
**A Comparative Study of Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, and Lal Ded:
Exploring Mystical Poetry and Spiritual Expression**

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Abstract

The Bhakti movement, the timeline of which spanned nearly a thousand years in the medieval period, paved the way for disintegrating the structure of the Vedic age and promoting religious inclusivity in India. While several poet saints spearheaded the movement throughout the country, Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded, and Mirabai were among the very few female saints. This research offers a comparative study of their lives and their devotion through poetry and songs, which facilitated a more inclusive society and furthered a discussion of breaking stereotypes of caste and gender. The research traces parallels and differences in their methods to analyze how it affected their contemporary society and the ways in which it can be used further to promote existing differences and inequalities. The paper uses standard translated texts in English by scholars of the concerned personalities, and textual analysis of the works has been used as research methodology. Furthermore, the paper also establishes the contemporary relevance of the saints in the society.

Keywords: Bhakti, comparative study, poet-saint, devotion, spiritual

Introduction

Mystical poetry has been an integral part of cultures across civilizations, offering a glimpse into the spiritual experiences of poets who sought to transcend the boundaries of the material world. Indian geographical landscape has worked as a salad bowl for ages as opposed to Western melting pot structures. Sustained oneness in such cultural diversity has been a characteristic of our society. *Bhakti* literature is one such umbrella which, even though it started in smaller cultural pockets in the Indian subcontinent, later emerged as a collation of mystical, divine poetry. The early medieval period marked its beginning as a counter-response to Vedic age theology and religious philosophy accompanied by structured layers of society with stringent rule-based order. Karen Pechilis Prentiss writes in *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, “For orientalist scholars such as H. H. Wilson, M. Monier-Williams, and G.A. Grierson, bhakti was a monotheistic reform movement, the first real instance of monotheism in India.” (Pechilis 4) *The Bhakti* movement started in Southern India but soon traversed to the northern, western, and eastern parts of the subcontinent. *Bhakti* poets posed a challenge to the structure through poetry, songs,

and chaos of their dances, bringing themselves closer to the divine but without the imposition of rules. Mirabai from the North Indian state of Rajasthan, Akka Mahadevi from Karnataka in South India, and Lal Ded from Kashmir were among those *Bhakti* poets who left an indelible mark on society. They contributed immensely to the spiritual discourse of their times. All three poet-saints, belonging to different timelines in medieval history and diverse cultural as well as geographical spaces, converge together in terms of their final spiritual goal of self-realization and challenging the social norms of fixed, assertive value systems.

They belonged to different temporal, social, cultural, geographical, and political spaces, resulting in their own individualistic approaches to a similar goal. Their divergent approach towards divinity was a result of their own socio-cultural milieu. Mirabai belonged to the Krishna *Bhakti* tradition (closely associated with Vaishnavism and *Saguna Bhakti*), whereas Mahadevi was a Shaivite in the *Saguna* sect. Lalla, or Lalleshwari as Lal Ded is often called, was a *Nirguna* poet-saint who is renowned for giving a new way to Kashmiri intellectualism and form a bridge between *Bhakti* and Sufi movements during her time.

Mirabai and Akka Mahadevi, in their poetry, reveal a deep sense of emotional state of devotion for their God- Krishna and Siva, respectively. Lalla's *Vakhs* are focused on innerjourney and realization and talk about a state of being where transcendence of thought constructs of every kind is sought. This paper aims to analyze and compare Bhajans or Padas of Mirabai, *Vacanas* of Akka Mahadevi, and *Vakhs* of Lal Ded to gain a deeper understanding of their contributions to spiritual literature and their impact on cultural landscapes, which ultimately contributed to the larger body of *Bhakti* Literature in Medieval India. Special attention to this study also finds significance in terms of their gender identity as they are among the very few women saints of the *Bhakti* movement, a space largely dominated by male saints.

Survey of existing research

Scholars have worked and positioned their views in terms of historical, cultural, and gender representation in the context of these women saints. Existing literature on them has diverging views of romanticizing their poetry, especially by western interpreters or a counter-romanticized view where scholars have made attempts to trace a socio-historical background and then contextualize their poetry in terms of that very understanding.

V. K. Sethi in *Mira: The Divine Lover* has tried to predicate his views, taking Guru Ravidas as a central figure in her life, whose timeline for many other researchers has been contestable. The importance of a Guru, or Master, who reveals the path of salvation to a devotee, is given primacy by him. He contends, "She came in contact with Sant Ravidas, the cobbler Saint, and was initiated by him into the path of Shabd Yoga. With the Master's grace, her inherent devotional bent of mind was given a new direction." (Sethi 7)

Mirabai has complete submission towards Krishna, the Mountain-Lifter (Girdhar-Nagar, as she calls him), the reason for which has often been ascribed to her gender. J. S. Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer write in *Songs of the Saints of India*, "so those who treasure Mira's songs often feel that her words have an authenticity that no male poet can match." (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 122)

Lal Ded has often been seen as a bridge between Bhakti and Sufi movements, and the tectonic cultural and political shifts in Kashmir have led to misrepresentation motivated by political concerns. Ranjit Hoskate writes in the Introduction to *Me, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded*, "Lalla was a wanderer who had deliberately de-classed herself, used the demotic rather than the elite language, and refused to found a new movement or join an established order." (Hoskate 35) Lalla did not join an order in her own time and could never be chained to a political representation many centuries later too.

Lal Ded is credited with giving direction to the Kashmiri language and culture and is accepted as a spiritual leader by all faiths. Prof. J. L. Kaul records in his work *Lal Ded*, "Indeed, she helped us, Kashmiris, to discover our mother tongue and our soul as a people... That is why there is not a Kashmiri, Hindu, and Musalman who has not some of her Vaakh on the tip of his tongue, and who does not reverence her memory" (Kaul 85)

Scholarship on Akka Mahadevi has contextualized her life in the Shaiva Bhakti tradition or, specifically, the Virasaiva movement. An epitome of feminism, she has her place in the company of saints like Basavanna and Allama Prabhu. Her life has often been placed in terms of the influence other saints have on her. A.K. Ramanujan mentions in his work *Speaking of Siva*, "Through a world of molesting male attentions she wandered, defiant and weary, asserting the legitimacy of her illicit love for the Lord, searching for him and his devotees. She walked towards Kalyana, the center of Virasaiva saints, the 'halls of Experience' where Allama and Basavanna ran a school for kindred spirits". (Ramanujan, 112)

Poetry of Mirabai, Lal Ded and Akka Mahadevi: A Discussion

While Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, and Lalla belonged to different time periods and socio-geographical cultures in the Indian subcontinent, their poetry possesses certain similarities. Mirabai was a staunch Krishna devotee since early childhood and defied her familial and social bonds when that acted as an impediment to her devotion in the early sixteenth century. In Robert Bly and Jane Hirschfield's translation *All I Was Doing Was Breathing*, she sings, "My family says: "Don't ever see him again!" And they imply things in a low voice. /But my eyes have their own life; they laugh at rules, and know whose they are." (Bly and Hirschfield 5-6) She championed individualism and discretion when women were not known to make decisions for themselves. Her songs, or *padas* as they are called, reveal instances from her life that formed into legends in folk as well as wider cultural space in North India. Mira fondly

refers to Krishna as her savior as she escapes death in the face of attempted deceitful poisoning of a garland of a snake, all by the orders of her brother-in-law, *Rana*, as she addresses him in her songs. However, her poetry's most significant portion is characterized by *virama* (separation) from the Lord himself. Krishna has been referred to as the Dark One, *Girdhar* (the Mountain-lifter), and *Jogi*, who is away, giving her constant yearning and pain. Robert Bly, a translator and scholar of Mirabai, stated in his work *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, Mira's poems sing of ecstatic union, and of the despair that ecstatic union, having once been tasted, can then disappear." (Bly 11) Moreover, Mira's songs have a unique signature, including both her and Lord's name at the end, as she often ends her lines with *Mira ke Prabhu Girdhar nagar*.

Akka Mahadevi's devotion was in direct contrast with Mirabai's Krishna *bhakti* as she propounded the Saivism or Virasaiva movement in the twelfth century. Inspired by high-statured devotees like Basavanna and Allama Prabhu, her songs invoked compassion toward people in misery. Like Mira's *Girdhar* or the Dark-One, Akka saw Siva as the "Jasmine-tender lover" (Chaitanya 20). Her love towards the Lord was a precursor to Mira's *bhakti* as she "considered herself wedded to Siva." (Chaitanya 22) Legends reveal that she left her husband's house, "the palace with only her tresses to cover her" (Chaitanya 20), when her freedom to devote herself to Siva was challenged. Worldly relations cease to exist for her as she sings in Vinaya Chaitanya's translation *Songs for Siva*:

"Can you have one husband for the here, /And another for the hereafter?
Can you have one husband for the mundane/Another for the ultimate?
All husbands other than my/Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender,
Are like puppets hidden by clouds." (60)

Akka's life was a remarkable example of a *bhakti* saint, and Mira's life uniquely resembles Akka's in the sense that both of them left their home when the family and their interrelationships tried to evade their devotion. Moreover, legends conclude that both of their lives end in a mysterious way. They disappear enigmatically; Akka "walked into the banana grove there, never to be seen again" (Chaitanya 23), and Mirabai merges into Krishna idol in a temple in Dwarka. Their life was four hundred years apart, and their form of devotion was contrasting, but certain decisive events were astonishingly similar.

Lal Ded, or Lalleshwari, was a fourteenth-century Kashmiri mystic. She broke religious monopolism and commanded respect among both Hindus and Muslims, being popular as "Lalla Yogini to the Hindus and Lal-area to the Muslims." (Hoskate 14) Lalla, as Lal Ded is often called, has a peculiar significance owing to her geographical space and its contemporary complexities in the present. Her poems, called *Vakhs*, "are among the earliest known manifestations of Kashmiri literature." (Hoskate 14) Unlike deep devotional sentiments in Akka and Mira's songs with certain specific synergy in terms of elements used, Lalla's *Vakhs* were "indicative of dialogue with the Islamic ecumene that stretched, during Lalla's lifetime, from Spain

across North Africa and West Asia to China.” (Hoskate 15) Elements of Sufi poetry are an important part of her *Vakhs*, too. Lalla renounced her life to be accepted as a disciple “to the Saiva saint Sed Boyu, or Siddha Srikantha.” (Hoskate 19) She propounded Kashmiri intellectualism and treated “the body as the site of all her experiments in self-refinement: she asserts the unity of the corporeal and the cosmic.” (Hoskate 23) In poem 52, She declares:

I trapped my breath in the bellows of my throat:
A lamp blazed up inside, showing me who I really was.
I crossed the darkness, holding fast to that lamp,
scattering its light seeds around me as I went. (52)

Her methods were unlike those of both Akka and Mirabai, and her poems resembled more “on *jnana-marga* than on *bhakti-marga*” (Hoskate 26) of Akka and Mira. “Lalla is concerned with nurturing a radical transformation aimed at recovering the identity of the self with the Divine; she is not chiefly preoccupied with a brimming-over of devotional expression by which the self embraces the Divine.” (Hoskate 26-27) Lalla’s poems also reflect non-diverseist Kashmiri Shaivism and references to Tantric rites.

Thematic intersections and spiritual expression: A Comparative Study

Akka Mahadevi from twelfth-century Karnataka, Lal Ded from fourteenth-century Kashmir, and Mirabai from fifteenth-sixteenth-century Rajasthan uniquely intersect in terms of their poetry and spiritual expression. While Lalla, a *Nirguna* (formless) Saivite, focuses on non-body intellectual, philosophical thought, Akka and Mira are *Saguna* (with form) devotees of Siva and Krishna, respectively. Even though all of their poetry is loaded with wisdom, love, and devotion, Mira and Akka are more concerned with *Bhakti*, and Lalla treads on the path of *jnana*. “Lalla provides a connection between the world of living and lifeless things.” (Bhatt 28) In-depth, reading and analysis of their poems reveal the austere similarity in their approaches towards societal norms in terms of acceptance and denial of assertive values irrespective of the differences in temporal and geographical space. The study also exposes the cultural production in their own individual spaces. Their identity as women-saints of the *Bhakti* movement places them in a constant struggle with the gender equation. Even though their methods and religious-philosophical thoughts were diverse, they broke stigmatized norms in their own individual spaces. Metaphors they use are mostly related to their form of devotion: Mirabai calls Krishna *Girdhar*, and Akka sees Siva as *Mallikarjuna*, the Jasmine Tender One. Both the saint’s poetry is extremely intimate with recurrent erotic tones. They compare their relationship with the Lord to the bond of a husband-wife. However, Lalla's poetry reflects intellectual tradition more with philosophical undertones, thus forming a complex bond of similarities and dissimilarities in their lives and their methods of devotion.

Conclusion

Bhakti saints changed the mode of devotion and led to increased participation of people from every stratum of the society. Started as a reaction to the

prevalent religion and caste-based structure, it shattered the dominant setup. Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, and Lal Ded were among those saints who not only promoted inclusivity of lower and marginalized castes but also, by virtue of their gender, helped in shedding gender disparity in medieval society. Their lives are absolute examples of determination amidst hardships when there is a belief system towards achieving something particular, irrespective of the magnanimous nature of their desired goal. They challenged societal norms and expressed feminine spirituality throughout their lives. Contemporary societies can learn from their life, too, as we still have to go miles in achieving equality in our society and taking the legacy forward. Moreover, their inclusivity could also bridge the gap between the divided nature of contemporary society based on communal differences.

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