towards rituals and caste (64). But these impacts were restricted to south India till the 12 century and before leaving the south to more sects of south India were

influenced by Islam.

Alwares and Naynars who became popular in South India gave importance to devotion based on love especially, a relationship between mother-child, slave-master and lover-beloved. This makes their love very intense and personal. For them Lord can be attained through grace not by our works(65). Their bhakti of the Alvars knew no barriers of caste and showed dispassion with the world. They marked intense longing for personal union and ecstasy and impulsion of a personal relationship between the devotee and the Lord. Bhakti is the whole gamut of love from despair to ecstasy and the relationship between the world and God.

In the 11th and 12th century Lingayat movement started as a part of bhakti(featuring bhakti as a central) in Karnataka which was against vedic rituals, sacrifices, idol whorships, temple and religious order. To stop the slaughter of innocent animals Lingayat movement curbed the violence during the sacrificial rites of the vedic religion. It raised its voice against *Varnashrama dharma* and established universal brotherhood(66). According to Basava(67) all are equal by birth, men are not superior to women. All women have equal status with men and the fair sex religiously and socially must be treated with

all respect and delicacy; marriage in childhood was considered to be wrong. And girl and boys were to be allowed a voice in the marriage of their union and widows were to be allowed to remarry.

Even the lowest caste were to be raised to the level of all others by the investiture of Linga and all weavers of divine symbol were to be seen as equal socially and religiously in all respects. They never worshipped the deities established in temple instead they wore small lingas and worshipped them as the only visible form of the movement. The movement laid stress upon family life which in its opinion was in no way a disqualification for salvation. The status of women in Lingayat society was equal to with that of man because it exploded sexual inequality in matters of religious and social importance⁶⁷. A host of women writers like Akka Mahadevi and Neelambika participated in the deliberations and deputations on religious and social matters at *Kalyan* basava founded a religious parliament *Anubhava Mantap* at *kalyan* where saints of the community, male and female, far and near, came to hold debates and discussions on the problem of life and religion and philosophy. Sister Mahadevi with her indigenous appealing logic convinced Allama Prabhu of the status of women and their just claims in society and in every walk of life. Male and female devotees were called by the names *sharmana* and *sharmans*⁶⁸. For basava a true

merges into God.

Basava gave a practical interpretation to achieve social and moral good which was only possible in those days by freeing the society from the Brahmanic hegemony, for these reason his system was one of resolute and wholesale opposition to the prevailing religious thought. It was revolutionary all along the line in doctrine, ritual and social custom, so much so that attempts of Lingayats were to tone down its originality with the help of Islamic elements. Besides, these Lingayat also provided a place for women devotees who could pray and worship God at all times of disabilities, that is when she was poor and unable to undertake offering or pilgrimage, she was believed to be forgiven by God as stress was more on purity of mind rather than purity of body. It gave not only entry into religion but also provided leadership women⁷³. Indian women who used to be under purdah or confined within the four walls, picked up great courage and started assemblies and took part in philosophical discussions.

The Varkari movement which started in Maharashtra included men and women from all four castes, who emphasised devotion to God's name, to the *Guru* and to the *satsang*, the company of good as the path of self realisation⁷⁴. The Maharashtra saints relationship to *Vitala* is

one of tender and intimate love. The scarcely ever use erotic or bridal metaphors and intended to relate *Vitala* (Krishna) as loving friend and companion. Intimacy with God results in an inability to distinguish between self and God. Another metaphor these saints very commonly use is that of *Vitala* as loving parent especially mother⁷⁵. *Vitala* is frequently addressed as female. Most of the saints of this period came into conflict with authorities of the priestly class. Chokha mela a untouchable coming to temple and Namdev openly singing and dancing. The Brahmins were compelled to give way and recognise bhaktas devotion as legitimate and not Brahmanical hostility never reaches the point of the devotee being martyred.

The first woman poet of Marathi was Mahadanba who was a daughter of a Brahmin priest. Most other women Bhaktas were also from bhakta households so do not individually have to face social slander or flout public convention when they express their devotion. They seemed to live relatively ordinary lives yet tradition made space for them as teachers and *sants*. But in contrast to this most male *sants* emphasise the need to stay away from women. Woman in the songs of Eknath and Tukaram is not only worldly attachment but also a distractor for the seeker⁷⁶. Eknath advised that the bhakta stay away from saintly women and even from a doll lest lustful desire be aroused.

So, the presence of these exceptional women as saints did not change the image of women in sant teachings and traditions. Indeed women themselves expressed the problems which they faced day to day. Abhangas(verses) written by them express their miserable state⁷⁷. Let's see the life of some of these saints Muktabai who was a beautiful and brilliant young girl spiritually advanced and learned but she did not marry and lived with her brothers. She is said to have surpassed many sages in wisdom and became Guru to of Changder an old wise tantric. Most of the male poets praised her and aspired for daughter like her. Another sant Jananabai a near contemporary of Mukta was a maid servant who falls in the category of those saints whose lower status distanced them from religious establishments. Talking about Jananabai Tukaram says lord had gathered cow dung with Shana. In her songs Jananabai shows a painful awareness of her position as a servant, as a woman and as an orphan without a family. The uniqueness of her poetry is relationship of devotee to God as one woman to another seems to be unique.⁷⁸ In an interesting variation Janabai addresses Janeshwar too as her woman friend and as a mother thus, seemingly crossing the male, female divide not just between God and self but between devotees too⁷⁹

Next Bahinabai (1678-1700) was the only woman saint who remained married while pursuing her life. She explains in Abhangas how her husband used to beat her and trouble her. She accepted Tukaram as her Guru who consoled her and gave her mantra. She gave more importance to Tukaram(who was Sudra) rather than her husband who was Brahmin but, after a lot of effort he also took the path of Bhakti. In several songs she reflects the oppressive aspects of her life as woman. First her dependence preludes her taking independent decisions about the life "she says possessing the woman's body and myself being subject to others I was not able to carry out my desire to discard all worldly things". The notion of womenly duties as defined by religious orthodoxy stands in the way of her own hearts desire and prevents her from abandoning domestic life. So, for women obstruction was internal not external. As Bahina was later on saved and called to the royal path of Bhakti. (80)

Discussing the Bhakti movement in North India Tarachand(81) points out that "Ramananda" was the bridge between the bhakti movement of south and north. The results of his experiences and discussions made a bold departure from the doctrine of the school to which he belonged he taught the doctrine to all the four castes without prejudice. Which shows a clear impact of Islamic elements in his

philosophy⁸¹. His teachings gave rise to two schools of religious thought one saguna and other norguna. It is not just to call one as conservative and other as radical because both had their own radical ideas. First school is dominated by Chaitanya, Surdas, Mirabai and Tulsidas. Sur's bhakti as depicted in literature is in the form of emotion that parents especially mothers feel towards their children⁸². He treated Krishna as small child who is involved in all kinds of child play. The other element of his poetry is all in the form of emotions of two lovers. Here again he projects himself into a persona of gopi lost in love of Krishna⁸³, sometimes it is a liaison between Krishna and his cowherding mistress, poems of his genre serve as a forum for expressing the distress that the gopi feels. When the great lover is absent. He talks about the informal harem of Krishna and the expression of painful emotions⁸⁴. He refers to the experience of separation of lovers and torture which arouse feeling of longing and anger.

In Uiraha poetry Sur takes the role of the poor jilted gopis that Krishna has left behind and sings in pain. In many poems he explained the condition of that gopi whose heart has been stolen by Krishna and now she is in continuous agony and pain⁸⁵. In the absence of Krishna he focuses on the expressions and emotions of gopis and

total attention to Krishna. His whole work revolves around Krishna and female friends who are the significance of his bhaktas when Krishna is not with them, they (bhaktas) long for him. He describes the emotions and beauty of his face and in the last part of sur, sagon contains a part where Krishna is the supreme God and gopies longing for him are the human souls waiting to unite with him.

The young women of Braj who were married to other cowherds express their love for Krishna and search for Krishna by abandoning their honour and modesty.

At the door of Nanda

She ask for Nanda's house

from this way, she goes that way

from there she returns again

She is dying to come close to him

to see the son of Nanda

The girl of Braj is terribly anxious

she dedicated to him

her body, heart and everything

She has given to him all

Abandoning her honour

giving up her modesty^{86a}

His poetry depicts some trends of his time where female love was given importance - a mixture of emotions - love, longing and restlessness

Nobody ever became happy loving,
The moth loved the fire it burnt itself,
Nobody ever became happy loving,
The bee loved the lotus
the petal became his prison
Nobody ever became happy loving.
The deer drawn by the sweet sound
had to bear the arrow in his heart
Nobody ever became happy loving
we who loved the Honeyed one
were struck dumb when he was leaving,
Nobody ever became happy loving
O'Suidas without our Lord we suffer
Our tears are always streaming^{86b}

Chaitanya, another Bhakta from Bengal, made the Radha Krishna

myth the basis of his teaching and worship. So intense was his desire to be to Krishna as Radha was to her divine lover, that he was sometimes heard to murmur. "I am He". His (Chaitanya's power over men came from the reality of his mystical religious experience, which he exhibited through overpowering emotions and an impassioned lover for God. Chailanya also seems to have believed in the brotherhood and equality of man; conswquent to this, he is said to have made some relaxations in the caste rules as far as his circle of discilpes is concerned. It is probably for this reason that the Muslims were also his diciples. Not withstanding his liberal attitude to all, he would not allow any of his Muslim disciples to dine together with his hindu disciples, nor would he allow any Muslim to enter a temple⁸⁷.

Mira's bhakti took shape in the Rajput state where pride, honour and family status played an important role. Breaking the social codes of family pride, honour , decorum and becoming a critic to social oppression she took the path of bhakti. She breaks the code of marriage by remaining sexually unavilable to her husband and by her obsessive religiosity from the moment she wed- she claims to have already married to Krishna. She ignores the claim of suhaag and called it illusary and says "I am wife of one who(Girdhar) will never die. Like other woman saints when widowed she openly denied the

reality of having been married in the first place. She also goes against the caste system and freely mixes up with saints of the lower caste. Kumkum sangari argues at other times her bhakti seems to be impelled by helplessness by persecution even by the women; she has no other true relative or friend. But after breaking the feudal relation she resorts to Krishna⁸⁸ through it is argued by Parita Mukta⁸⁹ that Mira opted for Krishna by breaking social norm not because of the patriarchal order she took refuge in bhakti.

Immersed in bhakti of Krishna she calls herself to be his dasi and suffers for him. She treats Krishna as her lover, husband, friend, etc. Madhu Kishwar⁹⁰. Argues that Bhakti provided a scope to Mira and created a social space for her and gave her opportunity to walk out from the patriarchal set up.

During this period, the position of women became very important as Kumkum Sangari points out that women got freedom to express themselves and created a space for themselves by going against the social order where, as Madhu Kishwar points out, women performed a social role. Women who defied convention in many stating ways were not by and large persecuted as heretics or dismissed as lunatics. Our cultural traditions provided a social space to women either exceptionally

outstanding abilities and courage even when they have outrageously defied what are called the stri dharma - marriage and motherhood⁹¹. Susie Tharu mentions that women poets of the bhakti movement did not live to seek institutionalized spaces, as religion provided it to express themselves and women's poetry moved from the court and temple to the open spaces of the field, the work place, and the common woman's heart⁹².

But the social acceptance of bhakta did not result in expanding options for ordinary women, as there was no change in their position. For women bhaktas do not receive orders from any external authority except in some cases, the guru they themselves chose the interpretation of what God requires is essentially made by each woman. One may discard clothing at God's command, another her husband, one may refuse marriage, another refuse family honour⁹³. She ascribes, attributes and justifies her actions which may seem unjustifiable to others. Thus with the help of god, by appropriation of God herself she negotiates that social space which was not available to others.

An impressive body of women writing which comes down from bhakti movement, was a period in which patriarchal control was radically questioned secondly, the female persona became an important

part where the devotee cajoles, chides and woos, rages against God who is the personally chosen husband, lover or companion and mystic union is often imagined in sexual terms. Masculinity, scholarship and reason were seen as obstacles to bhakti⁹⁴. Being a male was no more a privilege as most of the saints wish to become women and longed for him. But most of the male bhaktas spoke bad about women and called them, *Kamini*, black cobra and fire who will destroy every thing.

Another bhakti poet of this period, Tulsidas who is generally considered to be hostile to women can be retermined by his views on society, as women are integral part of society.⁹⁵ Tulsi divides his female characters basically into two categories the first consist of those high minded ladies such as Sits, *Sunayana*, *Mandodari* and others who understand *rajnity* or science of polity, are loyal to their husbands, offer aid and council to them in moments of crises. The second⁹⁶ category consist of those who are short sighted, are led by their passions and are destructive in their thinking. Like the neech and sudras such women must be kept under strict control.

Tulsi's attitude towards the position of *sadhus* and saints in the caste system is ambivalent. He says that caste restrictions do not apply to saints. A man of lower caste is better than man of higher

caste if the former is a devotee of Rama and the latter is not. Similarly even a low caste *sadhu* is superior to a man of high caste - since, the former recites the name (of God) everyday. He says that a saint has no caste, nor he has any religious restrictions, he can beg from anyone, or sleep in a mosque⁹⁶. At the social level he classifies society into three classes and on other hand *Vainashiana* is to be maintained. He is an exponent of *maryada bhakti* where Ram is his ideal and the goal is Ram rajya. Tulsi regards bhakti as a *mani* and *jnana* as *dipa-bhakti* is an independent path which does not need any other support- His spiritual ideas are closely knit with his moral and social ideas. Not only does he stress the virtues of self discipline but also of detachment from the world⁹⁷.

From the 9th to 16th century Islam made an indirect impact on bhakti as result of which Hinduism revived things from within. When number of developments were taking place in the field of Art architecture learning and science, they had an impact on religion which was not direct⁹⁸. To Yusuf Hussain Islam gave an impetus to already existing bhakti ideas, such as monotheism, human equality, as there was an interaction of ideas⁹⁹.

During the time of Kabir the caste system image worship, authority

of vedas and vedic ceremonialism and ritualism were subjected to the file of criticism and rejected. Some of the teachers proclaim their independence of all established tradition of Hindu and Muslims. One approach has emphasised the egalitarianism, iconoclastic tendencies and pure monotheism were prominent feature of the Islamic tradition¹⁰⁰. Another has been to emphasized the social origin of such teachers of bhakti and treat their views as the radical expressions of social protest¹⁰¹. Still another approach traces the development of these tendencies to the older traditions of Siddhas.

Where as Sushmita Pande states that, caste system should not be confused with social egalitarianism. The fact is that the notion of social equality is hardly relevant to the history of premodern societies, where inequalities of wealth power and recognition were inbuilt¹⁰² caste society was unique by virtue of inequalities . It can be noted that quite a few of the medieval saints came from the unprivileged social classes and this has been basis of the hypothesis that they were part of a movement of social protest. The radical spiritual movement of this period denied the relevance of vedic study and ritual for man's spiritual emancipation and questioned the claims of Brahmanas to the possession of spiritual knowledge¹⁰³. They jealously guarded the privilege of reciting vedic texts and performing vedic rituals. The

participation of unprivileged classes in the spiritual life of the society under the leadership of wandering teachers mendicants poets, reciters, etc independently of the vedic Brahmanic tradition, was not a new phenomenon in medieval times but it was present in *Bhagavad Gita*.

Besides this the heterodox tendencies which were mostly engaged in condemning Brahman orthodoxy were also influenced by bhakti since the leaders of heterodox tendency mingled with the mass bhakti in the form of a fully mature doctrine was able to permeate the ethos of common man¹⁰⁴. The rich mystic experience of these saints were combined with the teaching of their ideas in vernacular instead of Sanskrit¹⁰⁵. Hence though the philosophy of bhakti was not a new phenomenon, Kabir and medieval saints emerged as leaders in spreading its importance among the masses, which is one of the reason why Bhakti is mistaken as medieval phenomenon. Kabir says the object of devotion is quality less and the reality cannot be identified with creator and created world. He was critical of the Brahmana class and rituals. Kabir and his followers considered social and ritual regulations totally irrelevant to the attainment of spiritual good. For them the attitude of the devotee has to be self surrender and method of attaining the divine love were not the mastery on *vedantic* text nor going to sacred places but an orientation of the self.

Like other sects of his day Kabir also attached great importance to the *guru*- the spiritual preceptor¹⁰⁶. The *Guru* is capable of separating the matter from the spirit, he sharpens the mind of devotee. *Guru* is referred as *Kumbhakara*. Another method of reaching God is related with the name by which one concentrates on the formless darkness is dispelled.

The spreading of the message of God in vernacular language by the saints helped further to popularise bhakti. Both Kabir and Nanak preached the principles of inwardness and devotion, advocated a path of devotion and meditation. Nanak too could not remain indifferent with the problems of his day. He seems to have been moved by the sufferings of the day and pained by the cruelty of the rulers¹⁰⁷. He emphasised the true nirguna bhakti tradition. Guru Nanak describes God as a pure light through which everything is illuminated and as *sat*¹⁰⁸ *Guru* was given the place of *sadguru*. The ultimate *Guru* is God and the *Guru* is the source of the transmission of God's grace love and wisdom. *Sants* of this period also share with Vaishnava a belief in grace and the power of the divine name, the idea of lover and beloved can emphasize on the pain of separation that salvation is attainable by all¹⁰⁹. While the orthodox Vaisnava tradition has found at the level of doctrine that salvation is offered to all regard less of social status,

ritual banias, between high and low caste had not really been challenged at the level of practice and leadership almost remained in the hands of Brahmins¹¹⁰. But the radical form of bhakti was especially attractive because it combined an ethical behaviour and egalitarian social value which is more congenial than the complexities of divine incarnation, image worship, temple, ritual and intermediary role of brahman priesthood.

Some saints were sudras and untouchables few were women who had no access to brahmancial knowledge, some were illiterate and they expressed themselves in vernacular languages with oral tradition.

Kabir talking against idol worship says-

"The gardner's wife picks flowers,
each flower is a life.
But that idol for which she picks,
them is a lifeless stone".

Describing the concept of *SatGuru* he says-

The *satguru* is the true *Guru*

Who loosed off a single sahda
The moment is struck, I fell to
to ground and opened wocind in my breast¹¹²

For Pandit Kabir says

Those who study loads, and loads of book is not pandit
A real pandit is one who knows the real meaning of love¹⁰³
Pandit who talks about philosphy and sect is not pandit¹⁰⁴

Beside this Kabir criticised the Muslim in the mosque he was
challenging the very authority of Muslim state but a tyrannical
authoriy.

Kankar pathar jor ke, masjid lai chunay
*Ta charhi mullah bang de, hya bahara hua khuday*¹⁰⁵

Kabir's efforts in bringing the Hindu and Muslim at par hitting out at
their follies was nothing short of a revolution. He was putting the
conquered on the same level as the conueror. It was a bond to provoke
the ire of muslim state¹¹⁶.

Sants of this period portray women on the one hand as paragons of

beauty grace love, devotion, service and undependable, lustful and destructive in nature men have been warned to shun their company. If they wanted spiritual salvation or even mental peace. Talking about the family life Kabir was strongly opposed to the idea of devotee for saking his wife and family¹¹⁷ True devotion, according to him implied doing without however being ensnared by maya or losing senses. He not only considered that wife and family were not obstacles in the path of self knowledge, he constantly used the imagery of love between husband and wife as the relationship that should subsist between the individual and soul(atma) A devoted wife who surrendered herself completely to husband would be dear to husband in whatever way she lives. In fact to keep a devoted wife well was matter of honour for the husband.¹¹⁸ But a good wife must also win the affection of the other family members- mother, father. in-law and the elder and younger brother, sisters of husband¹¹⁹

Kabir contrast a devoted wife with the prostitute who sells her wares at the market place and tries to entice the innocent and the unwary. Again he uses the contrast an allegorical way to convey philosophical message. He says

Women is like a black cobra

in the midst of the three worlds

Those who love Ram escapes her¹²⁰

speaking of behaviour towards other's wife he points

Another man's wife is like sharp blade

Which few can escape

Let it not enter you into your belly,

even if the blade be gold¹²¹

For prostitute he mentions

"Women is a pit of hell"

"A beautiful woman is like a snake,

those who touch get bitten

But it dares not come near those,

who enamoured the Feet of Ram"¹²²

"Women ruins everything,

when she comes near a man

Devotion, Salvation, and divine knowledge,

no longer enter into soul¹²³

Kabu's criticism of public women intended to those who dressed themselves in order to attract othewr men. He compares that woman to venmous snake or poisonous fruits, or fire which burns, even the sight of such women is dangerous.

Women and gold are the same thing

it is like eating poisonous fruit

you look at them and you die¹²⁴

Dadu Dayal who followed the tradition of Kabir says a woman is but the enemy of man and man is the enemy of woman at the end nothing will be left. A woman should be kept at home only when she serves the husband¹²⁵. Tukaram says "give me not the company of women for by them I forget God's worship and my mind goes beyond control as only diety of woman was to serve her husband through institution of marriage. Kesavdas says clearly that a woman should not leave her husband even if he is disabled, dumb and mad, lame, blind and deaf. The Bhakti poet of Nirguna branch were primarily associated with professions like tanning, weaving trading, tailoring etc. where women were moving away from professions.

Nanak is all in praise for women -

It is by women that we are conceived
and it is from her that,
we are betrothed and married.
It is woman we befriend, and it is she who
keeps the race going
when one woman dies another is sought
for and it is with her that we get
established in society. Why call her evil
from whom are born king and great men¹²⁶

But again we see that Nanak praises her as a woman who is revolutionary and throws away the social barriers and objects to set social norms¹²⁷ One who is not married or remains childless has no honour in society. Nothing is said about those who move away from their familial responsibilities.

At the end of this review one can say that the bhakti movement was a continuous process especially starting from the vedic period which took place in 9th century south India and marked some social changes with indirect impact of India and later on led to amalgamation of two cultures Hindu and Islamic by borrowing things from each other. With bhakti we see there was lot of change in the position of women

and especially during saguna bhakti which is marked by the emergence of a number of women bhaktas. As scholaras ¹²⁸ have argued that during this period women enjoyed social freedom and acceptance from society but now my problematic is whether this freedom was freedom and acceptance in society or just remained within the boundaries of religion leaving aside the ordinary women, did women bhaktas themselves every get a respectable position in society? Secondly when all the saguna poets like Sur, Chaitanya, Mira are all in praise for women then how come Tulsi was left unaffected. In the real sense was he anti-women or are his dieas taken from the conditions of his times? Thirdly, what are the femine elements in Mira and Tulsi's poetry which can help us in defining the privileged position of women within bhakti movement during the medieval period and what does the great epic of its time *Ramcharitmanas* has to say about the status of women.

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hard labour of grinding, pounding, washing clothes,
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Chapter 2

MIRABAI - A REBEL

In the history of Bhakti movement, fifteenth and sixteenth century marked a remarkable change in the position of women as pointed out by many historians¹. Talking especially about women Bhaktas, it is argued that Bhakti movement provided an enlarged space for women in the society. So, taking the example of Mira as a female Bhakta I would like to study her works which will help us in understanding the period in which she lived and the role society played in her life.

An extensive range of women's writings during this period express the pathetic conditions in which women lived, their sufferings and their final revolt. If, Mira is said to have received social freedom, then why did she suffer and why was she not accepted by her family and husband? And why was there need to revolt against the society and her in laws? Why did she take refuge in the company of *Sadhus* (holy men) rather than going back to family? Even in the name of God, her actions were not acceptable to society; it was only *sadhus* and saints who recognised her devotion for God and respected her for her spiritual genius. Parita Mukta,² after survey of Mewar has also pointed

out that, till today the upper class people of Mewar have not accepted Mirabai as a source of honour to their caste and family. Further, the name Mira is never given to any girl in the family nor are her songs; even singing of her *Bhajans* is socially out-lawed in some parts of Rajasthan. Even, today, she is considered as one who has compromised family honour.

Secondly, the poetry of this period did mark some feminine elements, (especially the religious poetry) which implies that freedom of expression a woman got was within the purview of religion. Rejecting the existence of worldly husband she looked to God and calls herself his wife, mistress, beloved and maidservant. Not only female, but also male bhaktas used female voice and feminine actions towards God. Suffering, longing & serving God was given importance. Female arts like dancing, singing became means of bhakti to unite with God. Here, Mira being a woman was at an advantageous position, there was nothing that she imbibed from outside as she developed all the traits internally.

LIFE-

To separate the legend from Mira's real life is very difficult and has

also raised the controversy regarding the dates of Mira's life span. Based on the literature produced by Munshi Devi Prasad³, Acharya Parshuram Chadurvedi, M. M. Gauri Shankar Hirachand Ojha, Hermann Goetz and others, it has been accepted that Mira was born in 1498 as the only daughter of Ratan Singh a Rajput noble of the house of Rathor. Based on the material present in the Archives of Mewar⁴, her birth place is recorded as village in the neighbourhood of Merta, a small Fortress city, some forty or fifty miles north east of the city of Ajmeer. It is about 220 miles south- west of Delhi.

Mira appears to have been born in circumstances that favoured devotion to Krishna. We see that, when Mira's mother died, the image of Krishna was present at her house and there is further folk lore that when she became so attached to the image, her mother jokingly told her that Krishna would be her bridegroom. This is quite apparent when Mira sings-

"O Krishna did you ever rightly,
value my childhood love"⁵

She also records seeing herself married to Lord in dream⁶

Sister the lord of the poor
came to wed me in a dream
fifty six crores of deities formed the bridal
And the bridegroom was,
the Lord of Braj, in my dream
I saw the wedding arc constructed.

These two verses clearly show that Mira from her childhood was in the practice of offering puja to Krishna. Her grandfather Rau Dudaji and his eldest son were worshippers of Krishna. Mira's uncle Viramji and Viramji's son Jaymal are all mentioned as Bhaktas in later hagiographical literature.

In 1516⁷ she was given in marriage to Bhojraj, the son of the great Rana Sanga, head of Sisodiya clan ruler of the time. He ruled from the famous citadel of Chittor. For his family, honour was very important and Mira, from a respected Rajput family was considered to be the suitable match for his son. When Mira entered her in-laws house after her marriage she was told by her mother-in-law to worship the family Goddess; but, Mira refused to do so as from her childhood she was worshipping only Krishna and knew no other God. Verses from Bhaktmal describes it as-

"When she reached the house, she
touched her mother-in-law feet
The mother-in-law arranged for puja of the goddess
The groom worshipped first and then,
the bride was to worship
She said how can one, who
has been sold into Girdhar's hands
worship any other?
My aspirations are set on him alone⁸.

She not only refused, to worship the family goddess but also called
her relationship with Rana as false. She never accepted Rana as her
husband and declared herself married to Krishna by saying.

Mine is the dark one who, dwells in Braj
Friend marriages of this world are false,
they are wiped out of existence.
wed my indestructible one,
whom the serpent, death can not devour⁹

Going against the customs and traditions of marriage she remained
sexually unavailable to her husband and remained virgin all through

her life and died as a childless woman. Talking about her virginity

Mira says

"Come into my courtyard, *Giridhara*,
The women are singing auspicious hymns
I have set aside a square for thy welcome
heaped with pearls of my tears
I cast my self before the, body and mind
servant Mira takes refuge at thy feet
for thy sake she has remained a virgin
from birth to birth¹⁰.

Second reference about her virginity is-

O *Girdhar*, I stand before you in supplication
spare my shame.
says Mira : O Madhav. O my master
for thy sake have I preserved virginity
Birth after birth
My mind has taken full refuge in thee.

Some verses from Mira's poem suggest that she was indifferent

to her marital duties. Many traditional scholars prefer to believe that she was an ir-reproachable wife as long as her husband was alive. After the death of her husband Mira revolted against the decision of family member and refused to enter into the pyre of her husband. As she announces -

"I will not commit sati,
because mine is lord Krishna
No body else¹²"

Seeing her behaviour number of restrictions were put on her by her in-laws. She was not allowed to move out from house and sing. She lost respect as daughter-in-law. If these restrictions were aimed at making her submissive, they failed as she turned more aggressive;

Mine is the lifter of mountains,
the cowherd, and none other
O'Sadhus there is no other
I have seen the world
I left brothers, I left kindred,
I left all I had, sitting near sadhus,
I have left worldly shame
I looked at the devotees

and I was one with them
I looked at the world and wept
with tears I watered love's creeper
and it took root
I churned the milk, drew out the ghee
and threw away the whey
Rana sent a cup of poison: I drank it
I slayed ecstatic
Mira's attachment is strong-what
was to happen has happened¹³.

This verse reveals that Mira didn't get any acceptance from her family members. The only option left to her was leaving them and joining the company of *sadhus*, where she found solace and ointment for those wounds inflicted by her in-laws.

HOSTILITY TOWARDS MIRA-

Mira described both male and female figures as hostile, the women described here as hostile are family members (especially her husband's sister and mother) whereas, male figures are depicted more powerful

and dangerous. Their displeasure had more fearful consequences as they often tried to kill her. In the words of her husband's sister-

Sister in law, I have tried my best to dissuade you, but failed,
do listen to me -

The Rana is angry- do not go amongst strange *sadhus*

It is a blot on the family, sister-in-law

we are, being severly criticised

Wandering from forest to forest with *sadhu*

you have lost your honour

you have been born in a great house

yet you dance clapping your hands

for you to sit amongst the high and

the low (making no distinction)

sister-in-law when you are so superior caste

And when you have husband like Rana¹⁴

Mira faced strong resistance from family and people of her caste then any where. To stop her exit from the house she was locked with a watchman sitting outside. All the doors which bhakti opened were locked by family and society.

O friends I can not live without the delight giver

my mother in law fights, my sister-in law teases,
And Rana remains angry
They have a watch-man sitting at the door
and a lock fastened on it
why should I give up my first love
the love of former life?

Mira's God is lifter of mountain none else please me¹⁵.

Not only male but also female members of the family were angry with Mira. She was continuously abused by her mother-in-law and tortured by Rana. Whenever she looked out for social space she was always punished by the family and when they found her disobedient and intolerable they tried to kill her to save their family prestige and honour of caste and class.

The king essayed his kind of gift
a snake coiled in a basket, Mira saw
instead a garland and wore it
Next came a royal cup of sparking poison
Mira looked it was, the dew of life she quaffed it
last throw of dice was bed of nails,
fine pointed Mira touched them,
saw a sheet of flowers lay on it¹⁶.

Mira's unbending defiance and the Rana's failure to either subdue or kill her made him more angry and he started persecuting Bhaktas.

As Mira sings-

Strange are the ways of fate

The deer has large eyes to see yet
stays(as if lost) from forest to forest

The crane is shining white and
cuckoo black in hue

River water flows pure and sea turns it into salt

Fools are enthroned as kings and
learned wanders from door to door

O'Mira's God, lifter of mountains

The Rana persecutes the bhaktas¹⁷

Besides the attempt to persecute and kill, Rana also tried to seduce her to material comforts so, that she would to the kingdom and remain inside the four walls of the palace. As Mira herself says-

Rana gave me poison, I came to know

He sent a bed of nails from which I was saved

He sent a cup of poison, I had that also

Now he says leave the company of
sadhus I will make you 'Patrani'¹⁸ (queen of queens)

When Mira refused his offer saying she was Krishna's Patrani than
she was persecuted and there was no peace for her as Rana constantly
trouble her

O'my King

Why did you bear enimity against me?

why do you play the role of prickly cactus

now I have left the palace,

And its lofty lovers

I no longer live in your city,

I have renounced antimony and tilak

and donned the ochre robe

Mira's lord is the courtly Giridhar

He turned the poision into nector¹⁹

Rana tried all his tricks against her leaving not a single stone
untruned. Mira calls him cactus and thorns which pircks all the time.
Her choice of joining company of sadhu's was a result of problems
created by her brothoer-in-law. As Mira expresses

Rana to me your slender is sweet
some praise me, some blame me
I go the other way,
on the narrow path I found God's people,
what could I turn back for?
I am learning wisdom among the wise
and the wicked look at me with malice
Mira's lord is Girdhar Nagar
Let the wicked burn in a furnace²⁰

She never cares about what people say and giving no heed to family
relation she goes to learned sadhus. When her husband's sister says

"O sister-in-law Mira
leave the company of *sadhus*
whole town speaks bad about you²¹"
then Mira replies-

"In this world no one is mine
beside you lord
mother, father, family, caste group
everything is false

as all of them go for their self interest²².

Showing her resentment towards worldly people she calls all the social & familial relationship as false(mithya). She trusts only Giridhar who is her own and takes refuge in him.

MIRA'S REVOLT-

After long silence and suffering, Mira revolted against the political authority of the Rana and the social norms. But Mira being rebellious challenged the Rana

Even king of the house of Sisodiya rages
what can he do?

I shall continue to sing the glories of govind

If the king becomes angry, he may keep
his kingdom and welcome

But if God becomes angry than

I shall lose trust like a withering flower

Fearlessly, sister I will sail the boat

Of the name of Shyam

And cross the oceans of becoming

Mira has taken refuge with the dusky Giridhar

sister, she will keep close to those lotus feet²³

For her kingdom of Krishna was more important than the kingdom of Rana which meant simply losing that particular land which was not very important but losing favour in the eyes of lord was waste of whole life. Instead of bowing her head in front of Rana she bowed it to Krishna.

Putting her family honour at bay she gave up family decorum and turned to be streets-

I donned anklets and danced

The people said "Mira is mad"

My mother in law declared

that I have ruined the family's reputation

The king sent me a cup of poison

Which I drank with smile

I have offered body and mind

To the feet of Hari

And will drink the nectar of holy sight

My lord is the courtly *Giridhara*

My lord in the I will seek refuge²³.

Tying of anklets and dancing in the street was never considered to be good for Rajput women, who to save their female prestige commit 'jauhar'. But Mira revolted from her family by keeping away from family prestige and turned out to be an open rebel after overcoming social atrocities.

As a married woman from Rajput family Mira was made to wear tokens of the marital status, like bangles, ornament of gold, Kohl, and hair tied properly. But Mira said that in the name of *hari* she had broken all the traditions and customs of the family

Your gorgeous kingdom does not please me
'O king there are no holy men in your kingdom
All are liars and good for nothing.
I have given up all my ornaments,
Even my bangles 'O king
I do not plait my hair
or apply ointment to my eyes
Mira's God is the courtly Giridhara
She has found the perfect bridegroom²⁴.

Kingdom as a sign of social and political prestige is put down by

Mira as she says that kingdom has only outer show but no inner jewel(saints) "All the people in your kingdom are liars and they are not fit to stay with". Symbols of married life are also denied by her as she says "my bridegroom is Girdhar" and revolts against the sign of familial authority and social status by removing the bangles and gets freedom from being called wife of Rana.

Revolting from the world and keeping herself away from the husband she declares,

Though he is forbidden to me
I can not do without Shyam
I will keep far away from the world
And enjoy the company of holy men
And the bliss of Hari
He can take my body and mind
As he already has my heart
my mind is fixed on Giridhara
And cares not for the insults of the world
Mira's lord is Hari, the indistructible
She says I have taken refuge with thee²⁵

Mira preferred company of sadhus more than the company of her husband and after a lot of humiliation and charges she ceased to care for the world. Rana, her husband was denied of her body and mind while she surrendered it to the lord and decided to keep herself away from cruel world (unholy people).

After the death of her husband she went against the set norms of the society and rebelled against the social norms by not committing sati.

"Why should I burn myself on a pyre with
the body of Rana and be sati
Is not Girdhar my eternal consort
I recognise no relationship
of body or by marriage to human beings
I only know one Girdhar, he is my
father, mother, husband, kin, none besides
I have nothing to do with ruler of state
says Mira²⁶.

Mira's social acceptance was not possible in any way as she went against the norms of society. Secondly, renouncing the familial ties,

thirdly, rejecting Rana as her husband were defamatory enough to call her a social rebel. Once she breaks from the world she sings-

No one is going to stop me, Mira goes on and on
leaving the shame, family honour and
hesitation and seperating from it
I am not worried about respect and
dishonour, now I walk in the
sheet of knowledge
leaving palace and good cloths Mira takes
refuge in open²⁷

Mira herself accepts that she was a rebel in the society of her time as, she knew about all the social and political restrictions still, she did not turn back. She mentions that I have seperated all the ornaments, like family honour, veil and sober behaviour to gain knowledge of Krishna's name. Now I am no more a resident in the palace and wearer of good cloths and but a mendicant under the open sky. She picked up Guru from lower caste which was not acceptable to the ego of the Rajputs.

I have found a guru in Raidas, he has given me the pill of

knowledge

I have lost the honour of the family

I went astray with the sadhus

I constantly rise up, go to God's temple

and dance snapping my fingers

I do not follow the norms as the eldest

daughter in law, I have thrown away the veil

I have taken refuge with the great guru, and

snnapped my fingers, all the consequences ²⁸

Raidas is believed to be a sant from lower caste a chamar, and Mira accepted him as her Guru by justifying her action in God. . As the daugher-in-law of prestigious Rajput family she was supposed to stay at home and wear a veil but she constantly went to the temple and danced infront of *Giridhar's* idol.

When a woman(a true bhakta) like Mira was deprived of her social freedom then how can one expect freedom for an ordinary woman. What ever Mira did was acceptable within the limits of religion so, she joined the company of *sadhus* and devoted her life to Kirshna. Female devotion of Mira got recognition within the limits of Bhakti. Tulsi who was her contemprary wrote a letter advicing her to leave her family and

joined the company of devotees. She mentions

"My mother father and saints
tell me that whatever you
feel is right, do that only"²⁹.

FEMININE ELEMENTS

The presence of feminine elements in her poetry show that woman was given important position in the religious circle. Most of the Bhaktas chose feminine qualities as a path to reach God. emotions, longing, suffering, caring, humble submission and total surrender to the loved one were important features of the Bhakti movement in Medieval India. God was treated as husband, lover, friend, (Krishna of Gopis) parent and childhood friend. These adjectives were used by women and later on they were taken over by male bhaktas. This way Mira was in a better position when compared to the male bhaktas as womanhood was a part of her and feminine elements in her poetry are very well used.

Giridhar as Mira's beloved
I danced before my Giridhara
Again and Again I dance

To please the discerning critic
And put his former love to the test
I put on the anklet
of the love of Shyam,
And behold my Mohan
stays true.
Wordly shame and family custom
I have cast to the winds
I do not forget the beauty of
the beloved
Even for an instance
Mira is dyed deeply in the dye
of Hari³⁰.

Mira dances in front of the image of Krishna in the same way a girl dances in front of her lover to make him happy. So, that he will forget his former lover and accept her. By tying anklet she has left worldly, shame and put down the family honour only to gain love of her beloved. She is so deep in his love that she has dyed herself in the colour of her lover.

Giridhar as companion-

Let me go to the house of Giridhara

Giridhara is my true lover
On beholding his beauty, I long for him much
As night falls I set out to see him,
And at break of day I return
Day and night I sport in his company
I please him in a way I can,
whatever he clothes me in that I wear
Whatever he offers that I eat
My love for him
is ancient and long standing
without him I could not live
where ever he places me there I remain
if he solds me in slavery
I would acquiesce
Mira's lord is the courtly Giridhara
she offers her self in sacrifice again
and again³¹.

Mira calls him as her true lover and surrenders totally to him.
Whatever way her lord wants to keep her she will live and rejoice. She
spends day and night in his company not bothering about the world. So
great is her love for Krishna.

Giridhar as her bridegroom
sister the lord of the poor came to wed
me in a dream
fifty six crores of deities formed the bridal
procession
And the bridegroom was the lord of Braj
In my dream
I saw the wedding Arch constructed
And the lord took my hand
In my dream
I underwent a wedding ceremony
And entered a married state³².

She imagines him as her bridegroom and dreams of getting married to him. This is the feminine element where the woman dreams of her lover and impatiently waits to see him as her groom and she considers herself as his bride.

Mira is all in pain as she waits for her lover-
I do not know how to meet my Lord
He came into my courtyard and went
And I only know that I missed him

I spend day in search
scanning the road nigh and day
Hari came into my courtyard
But wretch that I am
I was asleep
The pain of absence burns my bewildered heart
And gives me no rest
O servant Mira,
who-so ever once meets Lal Giridhara
should never let go³³.

Mira is suffering in the absence of her lord, she is in impatiently looking for him day and night and regrets for having slept, for she could not meet him when he came to her. Her heart is all in pain for him. Waiting and suffering for her lover has become part of her life.

Mira as servant of lord and he as master

O Giridhara lal, you enjoyed a feast
servant Mira begged a boon
And my dear Krishna show his compassion
He who protects and nourishes his servants

Accepted a savoury dish
I held the platter before him
while Giridhara feasted royally
servant Mira will take refuge in thee
Grant her contentment soon³⁴

Here 'servant' is used in the sense of a maid servant, and Krishna is the Lord whom Mira feeds and asks for a boon. For her Krishna is one who protects and nourishes every one as a master and his servants take refuge in him. In the same way Mira also asks for contentment. Here the image is projected as the maid servant of a male master.

Mira all in pain for her Shyam-

I am mad with love
And no one understands my plight
only the wounded
understands the agonies of the wound
when a fire rages in the heart
Only jeweller knows the value of jewel
Not the one who let's it go
In pain I wandered from door to door

But could not find a doctor
says Mira harken my master,
Mira's pain will subside
When Shyan comes as a doctor³⁵.

Expressing her deep love for Krishna and waiting for such a long time for her lover her heart and body is all in pain, she says dear Krishna you only know the value of my love no body else. This pain in her heart is due to the absence of her lover. Only when he will come as a doctor will she be cured.

Equality between a woman and devotee-
who can understand the grief
of a woman parted from her beloved?
only one who has felt the pangs of absence
or perhaps a devotee
The physician is present within the patient
only physician knows the remedy
The daggers of the absence of the Beloved
Has pierced my breast
Without Hari, all pleasures are as dust
I am like a mad cow roaming in the forest

who can think only of her lost calf⁶⁵.

She presents the image of a woman who is separated from her beloved. Nobody can understand her grief except a devotee who himself longs for God and undergoes a pain. Without her lover she is not in peace and roams around like a mad cow searching for her calf. Her comparison with devotee marks an understanding between, the two a devotee also waits for the final union with God.

Mira's sacrifice for her beloved Shyam

The beloved has abandoned me

with whom, could I play holi?

I have taken off all gems and pearls

And donned the jogi's beads

Neither food nor house pleases me

The beloved had driven me mad

why did he subject me

To the pain of absence?

If you are now loving another

why did you love me first

many days have passed

And still he has not come

O my companionon I am disturbed³⁶

For Krishna's sake she has stopped wearing gems and pearls and now she wears beads of jogin as she searches for him from one place to another. She longs for him as his absence has driven her mad. She berates Krishna for jilting her and yet waits for him steadfastly.

Mira impatiently waiting for Shyam
I have sacrificed my life
Unto the beautiful Shyam
For thy shake O Shyam,
I have abandoned worldly shame and
family custom
without his sight I find no rest
And streams of tears fall from my eyes
To whom could I speak?
who could assuage my pain?
The river of seperation is powerful stream
says Mira flarken, lord grant me
for thy feet are my only suppre³⁷

Mira has been impatiently waiting for her male lover for whom

she has not only given up the family honour and wordly shame but also her whole life. She is suffering from the pain of the seperation from her only lover and asks him to give her some place under his feet. She presents the image of a humble worshipper.

Mira's total submission to Krishna, her beloved-

My darling grant me your sight

I cannot exist with out you

Life with out you

Is like a pond with out a lotus

Or a night without the moon

I pass the night in deep distress

The pain of absence eats my heart

No food by day and no sleep by

No words pass my lips either,

who will listen to me to whom can I speak?

Come my beloved and quench my pain

why do you torment me O inner Ruler?

If you come my pain will go

Mira is your servant³⁸

Her love has lasted through many births she calls Krishna her

lover in all her previous births and calls herself as the servant of her lover. She is longing to be united with him, as without him there is no beauty in her life. She is longing for one sight of her beloved and waits impatiently forgoing food and sleep.

Krishna as companion of her Former birth

I send letter to my beloved

To dear Krishna,

But he sends no message of reply
purposely preserving silence

I sweep his path in readiness

And gaze and gaze

Till my eyes turn blood shot

I have no peace by night or day,

My heart is fit to break

O, master you were my companion

In former births

when will you come?³⁹

This verse, gives a clear image of Krishna being lover of Mira for whom she waits. She is quite worried as Krishna never sent a reply to her letter. She reminds him that "our love is not love of this world". It

is a love of all births you were my companion then and now.

All the above quoted verses are taken from 'Miravani' a collection of Mira's padavali in original language by Kalyan Singh Shekhawat, He has collected these (pandas') verses from documentation of Pustak Prakash from Jodhpur. These manuscripts were written by Mira herself and some saints of that period. This documentation of that period. This documentation sector was established by Maharaja Mansingh in Vikram Samvat era 1731. For translation purpose I have used Alston's book Devotional songs of Mira, a standard work which is used by a number of historians. Another primary source is collection of songs by Parsuran Chaturvedi's Mira Ki Padavali which has been used by Historians like Hawley J.S. and others. Almost all the verses mentioned here are present in Mira Ki Padavali.

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TULSIDAS-MALE BHAKTA

Tulsidas who emerged as an important Saguna Bhakta in the sixteenth century was a contemporary of Mira. Talking of the trends of his time, most historians see him as conservative. Historical writings indicate that Tulsi does not consider the path of knowledge suitable for women and her only duty was to render service to her husband. But my suggestion is that Tulsi could not have remained indifferent to the then existing ideas which gave a lot of religious freedom to women because this was the time, when women got the freedom to worship and pray at par with male Bhaktas.

Tulsidas remained silent on the question of freedom of women in society but his ideas about the freedom of women within the limits of religion were quite evident. The presence of "Feminine" elements in his renowned work *Ramcharitmanas* where he accorded a high status to female devotees, who received this status through love and devotion towards God. Most of the time devotion of the woman is discussed at great length by him and women acquire a centrality in the unfolding of the story of *Ramcharitmanas*. As the whole epic revolves around narratives related to women characters and her central position cannot be denied to the extent that throughout the epic linkages have been provided by women.

Tulsi's projection of Ram is in consonance with the amount of

respect that Tulsi gives to women, to the extent that he consider the relationship between Ram and Sita as one of deity and devotee, where the devotee is wedded with her choosen God and at times lives with him and at other times longs and suffers for him and waits for the final union. Ram is shown as one who goes in search of his devotee and saves her from all evils. Side by side Tulsi also gives a description of the impediments that comes in the path of devotion and the way female devotion crosses all obstacles to achieve a set goal.

LIFE

Most of the material concerning Tulsi is not reliable, but early biographical accounts of Tulsidas, particularly the *Gautam Chandrika* and *Bhaktamal*. Finally, we shall try to ascertain, from both the ledgendary material and the research of modern scholars about the central events in Tulsidas's life.

Tulsidas frequently refers to his personal life, particularly in the *Vinaya Patrika*. Such disclosures are meant to confess his sinful condition, to proclaim his utter dependence on Ram, or to deplore his physical ailments. When he does make allusions to particular events in his life, their meaning is not always clear.

In *Kavitavali* he wrote:

His father and mother brought him into the world and abandoned him.

Destiny had written nothing good upon his forehead,

He was a low vessel for disrespect, a coward who was glad to get even the scraps thrown out for dogs(2).

This verse perhaps suggests that the poet was born on an inauspicious day, and as a result his parents felt obliged to disown the baby. Such an interpretation is corroborated by another statement found in *Vinaya Patrika*.

"And as the wretched snake cast off slough, so did my father and mother abandon me

They feared even to touch my shadow such was misfortune."

His childhood was very painful as he says

"Bare, *Tae laloat Bilat dandaar deen*

Jaanti hai charri phal chaari chank kari"(3)

For food and clothing he went from door to door asking for it. Four grains of gram were equal to four fruits. Then he gives a reference of his meeting with *Narhari*, his spiritual Guru.

I told you poverty at every door.

I gnashed my teeth and fell at feet,

till some holy man saw my

misery and said

sorrow no more Ram is the refuge of wretches(4)

This was the turning point in his life when he became devotee of Ram

and his *Ramcharitmanas* was product of this devotion towards Ram. Tulsi was born in the year 1543 at Eta in U.P. He was married to the daughter of Dinabandhu Pathak called Ratnavali and the couple's only son Taraker died in infancy(5).

Till now 12 works of Tulsi has been discovered. They are *Ram Lalaanchachu*, *Vayragye*, *Sandipani*, *Ramagya Prashn*, *Janki Mangal*, *Ramcharitmanas*, *Parvati Mangal*, *Gitavali*, *Vinaya Patrika*, *Kushana Katiavali*, *Barvairamayan*, *Dohavali*, *Kavitavali* and *Hanumanbahuk*

Tulsidas is very specific in revealing the date when he began to write his most famous work *Ramcharitmanas*. "In the *Samvat* year of sixteen hundred and thirty one (A.D. 1547) I lay my head on *Hari's* feet and write the story. On Tuesday the ninth day of the month of *Jaita* in city of Avadh, I begin the story of his acts." *Ramcharitmanas* is divided into seven parts which is written in the form of *Doha* and *Chaupai*. Today it comes in the category of respectable works. It is all about one's devotion towards God. Due to its popularity it was translated into a number of languages and used as an authentic source by historians to understand the ideas of Tulsi.

WOMEN DEVOTEES

Tulsi starts his Epic by paying reverence to all the goddesses before taking the name of male Gods. Sita comes before Ram as he bows at her and calls her the cause of creation.

"I revere *Swarswati* and *Ganesha*"(6)

"I revere *Parvati* and *Shankara*"(7)

"I bow before Sita the beloved of Ram the cause of creation and preservation, the destroyer of sorrow and the source of blessings"(8)

Showing reverence again and again to Ram he calls Sita's name before Ram and pays homage to Kausalya for her glory in the world. For him they who are close to Ram are great women.

"I propitiate the two lotus feet of *Janaki*, Janak's daughter, mother of the world, best beloved of him in whom all mercy dwells that by her grace I may attain to unclouded an understanding(9)

Now I do homage to *Kausalya* the eastern heaven, whose glory stands diffused throughout the world(10).

He talks about woman's nature by depicting Sati who wanted to test the lord by putting on the guise of Sita. Tulsi feels that it is the nature of woman to doubt even one who knows everything:

Sati sought to practice deception even on him(Ram)

see what a woman's nature can make her do

But Ram acknowledged her and addressed her with a smile(11).

These words of praise are used by Tulsi for a woman and he describes her efforts to win Shiva's heart and her devotion towards him:

She shall command the respect of whole world and he who serves her shall lack nothing. By mere thought of her name women in this world shall tread the wifely fidelity, though it be narrow as the edge of a sword(12).

Parvati's devotion was so great towards lord Shiva that she left her parents and went to practice penance. She got so absorbed in penance that she took no heed of her body. For some days she lived on fruits and roots, some years only on water and then on air for few days. Seeing her devotion Tulsi is all praise for her:

I fall at your feet continiously

Parvati, the mother of the world and
beseech you to go home.

It is already late when the sages

beheld Parvati's devotion they cried

glory all glory to you Bhavani mother of universe(13).

His work also gives a clear picture of position of women in society and her grievences:

Why did God create the women

in the world? She said one who is
always in a state of subjection can
never even dream of happiness(14).

Women's position as social beings did not change but within the limits of religion devotion gave them a higher status. Through devotion Parvati gained Shiva(personal God), she degrades herself only to glorify the name of the lord. But when the lord answers her he talks with all respect by calling her "a sensible lady". In the words of Parvati:

though as a woman I am not worthy
to hear it, yet I am your servant
in thought word and deed(15).

By your grace, my lord, my gloom has
been lifted and I feel happy now by
the favour of my lord's feet. Now
regarding me as your servant, even
though I am a woman, ignorant and
stupid by nature(16).

Shiva who is impressed by Parvati's Bhakti devotion about many women who did wonders with their devotion. For example

Jalandara's wife.

Tulsidas is all in praise for Mandodari and calls her a jewel of womankind because of her devotion towards Ram. Now Maya had a daughter Mandodari by name exceedingly beautiful a jewel of woman-kind(17).

Kausalya, who is the mother of Ram is praised by the poet and the description of the lord's blessings are quite unique. She is a chaste woman who was loyal to her husband and devoted to Hari with her heart and soul-

Kausalya and his other loving
consorts were all chaste in behaviour
faithful to their lord and full of humble
and steadfast devotion to Hari's
lotus feet¹⁸

Reflecting the characteristics of his time Tulsi mentions Kausalya and shows how a woman was in an advantageous position through devotion and God blessed her more than any male Bhakta. Most of the time in the epic it is women to whom the lord reveals

himself as Brahma: The pleasure of seeing the divine form of Ram was given to women as their devotion was considered to be supreme.

"The unborn and all prevailing
Brahma who is un-attained by
illusion without attributes and
indifferent to diversion, lay in
Kausalya's lap, conquered by
her love and devotion¹⁹

-The lord revealed to his mother
his wondrous form, infinite millions
of universes she saw set on every hair²⁰

Kaushalya's devotion to the lord got proper recognition . For her devotion was in the form of a mother to her child(a variant of Feminine devotion). Other queens of the palace are also praised as they are ladies with devoted hearts. Another important female devotee in the epic is Ahalya whose name occurs again and again in order to glorify the lord's name, that a sinner gets eternal life through single minded devotion. Ahalya who was cursed by her husband got eternal life with the mere touch of the lord's feet. Her devotion towards the lord was so great that He himself came to her rescue. For her, the curse of her husband turns out to be a boon with the touch of the

lords' pure feet.

-At the very touch of his holy feet,
which drive away, sorrow, verily
emerged Ahalaya, a true embodiment
of austerity. Beholding the lord of
Raghus, Joy of the faithful, she stood
before him with folded hands
overwhelmed with love and -----²¹
----- I seek no other boon
from you, my master, my soul like
a bee sip the honey of devotion to
the dust of your lotus feet²²

Sita is projected as a remarkable devotee of the lord, one who is
Brahma himself. The Lord was thrilled when he saw her devotion and
praised her for her love and beauty.

Lord looked at Janaka's daughter and
thrilled all over to mark her singular devotion²³

Ram loved Sita so much that at no point of time he could see her
in pain and anxiety and helped her in times of trouble. For Sita He
went all the way to rescue her, and the union of lord Ram and Sita is

looked upon as the union of a devotee with her choosen lord.

Shabari, who was low in origin and caste was great in her devotion and the Lord equally blessed her. For him men, women, high and low all have equal right to worship. Her love for Ram was so great that Tulsi describe it as-

She was so drowned in love that
no words came out of her lips, but
again and again bowed her head
before their lotus feet. She bought
some water and reverently washed
their feet and finally conducted
them to seat of honour²⁴

Her devotion was so great that with love she offered the most delicious bulbs and fruits and the lord lovingly partook all of them and praised her for her devotion. She knew about her humble origins and called herself a dull witted woman, and said in all humbleness

She stood with folded hands before
him, and as she gazed upon the Lord,
her love grew yet more ardent.
How I hymn your praises? She said "I am

a woman of mean descent and of dullest wit²⁵

Of those who are the lowest of the

low, women are lower still, of women

again I am the most dull headed,

O destroyer of sin! listen lady to my

words said Rama, I recognise no

relationship except that of faith²⁶

For a devotee faith in the lord is the most important thing and faith destroys all the barriers created by society, family and sex. One who doesn't have faith never gets favour, whatever caste and sex he belongs to. This becomes quite clear in the words of Ram himself.

-Despite caste, kinship, lineage, piety

reputation, wealth, power connections

accomplishments and ability,

a man without faith is of no more

account than a cloud without water²⁷.

Discarding caste, kinship, lineage, piety reputation, wealth and power he gave importance to nine types of Bhakti: 1) company of Saints; 2) Fondness of legends relating to God; 3) Singing the virtues of the God; 4) Selfless devotion to the lotus feet of the Guru; etc., and

mentions that whosoever practices all these, man and woman, animate and inanimate, will be dear to Him. Giving a total recognition to Bhakti of Shabari the Lord himself is all in praise of her and blesses her-

The lord conferred final beatitude
on a woman like Sabari, of such
low descent and so altogether born in
sin. O exceeding stupid soul! Do you
expect happiness though you have
forgotten such a lord?²⁸

Tulsi has criticised a woman who is not devoted to Ram and tries to dissuade such women from following the path of devotion who use their beauty to gain the attention of men and becomes an obstacle in the path of devotion.

Women again is night impenetrably
murky in which all the owls of
sin delight, or a hook to catch the
fish of reason and strength and honour.
-A young woman is root of all evil
a source of torment and a mini
every owe. bearing this in mind

O sage I prevented your marriage²⁹. These verses describe a woman who is filled with evil things and stays away from love of her lord. Narad was infatuated by women and to put such feelings away from Narad, Ram points out:

A young woman is like the flame of a
lamp. O my soul, be not as the
moth to it! Discarding lust and pride
worship Ram and ever seek the fellowship of the righteous.³⁰

By saying so Tulsi warns that anything which takes you away from Ram is evil and many a time a woman who is not at all religious tries to dissuade other. But a female demon who is devoted to God is praised by him. Being a demon she knows the path of devotion

One of female demon, Trijata by
name was devoted to Ram's feet
and perfect in spiritual wisdom
she summoned all her companion
and told them about the dream ----³¹.

In the light of these verses to take Tulsi as anti-women is as good as doing injustice to *Ramcharitmanas* which speaks so highly of woman and lower caste devotees. He has criticised only those women

who either went against God's will or those who were not devotees of lord.

WOMEN AS THE 'CENTRE OF EPIC'- Tulsi's epic starts with the stories of Sati and Parvati where Shiva is not given much importance. It is only Sati's disobedience and Parvati's devotion towards Shiva which holds the description. It moves with the penance and Bhakti which Parvati underwent to receive favour in the eyes of her husband.

Starting with the story, Kausalya becomes the centre of attraction as the mother of Ram. The story takes a turn with a female demon who was killed by Ram (It was done to glorify the exploits of Ram) Tulsi goes out of context to explain the story of Ahalya who reached heaven with her devotion. The next turn comes with the Svayamvar of Sita which is a very interesting part of the story where, first part discusses the love of Sita and Ram in the garden. The description of Sita's beauty is such that Ram falls in love with her.

When he saw Sita's beauty he was
filled with rapture, he admired it
in his heart, but utterance failed him
He felt as though Brahma the Creator
had put forth his creative skill in visible

form and revealed it to the world³²

-My heart which is by nature pure is

agitated by the sight of her divine

beauty, God alone knows why.

But I tell you brother, the throbbing

of my lucky side betokens good fortune³³

Sita's love towards Ram is equally fascinating as on the advice
of a maid she turns and looks towards Ram-

The Sita shyly opened her eyes and

saw before her the two lions of the

house of Raghu, surveying Ram's

beauty from head to foot.

The cause of whole *Svayamwara* is Sita for whom it is arranged
and she is the one who use to lift Shiva's bow with a single hand,
whereas other powerful kings were not able to lift it at all. Description
of *Svayamwara* revolves around the expression of Sita, court women
and kings. After the *Svayamwara* vow Sunayana steals the ground
and she is projected as a devotee of the Lord. With humble submission
she entrusts Sita to Ram and prays with Folded hands. Other Females
of the palace long to see him. The poet has very carefully discussed the

emotions of these women.

The queens were all so overcome with
joy and rapture that their feet refused
to move and they are faint , passionately
longing for a sight of Ram³⁴

The women of Janakpuri say
Like a dying man who finds nectar
or one who has been starving all
his life and is able to discover the
tree of paradise, or one of the
damned in hell who attains to the
abode of Hari, so are we blessed by
the sight of these³⁵

After marriage Dasratha called for most of the women of Ayodhya
and honoured them which was honour to his kingdom

The king summoned all the
Brahmanas wives and invested
them with robe of honour and
ornaments³⁶

-Next he sent for honourable
women of city and presented

them with garments of their liking³⁷

When the story starts losing its speed, Kaikeyi provides a tempo. Saraswati, who was pleaded by different God's to make arrangements to send Ram to Vanvasa, worked on Manthara's mind. Kaikeyi was quite happy with Ram's accession but Manthara, her maid-servant turned her mind and encouraged her to go against the will of God.

Manthara is called woman with weak mind and Kaikeyi who went against Lord were called wicked woman that's the only way a bad woman in Bhakti is projected³⁸.

Putting Kaikeyi's image as important character of story he describes her evil behaviour.

There she stood before him, burning
with wrath as if it were fury's won
sword drawn from the sheath with
her prevented mind for its
hilt and relentless for its edge,
Sharpened on the whet stone that
was the Manthara³⁹(humpback)

Kaikeyi's boon created havoc in Ayodhya. Every one held her as responsible for Ram's *Vanvasa* as she steals an important place in epic by turning whole story towards battle of Ram & Ravan. Kausalya again emerges and conversation between Ram, Sita and Kausalya holds the ground and ends in the persecution of Ram, Sita and Laxman. Next comes the suffering of fragile Sita who takes all the troubles to stay with her husband and story moves with her when Ram instructs her and tells her about the difficulties which they will face in forest. A new turn comes with Shurpanakha who is projected as a cruel lady

-who has foul heart and cruel as

a serpent. One day she came to

Panchvati and was smitten⁴⁰

-Having assumed a beautiful form she

approached the lord and with many

a smile thus addressed him - I here is

no man like you, nor a woman like me⁴¹

She turned to Ram and Laxmana again and again and when turned into her original form then Laxmana struck her nose and ears.

She became all furious and called for Khar and Dushan but when they die she causes Sita's abduction.

Cried one 'Capture the two
brothers alive and having
seized them, slay them and
carry off the woman⁴².

Story comes in flow when Sita persisted for deer's skin and Ram follows the deer, After the abduction of Sita, Ram goes in search of her and meets Shabari which is included by Tulsi just for the sake of showing her devotion towards lord. Whatever happens, thereafter is all to bring back Sita. The whole animosity and war with Ravana is to get back a single woman(Sita). Lanka was put to fire by Hanuman because he was furious with the behaviour of Ravana towards Sita. Description of female demon at length is merely to present devotion of Taraka towards him. Mandodri is one who works as a good advisor to her husband-

Reflect my beloved lord, and abandon
perversity, it does not behave you
to fight with Raghunatha-----⁴³

After battle of Ravan and Ram again the whole story revolves around Sita who is brought back and then her Agni pariksha to bring her back from fire and their final retreat to Ayodhya.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEITY AND DEVOTEE WITH SOME FEMININE ELEMENTS-

As said earlier, the crux of Tulsi's writing is to show the relationship between the devotee and his god. This relationship is evident from the fact that Brahma himself is born as a human being (Ram) to comfort his devotees and to kill those who stand against him

-Ram is no other than Brahma
the supreme reality, incomprehensible
beginning less, incomparable, unchangeable
and beyond all diversities⁴⁴

-Ramchandra the gracious lord takes
human form and plays the part of man
for the well being of his votaries
and of earth and Brahmans and
cows and Gods⁴⁵.

So Sita here is taken more in the image of a female devotee who takes Ram as husband and worships him. She is one who wins his heart with her devotion. During the time of *Suayamwara* Ram becomes very happy seeing her single minded devotion. During the time of *Vanavas* Sita leaves her family, in-law and all comforts of the palace for her husband. If path of forest is compared with path of Bhakti than

Rama tries to test her by saying

The tracks are beset with prickly
grass and thorns and pebbles of
all kinds, and you will have to
walk afoot without any protection
for the feet your lotus feet
are delicate and lovely the
paths are rough and
intercepted by huge mountains⁴⁶
.....Bears, tigers, wolves, lions
and elephants make such a
roaring and howling that
at the sound of it fortitude
melts away⁴⁷

But once devotee is ready to take path of devotion then lord protects him each and every minute, he looks for his/her comfort and crosses all limits to protect them. To protect Sita, Ram gave her to fire and with *Agni Pariksha* he gets her back. Sita's relationship with Him and her emotions, passions and love for Him all reflect the presence of feminine elements in Tulsi.

Kausalya's relation to lord is that of a mother which is so intimate and full of love and care and she is the one who is privileged enough to come so close to Him. For Kaikeyi the relationship is the same but she is not devoted to the lord and goes against him. Yet, Tulsi's hostility towards her is not due to her sexual identity, but because of her lack of devotion to Ram. Manthara is again kept in the category of low women as she is hostile to Ram. So she is called

That evil minded and low born
woman pondered how that very
night the plain be defeated like
a crafty Bhil woman⁴⁸

All the sinners and demons who were devoted to lord with all love and emotions are praised by him and got upper status in reaching God. Ahalya and Shabari who are described as women of low origin are praised only because of their great devotion. Their relationship with lord is again filled with emotion, pain and longing. Mandodari, the queen of Ravana, was praised again and again as she was all in devotion to Ram.

The elements of pain and longing are very well presented here. After the departure of Ram Dasharatha longs for him and his pain

becomes inexpressible. He could not bear the departure of Ram, suffering and longing for him he died. Bharat who was so close to Ram becomes impatient after the separation from Ram and he is all in grief, Kausalya's heart cries for Ram and Sita and she impatiently waits to meet them in forest. Shabari waits for Ram everyday and is overjoyed by his arrival. Her waiting is compared to chataka bird who waits for rain and his whole desire is fulfilled after meeting her Lord. Love of Nishad and Malla is again great who are overjoyed by the love of Ram.

Shurpanakha is criticised due to her evil nature who tries to test her skills on lord rather than being devotee of lord. To take revenge from Ram and Laxman she went to the extent of acting in front of Ravan and provoked him to steal the most precious thing of Ram.

Where Tulsi speaks evil about woman is when she is not devoted to Ram or one who went against His will. Those who obeyed him got favour in his eyes. Sita was instructed by Anasuya about the relationship between husband and wife, where husband signifies her beloved Ram and devotion to him is said to be a virtue of the highest quality.

Listen O princess mother, father, brother

are all friendly helpers in limited
degree but a husband, Sita is a
unlimited blessing and vile is the
women who refuses to serve him⁵⁰.

Giving more importance to devotion of women Ansuya calls it
their religious duty.

Yet if this wife treats him
with disrespect, she shall suffer
all the torments of hell. To be devoted is her only religious
duty her only vow and
her only guiding rule⁵¹.

Taking the example of Ram again she tells her to remain loyal
and maintain vow of fidelity.

But she who is disloyal to
her lord becomes a widow in
her early youth wherever she be born⁵².

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Importance which is given to husband is given in context of Ram
and Shiva who are the choosen God of their devotees.

All these things clearly show that Tulsi is not anti-woman and his ideas are not against women but against those who are not devoted to the lord. Whole story revolves around women and she stands at the centre. All the female characters are very powerful and have their individual characteristics. Tulsi says nothing is impossible for a woman as she is all powerful and is capable of acute devotion.

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CONCLUSION

Medieval Bhakti which trace its origin from *Rig Veda* was part of hinduism but medieval period did mark a change with inclusion of certain Islamic elements directly or indirectly. Though the changes in the position of women were not much to do with these Islamic elements as Islam does not give much scope to women. But fifteenth and sixteenth century India did provide a better position to women due to the efforts of women Bhaktas themselves and later on these set traditions were followed by Male Bhaktas. Writing of these female and male Bhaktas reflect the changes which were taking place within the limits of religion though society remained hostile towards the changing ideas (denied social freedom to women).

The basic idea of taking Mira and Tulsi was to make a comparative study of their works and to mark the position of women in the whole movement and to throw light on feminine elements present in the literature of that particular period. Tulsi's ideas about the women in society are the same as they were of Mira's in-laws but when it comes to 'Devotion' Tulsi's ideas seems to be very close to Mira's devotional ideas. Devotion is given more importance than set norms of caste, sex, class and clan. For women of medieval society husband and in-laws were very important and women who used to serve them were

considered to be good, but, in the limits of Bhakti one who was devoted to the lord was given higher status by the male and female Bhaktas. Here the lord stood as one and the only male and all those who seek him were females.

This respectful treatment to women was given by saints of the period who were called *sants* and their company is described as 'satsang'. They were devoted to the lord with their heart and soul. Reference to them occur again and again in the works of Mira and Tulsi. When Mira is not happy with her in-laws. She takes refuge in the company of *sadhus* and calls them a oceans of wisdom;at times she talks about their persecution. So, the whole question about the socio-religious position of saints still remains open. At first place they were projected as a resort for those who were devoted to the lord but considered to be rebels in society

Now I have made acquaintance with
thy devotees.

And shun the world from Afar¹

This verse represents devotees(sants) as people of lord not the people of world and speaking in praise of these sants Mira says

O king today I was very fortunate

And enjoyed the company of holy men

Those who associate with holy men

Increase their devotion fourfold

Do not associate with Saktas

It will interfere with your devotion

All sixty-eight places of pilgrimage

Reside at the feet of one holy man,

Along with Banaras and the Ganges.

Ten million times over

who so ever abuses a holy men

will go blind.

Be crippled and end in hell.

Mira's lord is courtly Girdhara

She says I cover my limbs

with the dust of the feet of holymen²

These lines throw light on qualities of saints who are considered to be blessed in all ways praised for their wisdom, devotion and sanctity. Mira's preference ties more in spending time in the company of sadhus than the rituals prevailing in the society. Hence, for Mira the company of sadhus is more precious than any worldly comfort and in her view whoever troubles Sadhu suffers the torcher of hell. But society

does not hold the sadhus in as high esteem as devotees, which is evident in the following verse. But when it came to society

Sister-in-law I have tried my best

to dissuade you but you failed

to listen to me

The Rana is angry do not go amongst

strange sadhus

It is a plot on the Family, sister in law

we are criticised

wandering from forest to forest with

sadhus you have lost your honour³

For the people of the world, sadhus were to be respected from a distance, but not to be commingled with, certainly not be their womenfolk. But Mira being aware of the position of *sadhus* in the society defied the bounds:

Your Highness

Now you can't close me

within walls

The wise(sadhu, sant) are now dear to me

lost is womanly shame,

I have left my mother's house

and the taste of dance is on
my tongue
-sitting in the company of saints
I have lost family honour
My lord is Girdhar Nagar⁴

The tension inherent here in the relationship between the sadhu- the renowner- and the mainstrea, society, people of the world so renounced surfaced here with enormous power. On one hand the very act of renunication makes the sadhu far superior to the householder and the king alike; on the other, longterm association with him is a threat to the social order. And a woman's association with them adds to the threat because of the gender dimension. She would lose 'family honour' in so doing in a social context where both the sanctity of the family and of the family and of its honour are the key elements in the maintenance of social order.

For a woman of high family dancing in public was dishonour but when Mira danced in front of sants she resolved the tension by sublimating both her dance and the company, even if the dance and sadhus company were both a metaphor.

I am dyed deep in love of Shyam

My king dyed deep in love
I danced before the holy men
Beating the drum
People think I am mad over madan⁵.

The *sadhu* has after all "no class and no caste".

In the case of Tulsi historians have demarcated between his representation of society and religious ideas. He very well presents the social and religious responsibilities of king. He divided society into *uttama*, *madhyama*, *neecha* and *dusta* and gave a proper description of this classification. He wanted people to follow varnashrama dharma and strictly maintain the deities assigned to each class. Showing his disappointment about the social order of his time he wanted Brahmanas to involve themselves in learning, Kstariyas in war, vaishyas in production and sudras in serving all the upper classes, as Brahmanas were no more involved in learning and sudras were openly taking part in reciting the Vedas. But when it came to devotion, he invites all the four classes to take part in devotion and total obedience to lord through Bhakti. But there is no social significance of the Sadhu and his religious and social position still needs to be deciphered in Tulsi's work.

The acts of a saint are noble, like

the carrier of a cotton plant,
whose produce is dry, white and
thread like-free from the
emotional attachment he is vishada
free from the darkness of ignorance and sin
gunamaya-full of goodness⁶.

Tulsi describes *sadhu*'s qualities by calling him noble. He says that *sadhu* has control over his emotions and stands as light which is bright and transparent.

Wisdom dawns not without association
with the saints and such communion
cannot easily be enjoyed without the
grace of Rama, Fellowship with the
saints is the root of all joy and
fortune, its flowers are good works
and its fruits perfection⁷.

Tulsi asks for the need of communion with saints who can guide one to the path of devotion their fellowship is blessings of Ram and whosoever associates with saints gets the eternal bliss. If a devotee is in company with saints then he becomes perfect and involves himself

in good works.

I reverence the saints who are even
minded towards all and have no friend
and for, just as a gracious flower,
crushed in both hands, sheds equal
fragrance on the two⁸.

Describing the quality of saint's friendship Tulsi calls him an
selfless person who helps everyone without any distinction and looks
after all with same attention and consideration

Realising thus the noble disposition
and loving nature of saints who are
innocent at heart and desirous of
the welfare of the world I make
this humble submission to them⁹

Giving some more qualities of noble saints he calls them loving
and innocent who is good at heart and never thinks about himself but
about good of the world. Tulsi wants to surrender to them. Now the
question arises whether the respectable position of the saint was still
within the limits of religion or percolated outside the bounds of religion
within the society.

Moreover, to consider the position of women one can again go to the Saguna poets of the medieval period and an indepth study of literature produced in this period will help us in constructing the condition of women as a whole in that period. Surdas, who was contemporary of Mira and Tulsi spoke, highly about women and his poetry marks the use of feminine elements at length. Many a time he projects himself to be one among Gopis who were so close to Krishna. For Surdas woman was neither sex object nor a symbol of lust. She was essentially a symbol of feminine devotion(gentleness love and compassion). So, these gaps can be filled with further study on *Sadhus* and women with reference to other Saguna Bhaktas.

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