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Voices of Devotion: The Oral Tradition and Saint Poetesses of India

Dr Arpita Mitra

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Murarka College, Sultanganj.

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Abstract:

Oral tradition has been recognized as the primary source of cultural and literary heritage everywhere in the world, and India remains one of the world's richest sources of oral tradition. What is unique to Indian oral tradition is the role played by women in it. Some earliest forms of oral poetry (composed during the 6th century BCE to 16th century CE) are found in the body of literature established by the ancient Indian poetesses. Their narratives and songs composed in verse form are the outpourings of their hearts containing the highest form of spiritual realization, metaphysical truth and metaphorical imageries. Their mystical experience led them to compose such compelling poems that they have collectively become the manual of liberation, social integration and reformation as well as a tool to challenge the social and religious orthodoxy. Our wise foremothers made a remarkable contribution to the oral tradition in poetry and as an indigenous heritage that is worthy of preservation and transmission from one generation to another. Their poems are expression of their profound faith and boundless love for the divine, their spiritual longing for a personal deity, and ultimately of their quest for enlightenment. The oral tradition in poetry in India first began with composition of *gathas* (songs) by Buddhist senior nuns (*theris*) during the late 6th century BCE. Later that poetic tradition was carried on by poet- saints like Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded and Mirabai through their Vachanas, Vakhs and Bhajanas. Their verse narratives delineate their journeys of ascendance from the confinement within a marginal/peripheral space of objectification to a space of freedom attained by spiritual awakening. The creative space opened up by them invited the hitherto unheard voices of the marginalized, the women and the so-called lower castes people who were excluded due to oppressive notions based on ritualistic purity.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, Poems, Saint-poetess, Liberation, Reformation, Integration, Realization, Awakening, Enlightenment.

Oral tradition has been recognized as the primary source of cultural and literary heritage everywhere in the world, and India remains one of the world's richest sources of oral tradition. What is unique to Indian oral tradition is the role played by women in it. Some early forms of oral poem (composed during the 6th century BCE to 16th century CE) are found in the body of literature established by the ancient Indian poetesses who were spiritually evolved beings. They made a remarkable contribution to propagate oral poetry as a significant branch of literature since its nascent stage. Oral poetry of the early women poets in India is a significant source of indigenous literary heritage that is worthy of preservation and transmission from one generation to another. The poems of the saint-poetesses are expressions of their profound faith and boundless love for the divine. The poems are also manifestations of their conviction in the equality and social justice.

The earliest known collection of women's poetry in India is *Therigatha*. *Therigatha* poems were composed during the late 6th century BCE to the 3rd century BCE by Buddhist nuns who lived in the "sangha" or monastery. The poems in *Therigatha* were described as *udana* or inspired utterances by Dhammapala as they belonged to speech genre. Later the poems were written down in Pali. Though *Therigatha* can be read primarily as a religious text of "Therabada" Buddhism of Pali canon, it equally draws our attention as a womanist text. They narrate the nuns' spiritual life, their experience of attaining enlightenment, their dissatisfaction of domestic life, their ascetic life in the monastery, and their journey to a state equilibrium that could be achieved by renunciation of all worldly attachments and through the realization of the absolute truth. Attaining "nibban" (liberation) was their ultimate goal in life. They considered the physical body only as an equipment to reach that aim. They succeeded in achieving a state of mind where they could see everything in an impersonal way. Body and gender did not matter to them as they cultivated a gender neutral approach. The songs of *Therigatha* are the expressions of their deep insight to look beyond the trivialities of this materialistic world, the happiness in finding peace under a monastic order, the blissfulness for being connected with Lord Budhdha and the sisterhood and mutual respect they shared among themselves in the nunnery. They raised questions regarding the religious rigidity of *Brahmanical* assumption during the post-Vedic era which deprived the women and *sudras*/ lower castes of their natural right to education, the right to access the Vedas, the right to perform religious rites and above all the right to lead a respectful life. The

bhikkhunis denounced the objectification of women in the then society and disapproved of the evil nexus between the theological and the administrative authority that systematically and successfully disempowered the women and the lower classes (both by caste and financial condition) over the years. They expressed their thankfulness to Lord Buddha as well as monastery for offering them shelter and for protecting them from ill treatment by the patriarchal system prevailed in the society. The people in general displayed a derogatory attitude towards the women. They actually challenged the *Brahmanical* notion that women can never achieve “*thevijja*”, the three knowledge and claimed that they had attained the three knowledge; they could visualize their past actions, the karmas of past lives, they knew the reason behind their rebirth. So they disdained any form of corruption, and maintained a state of complete detachment that would lead to the “*nirban*” or liberation. They realized the meaninglessness materialism as they learned from Lord Buddha’s teaching that human beings are *khandas*, a unique combination of physical things and consciousness. The nuns could realize that reality of existence goes beyond the physical world and cannot be experienced by sensory organs only. The metaphysical aspect of this universe can be understood through prolonged meditation and other spiritual practices. These wise women of ancient age knew to give importance to intellect and wisdom over the body and found delight in diligence. Bhikkhuni Mitta proclaimed,

“My heart’s fear and its sorrow are gone:

I don’t want a god’s body either”. (verse 31)

They eventually forgave and forgot the people and the social system that had acted as a machinery of discrimination and exploitation. They completely surrendered to Lord Buddha and took religious refuge in the monastery. The monastery freed them from the claustrophobic confinement of their homes and the stereotypical roles they played as caregivers there. The wives were considered nothing other than the wretched baby-makers and their biggest achievement was to produce male progeny. On the other hand, a public woman was simply an object of desire and a mass entertainer. All of them were treated alike at the monastery. It offered them an alternative order that is all- embracing. So the poems of the early nuns carry the message of equality in subtle ways.

They realized the meaninglessness of various social norms imposed by the patriarchy and they disassociated themselves from the society that taught women to act like playthings for the men. Bhikkhuni Vimala revealed,

“Intoxicated by my good looks, by my body, by beauty and my reputation, haughty because of my youth, I looked down on other women”. (verse 72)

“I flashed my ornaments as if I were showing my hidden parts, I created illusion for people”. (verse 74)

In post Vedic age, women could not perform any religious rites as they were presumed to be impure. They had no access to Vedas or any religious scriptures. Through their songs they voiced out their disgust regarding the discrimination, injustice, the oppression and other wrongs done to them. They narrated their journey of getting triumphant over anger, desire and ignorance by practicing renunciation. Path of *dhamma* (righteousness) showed them light when they were combating the darkness pervaded everywhere. Bhikkhuni Nanduttara said:

“I saw the body as it was, the carnal desires was no more.

All existences are cut off, wants and aspirations too,

Every tie united, I have attained peace of mind

I wandered about looking for gain and recognition

I stood up, my mind freed

The Buddha’s teaching done”. (verse 98)

Their narratives delineate a journey of ascendance from a state of insignificance to a heightened state of being enlightened and liberated. Rita M. Gross describes their narratives as songs of triumph.

Akka Mahadevi (1130 - 1160) was one of the early poet saints of Kannada literature. Her name Akka (elder sister) refers to a revered position among the lingayat saints. Through Akka Mahadevi’s poems that are popularly known as *Vachanas*, the tradition of oral poetry flourished further in India during 12th century. She was a pioneer poet-saint of Bhakti Movement that stormed the entire India from south to north during medieval period (from 7th century CE to 17th century CE) and transformed the socio-religious scenario of India to some extent. Akka Mahadevi composed around 450 *Vachanas* and these poems are expressions of her ardent love and yearning for her Lord Chennamallikarjuna (Lord Shiva), the symbol of

Purusha (male) aspect in nature. She despised other men around her and sought the union with her lord.

“Lord, listen, if you please, or, do not if you do not feel like it,

Without singing of you, I cannot contain myself.

Lord, without embracing you. I cannot contain myself.

Without offering you my worship, I cannot contain myself Chennamallikarjuna”! (Vachana 3, Shankar 42)

She was one of the most radical figures of her time. She realized that patriarchy targets a woman body as a potential source of impurities for perpetuating the belief that it is inherently inferior or dirty and for the further reinforcement gender hierarchies. So, she overcame all the inhibitions regarding the body. She traveled from one place to another to look for Lord Shiva, whom she addressed in her poems as Chennamallikarjuna, Lord White Jasmine. She wandered into remote places leaving everything behind her, her marital home, her husband even the clothes she used to cover herself. She knew no pretension, no inhibition, no shame --- the qualities those were considered appropriate for a lady. She offered her lord only her bare heart, her true self :

“Fools, while I dress

In the Jasmine Lord’s morning Light,

I cannot be shamed.

What would you have me hide under silk and the glitter of jewels?

The last thread of clothing can be stripped away.

But who can peel off the emptiness, the nakedness covering all”? (Vachana 23)

She found her home in the lap of nature, among the trees and plants of the thick forest and, the bees, butterflies, birds and wild animals were her companions. In one of her poems, she asked them:

“O prattling parrots, have you seen him?

O cuckoos, singing in high notes, have you seen him?

O sporting and playing bees, have you seen him?

O peacock, playing on the hills and in caves, have you seen him?

Tell me, o, tell me, if you have seen my Lord Chennamallikarjuna". (Vachana 30, Shankar 54)

As a revolutionary woman of extraordinary stature she raised questions regarding the prevailing societal norms that restricted women and untouchables from participating in religious practices and in the pursuit of spiritual progress. She defied those norms by breaking stereotypes and making a journey for *Anubhav Mantapa* and then to Srisailam. Like the Buddhist nuns of post Vedic era, Akka Mahadevi also offered a compelling counter narrative to challenge the contemporary practices of priest craft through her *Vachanas*. The *Vachanas* of Akka exhibit her literary excellence as a poet and clarify the concept of *Istalinga* or personal deity (which can be held in the palm) according to Veerashaiva religious practice.

For Akka, Shiva, the supreme God is beyond any ritual, understanding and intellect. He is attainable through the knowledge that directs to look inward. So the materialistic world and people of flesh and blood could no more attract her. She dedicated her body, mind and soul to Shiva. She prayed:

"My mind, sister, be captivated, my body be ransacked, my being be held up.

I am the loved one of Chennamallikarjuna". (Vachana 9, Shankar 44)

Her entire existence depended on the belief that she loves Shiva and Shiva loves her back.

"I lost my heart to him who wore a jeweled crown, bands of snakes

And a smile on his beautiful small teeth

And this Chennamallikarjuna is my bridegroom

And, listen, O mother, I am his bride". (Vachana 14, Shankar 46)

She felt that her passionate lord is not like other men on earth who are cruel and devoid of any feeling, so her marriage signified nothing to her because it was devoid of any genuine feelings:

“Chennamallikarjuna, the king of compassionate beings!(Vachana 24, Shankar 51)

The kinship of husband and wife is not there”. (Vachana 25, Shankar 51)

She knew that her Lord White Jasmine requires nothing of this world. He does not demand any ceremonial worship as he is the symbol of absolute nothingness. Akka, too, following her lord, embraced nothingness :

“You can take away the clothes and jewels I wear

Can you take the nothingness that covers me?

I have become one with Chennamallikarjuna

And I have lost caste and tribe.

I am shameless.

Ah fool, what do I care for clothes and jewels”? (Shankar 50)

“Once you know that the body is but dust

The pride of body disappears.

Once you know the life is but nothingness. The shame of mind disappears.

Through the steps of disinterestedness of *vairagya*

I climbed the hill, Sri Giri”. (Shankar 56)

According to Akka Mahadevi, the devotee who has made the uphill journey to get united with her lord has no class or caste, no sense of body. The devotee finally meets and merges with the Master and attains the *aikya* that is synonymous with liberation. So the devotee no longer feels inferior or less clean than the priest. In her poems, Akka advocated for the rights of all human beings. The visual details and metaphorical imageries used in her *Vachanas* delight the readers for their picturesque quality. She describes the *sansara* (the world) as the place of dwelling for vultures and the sky as the spiritual realm where the moon belongs to. She compares the ordinary human beings (who are not spiritually awakened) to the vultures and the devotees and the enlightened ones to the moon. She carried on the legacy of the Buddhist nuns who had acted with efficacy as an agency to bring about the paradigm shift in literary and socio-religious ground in ancient India.

Lal Ded was a 14th- century (1320-1392) mystic poetess from Kashmir. She got married at the tender age of 12 and in her marital home she was severely mistreated. When she came into contact with her Guru Sidh Srikanth, she left her home to pursue spirituality.

Lalla proclaimed it in her poem:

“My Guru gave a single precept:

Turn your gaze from outside to inside.

Fix it on the hidden self.

I, Lalla, took this to heart and naked set forth to dance”. (poem 95, translated by Andrew Schelling) (Hoskote 141)

She became a fervent devotee of God Shiva and wandered here and there reciting the poems praising Him. Later her poems became popular among people as “*Vakhs*” (speech). Lalla’s *Vakhs* are the ecstatic utterances about her spiritual experiences and are counted among the earliest evidences of literary compositions in Kashmiri language. They carry the essence of Shaivism blended with Sufism. She was well-versed in the religious theories and practices of Shaivism, Buddhism, Sufism and tantric adepts. Through her poems Lal Ded spread the message of religious integrity, and challenged the prevalent caste system. She realized that caste system had been the root cause of social discrimination pervaded in various forms . Lalla’s poems are about her journey she made as an ordinary village girl and how she became a saint. From her poems, we come to know about her early life as a housewife, her distress in that life, her disillusionment regarding the world, her search for God and the ultimate realization of the highest truth through mystic experience:

“I, Lalla, entered the gate of the mind’s garden and saw Siva united with Sakti.

I immersed in the lake of undying bliss.

Here, in this lifetime, I’ve been unchained from the wheel of birth and death.

What can the world do to me”? (poem 68)

Though the *Vakhs* were composed basically to express the utmost adulation for Lord Shiva, they never fail to surprise the readers as creative manifestations of a rare poetic genius. Lalla played a significant role in shaping the Kashmiri language and literature and reviving the Kashmiri dialects. Her poems were immensely popular among common people because

they were composed in conversational style. People could easily understand the language of her poems and could recite the quatrains. The *Vakhs* somehow ended the epistemological monopoly of Sanskrit scholars who used to assume the role of mediator between people and the divine.

Lalla completely disregarded the conventional ways of worshipping and parasitic forms of organized religion. She believed in inclusiveness as God resides inside every human in a subtle form. So a devotee must turn inwards to feel the presence of God at the centre of her ontological essence of being. For attainment of truth and liberation no convention like asceticism, fasting, pilgrimage, animal- sacrifice are required. It requires an intense love for God and a longing to reach a state of nothingness:

“Turn within, turn within,

I immersed myself in my inner voice alone.

Ultimately I saw myself looking deeply into myself

And knew it to be you.

Wrapped up in yourself, you hid from me.

All day I looked for you

And when found you hiding inside me,

I ran wild, playing now me, now you”. (poem 15, Hoskote 61)

Mirabai (1498-1547) is definitely the most eminent among the saint-poetesses of medieval India who went against the norms and customs of her time. Initially, she was a princess of a royal family in Rajasthan but later in life, she became a yogini, a sage who remained immersed in the devotion of Lord Krishna. In her bhajans, she expressed an acute yearning for Sri Krishna that never fails to appeal to even a nonreligious person:

“Shyam, without Thee, I cannot sleep.

Every second seems many an age,

Every moment, I am tortured by separation.

Without the Beloved, I remain in darkness.

Neither lamps nor palaces please me.

And I pass my nights awake.

Mira's Lord is Hari, the Indestructible.

His sight would refresh her eyes". (poem 92, Alston 72)

During medieval period entire Rajputana was dominated by the priests and religious dogmas and superstitions were widespread in the society. Mira's open denunciation of all external formalities regarding religion aroused much controversy in society and even at her home. She considered Sant Ravidas her master due to her brief yet deep spiritual association with him. Though she was not allowed to step out of her chambers, she used to go to meet with him. She used to sit among his ordinary disciples showing disregards for *purdah* (veil). She never bothered about caste or social status of an individual as she did not care for any worldly affair. Lord Krishna was her only concern. Her song records how society perceived her as an ill-reputed woman who disobeyed all codes of conduct:

"I have found my guru in Ravidas, he has given me the pill of knowledge.

I lost the honour of the royal family, went astray with the sadhus....

Sitting in the company of devotee you have brought shame and disgrace on yourself.

Every morning you get up and go to the house of low-born one.

And thus, put a blot on the name of your noble family". (translated by Alston)

Being a princess, she opted for a life of austerity and impoverishment, and went through all sorts of ordeals. She was given poison by the relatives who tried to kill her, but her infallible faith in her "Govind" saved her. Mira sang in her pada:

"Sister, I will sing the glories of Govind.

The King sent me a cup of poison

And I accepted it as nectar,

As the very foot-wash of the Lord.

He sent me a black serpent.

Hidden in a basket

And I worshipped it.

Now Mira has gone veritably mad with love.

She has obtained Shyam for the bridegroom”. (poem 39, translated by Alston)

In her *padas* Mira metaphorically vented her anguish for the separation from Krishna who seemed to be unattainable at one point of time. Mira knew that the way to reach Krishna is not easy. It requires unconditional, selfless love and courage to sacrifice. Mira said,

“I have reared love’s creeper with my tears and

O friend, the true path to God is that of meditation and love.

Adore the Lord, love Him”. (poem no 18)

Mira’s incessant search for her Giridhari ended when she finally looked at her inner self. She found Him there within her. Then she could find Him everywhere around her. Mira’s longing and quest for Krishna thus ended in self discovery.

Long before the advent of feminism in Western world, some radical women left their homes in search of the Absolute Truth with songs on their lips in India. They used to recite poems, chant hymns to bring back people on the path of love and devotion as love and devotion are the two means to receive the divine grace. They wandered through the remote places and voiced the agony of the people who were ostracized due to class, caste, creed or gender. They walked on the path of no return to find their inner selves. They looked within and made a voyage of self-discovery. They walked alone but not in isolation. They showed the way to salvation, and left their message of hope, equality and harmony for the thousands of people who had forgotten to stand for themselves, especially for the women folk who helplessly accepted lifelong confinement as their only provision. The creative space opened up by them invited the hitherto unheard voices of women and so called lower caste people who had been excluded due to oppressive notions of the ritualistic purity.

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