

Divine Sounds from the Heart—
Singing Unfettered in their Own Voices:
The Bhakti Movement and its Women Saints
(12th to 17th Century)

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By

Rekha Pande

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P U B L I S H I N G

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The Bhakti Movement and its Women Saints (12th to 17th Century),
by Rekha Pande

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Dedicated to my dear friends

Kameshwari Jandhyala
(Consultant, Gender issues)

and

Gillian Youngs
*(Department of Media and Communications,
Leicester University, U.K.)*

For

*Helping me mould and sharpen my
Understanding of feminism*

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PREFACE

A people with out a sense of their own past are a people with out a sense of self. Yet our understanding of the past has been primarily from a male perspective and women's voices have not been heard. It is essential to make these voices heard in order to get a correct understanding of the past. Through the centuries of patriarchal control, women have negotiated many layers and levels of existence working out various forms of resistance through various mediums which have often gone unnoticed. Bhakti was one such medium which was open to women. Since religious space was one of the restricted spaces available to women in medieval times many women embraced bhakti and it provided them the space to define their own truths in voices that revision society, polity, relationships and religions. Women's articulation is often at odds with the dominant male voice which is the only voice that is heard in traditional historiography. Gender becomes a useful category of analysis for elucidating the many ways in which relations of power are constructed and represented in society.

Through out the long course of Indian history there have been a large number of religious movements which have sprung from time to time with varying degrees of impact. India witnessed significant socio-economic changes during the medieval period giving rise to the emergence of new social groups which could not fit into traditional hierarchy. The Law books were ossified as they did not anticipate these changes which were engendered by large scale socio-economic transformations at a macro-level. The newly emerging social groups attempted to redefine their position and status with in the given traditional hierarchy and spearheaded a movement articulating their demands for restructuring the existing order. By declaring that God dwells in each individual and one could attain God through faith and devotion these saints brought religion to the downtrodden and henceforth marginalized sections of society. Religious movements acquire greater significance as they have a far reaching impact on society as a whole by penetrating even its ideological as well as pragmatic base. A large number of women also became part of this movement and wrote poems and songs on different themes such as love for the lord, their oppressive life, their seeking of a God who is their lover,

husband and consort. A reading of these poems opens up a new world in front of our eyes and shows us some of the ways through which women expressed themselves and negotiated patriarchy.

While the voices of women are absent from this movement this movement itself has not been analyzed properly and many have looked upon this as a dynamic aspect of Hinduism. Historically the religious beliefs and practices of the Hindus were too divergent to constitute a coherent, monolith religious system that has been a part of the imagined image of Hinduism in modern times. This fundamental mismatch between the sacred literature and their modern readings is one of the main reasons for tracing the history of the Bhakti movement on its own terms. A historical gaze at Hinduism clearly points out that, to view this as a single religious system is not correct and a distortion of the heterogeneous religious practices which has become well entrenched in the academia and our mindset. This exercise has also spurred a school of revivalists who have adopted equally narrow readings by imputing categories into medieval India to present a purely spiritual past obscuring the diversities. Thus the exercise of finding the diversities of language, region, caste, gender and religion and their narratives in the Bhakti movement becomes a logical starting point.

It was only in the 19th centuries that a monolith definition of Hinduism was given basing on textual constructions. The British perception of Hinduism was from the point of view of Christianity. In the divide between the Colonizer and the Colonized, it was the western standards and Christianity which became the basis to evaluate Hinduism. There was an inability to view Hinduism on its own terms and conditions. Efforts were made to find notions of Christianity like monotheism, a salvation and notions of after life in Hinduism. Hinduism to the Colonial administration became an imagined religion of a vast majority of the population. This was a concept that never existed in the consciousness of the Indian people themselves. In the rise and flowering of the Bhakti Movement we glean a revealing luminosity on the heterogeneous religious practices of the Indian people.

Hinduism can never be viewed as one monolith tradition or a unitary practice. Through out history there have been various independent reform movements which questioned the authority of the Vedas and created an alternative religious space through different modes and means and we find a great representative in the Bhakti movement. Bhakti as a concept means

devotion and surrender. For the common person the term is understood in terms of religious devotion only, devotion to a personal God, a God who is conceived as a supreme God for salvation. The earliest form of devotion was characterized with different kinds of rituals and sacrifices in which Vedic mantras played a significant role. The Brahmins were in the forefront and they initiated all kinds of ceremonies. But gradually the aspect of ritualistic religion began to be overtaken by the concept of *Upasana* (worship) or *Bhajana* (religious singing) in which the *Sraddha* (devotion or genuine regard) had a fundamental place. The importance of this spirit of *Sraddha* bhakti or respectful dependence upon God was considered as the first step in the scheme of bhakti cult. It is interesting to see that even in the Vedic times *Sraddha* bhakti made its influence felt in many directions. Under its wholesome impetus, the Vedic religion progressed from polytheism to monotheism, for bhakti essentially stands for broad comprehensive faith in one who is adored.

Though this doctrine is traced to the Brahmanical tradition, in the religious scripture of Gita, it was in the south between the seventh and tenth centuries; this movement became broad based and acquired a huge social support. The great bhakti tradition that began in South India had its origins from the Sangam period. Bhakti or devotion appears for the first time in the literary accounts like *Paripadal* and *Tirumurukarappadai* as the central concept which was to be later developed more fully by the Alvars and Nayanars and elaborated in the Vaishnava and Saiva canonical texts of medieval times. It was the Acharyas who provided a philosophical basis for this movement.

Of the four ways of attaining God, Bhakti is considered as easy and simple since it makes one more accessible to God directly. It creates a space which gives way to personal kind of relationship with the Almighty or the Creator eliminating any intermediaries. This aspect of bhakti attracted large number of people who began to follow these paths to attain salvation and hence, this became popular among the masses from all social backgrounds. The doctrine of bhakti as well as its practice can be traced to remote antiquity and in fact medieval thinkers constantly appealed to these sources to give a long historical past. Hence historically Bhakti manifested itself as early as Vedic hymns, but gradually developed through the time till medieval period when it reached its climax. A new wave of emotionalism spurred by a longing for a personal god who was addressed in the vernaculars is one of the main features of medieval bhakti and this appears as a response to the existing situation. Emerging from the southern

regions, we find this movement spreading in North and thence to Bengal, Maharashtra, Kashmir, Gujarat and Assam.

In the paucity of source material for the study of medieval society especially of the unprivileged, the bhakti movement is a very good example of the voices of the unprivileged and women, a vibrant living tradition that is very much a part of our plural identity and rich cultural heritage. It is one of the strengths of Indian civilization to accommodate a wide variety of voices which to the outsider may seem contradictory, confounding, disorganized and illogical. It is in this rich tapestry of creativity that the many voices interact over time to produce many hybrid forms which keep the vibrancy of Indian civilization alive as they are responses to a wide variety of situations from the homestead, village to the regional and universal. Today our myopic reading of the past using singular frames of references has brought about rigidity in public life leading to communalism that are based on watertight compartmentalization of identities rather than as a fluid view of the past which stands as a negation of all that the bhakti saints stood for. This movement occurred in many parts of India over the centuries and there were many regional variations. Sustaining this vibrancy over a vast spatial and temporal canvas was a common thread running through out this movement exemplified in the ways of questioning the existing religious system and promoting socio-religious egalitarianism. The Bhakti saints wanted the religious space to open up and provide alternative spaces to the existing one.

The historical works on Hinduism written prior to the nineteenth century by western scholars did not mention this term bhakti. From the second half of the nineteenth century different theories were propounded on the character of the movement and its origins. H.H. Wilson first used the term bhakti to denote Krishna bhakti of the Vaisnavas of Bengal. It was George Grierson who developed the idea of bhakti as a religion, a cult and a doctrine. Orientalists like William Jones, H.T. Colebrook, closely related to the, "Asiatic Society of India" looked back at the glory of the past and covered a wide range of themes in Sanskrit literature, on philosophy and Hindu religion in general. Theorization about bhakti really started with the Orientalists who conjured up images of an exotic opulence and the othering of India commenced. European constructions of the varied images of Asia started within the context of imperialism, a binary opposite to demarcate the progressive and the backward. It was a period that saw a discourse of power which characterized a particular set of social, economic and political relations between Europe and its colonies. Many of

the ideological texts transformed the ideals and normative values of ancient Indians as standard and this led to distortions of reality as there is a fundamental disconnectedness between the text and the context. The Orientalists created Hinduism in their own image. Most of their theoretical formulations were based on contemporary Christian reaction in Europe against explaining God in abstract and personal terms.

In many modern day writings also, the bhakti movement is treated as literary or at best an ideological phenomena which had religion at the basis of its inspiration and more works have been written about this movement by Litterateurs than historians. This has mainly happened due to the lack of emphasis on social history and also the lack of analytical tools in history writing till the 1950's and hence the socio- economic factors that have been responsible for bringing in a change have been ignored. Since most of these saints were from marginalized groups and were composing and writing in the vernacular literature in an oral tradition which was passed down from generations, there is a major problem of sources for the historian as these text presupposed an oral consciousness that is improperly translated when we print the same and is only now being recognized with the interest in consciousness studies. There is very little historical information on these saints and they were not patronized by any kings or court biographers and therefore were outside the established system. Nor is any religious hagiography available about them from the time they deemed to have inhabited. Much of their history has been reconstructed much later by writers and biographers arising from the emerging anglicized middle class. Yet most of these saints are very much alive in the popular culture and the day to day life of India in different regions and are the most important link to the continuities between past and present in Indian culture.

Over the centuries, the transformation of the oral tradition into a textual one saw many accretions and these interpolations served to marginalize, domesticate or valorized certain events and personalities using a plethora of devices but it is still possible for a historian to arrive at the essence of the texts by deconstructing the meanings using an array of methodological tools borrowed from different disciplines. The text is therefore seen in its historical context against the background of larger questions that conditioned the socio-economic and politico-cultural context rather than probing into the literary nuances and niceties since the focus is on broad socio-religious patterns.

There are multiple dynamics of any movement seen in the constant interplay of opposition and co-option and a gendered reading offers us such glimpses where we see alternating phases of radicalism and domestication. We see that bhakti created an alternative space for women by stressing that all were equal in the eyes of God and everyone could realize God. Thus, we had a large number of women who practiced bhakti. There is a palpable tension that finally comes out when the divergent views of the women, who were very outspoken and wanted to lead life on their own terms and conditions and the men were not willing to provide this space to them implying that they wanted reform to end at a certain point, come together. While the women wanted to lead a life as they pleased, the forces of reaction set in as it would deprive the men of their domestic dominance and these contradictory features manifested to reinforce and reiterate the already existing notions of women, family and their roles.

Though doubts have been raised about this movement being a mass movement and if at all the label of movement can be applied to this vastly different streams and practices as they emerged in different parts of India. No doubt there were wide differences regarding the attitude of these saints to scriptures and their agendas of social reform and many of them especially the *sagun* bhaktas never challenged the living conditions of the people and the over all aim of the movement was individual salvation and mystical union with God, through the help of a guru, yet it cannot be denied that they did question the existing hierarchies in their own way and were critical of many of the structures and institutions. Regional flavors and complexities only added to finding newer solutions to what was essentially a same problem and thus we find the substance of the bhakti saints having a remarkable similarity.

A rationale for such a study is too obvious to need any justification for there are many conventional explanations that do not lead us to a holistic understanding of the bhakti movement. Women's voices have been by and large absent from main stream history and we need to reconstruct a history which gives women their due. Religion has always played a major role in the establishment of a cultural identity, which is firmly rooted in history and women had a space only through religion. Hence women's history has to be reconstructed through the medium of religion. The abiding image of India today as a modern day nation ready to move on to the 21st century and yet rooted in tradition is primarily due to the presence of both old and new in multiple combinations. Socio- cultural continuities and

discontinuities resonate in India from the past to the present especially in the arena of religion and culture. The need to see the complex linkages between the large scale socio-economic changes in the Indian subcontinent and the contingent expression of religiosity as intertwined aspects without demarcating them into separate blocks was another need. There is also a need to read the sources in their context otherwise we would end up reading history backwards with an idea of fixed religious boundaries that are commonplace nowadays where as in the medieval period, socio-religious boundaries were being constantly redrawn. One only hopes that through this endeavor, it would be possible to bring out a vibrant tradition in all its complexities giving space to all facets and themes in history and reconstruct women's history.

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As a Feminist historian, interested in issues of religion and culture, the space provided by the bhakti movement has always interested me. What attracted me most to this movement were the voices of women who spoke of different issues. Listening to the songs of these women one was struck with the courage and determination of these women and the steps they took to lead life according to their own individual desires.

The bhakti movement to me is a movement that shows the dynamism of Indian culture and religion and provides a space for women. This book is an effort to answer some of the questions with which I am attempting to grapple as a historian interested in Women's issues for the last three decades. I am highly indebted to my students, all of whom I cannot name in my earlier Universities, the University of Allahabad (UA) the University of Hyderabad (HCU) and the International Institute of Information Technology (IIIT) and Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU) for keeping my interest alive in this theme. In the past and in the present I have benefited immensely from my various students who have shown a love and inquisitiveness for women's history and feminism. They have played a significant role in molding and restructuring some of my arguments.

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CHAPTER I

HISTORY OF RELIGION: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES OF LOCATING WOMEN IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

It is generally believed that our notion of the past has come about with the British as they changed the history as well as the mode of writing history in India. However, the whole debate that historical writings in India emerged with the coming of British has been seriously challenged by a large number of scholars. Questions have been raised if along with the railroad, the clock did the British also bring the questionable gift of history. The question that is posed here is, did the Hindus have a sense of history? An extension of this question would be did the Hindu women have any sense of history?

This has to be seen from the methodology of history of religions which shows that there are many events and collection of facts which are of prime importance.¹ Though much has been added to our understanding of the past with a large number of indigenous writings a big lacuna that remains is that women's voices are completely absent from this understanding. Our understanding of the past has been primarily from a male perspective and women have had no visibility here. One of the main reasons for this lies in the way the nature of historical understanding privileges certain sources. Literary sources are given privilege over oral history on the count that secondary orality tampers with the original intent of the author. But parallel to this is the blurring away of archaeological sources which would help us to reconstruct the material lives of women and thus the religious life also to a considerable extent. This may sound paradoxical but we seem to have better understanding about the religious lives of pre-historic and proto-historic communities based on archaeological sources than we have of the literate people. One of the problems in writing the history of literate societies is that the voices of the literary elite come into full focus. In the Indian context the literary elite were the Brahmanas writing in Sanskrit and later the Moulvis writing in

Persian –both articulating a point of view that was not representing women. Therefore it is essential to make these voices heard in order to get a correct understanding of the past. One of the sources for such an exercise in ancient Indian history is the *Therigatha* or voices of the *Theris* (Buddhist nuns) and some fragments from Sangam literature of Tamilagam. The *Theris* songs celebrate the day to day existence, the toil and hardships of every day life, a life involved with pestle and mortar and a life filled with grief and pain till the banisher of pain Buddha's teachings bring about a life transformation.

Through the centuries of patriarchal control women have negotiated many layers and levels of existence working out various forms of resistance through various mediums which have often gone unnoticed and hence need to be rehabilitated to get a more meaningful view of history. Bhakti (religious devotion) was one such medium which was open to women and in the initial stages saw large scale participation by women. Since religious space was one of the spaces available to women in medieval times many women embraced bhakti and it provided them the space to define their own truths in voices that revision society, polity, relationships and religions. Women saints could hope to create a space for themselves only with in the popular religious movement like the bhakti movement.

A people with out a sense of their own past are a people with out a sense of self. However the voices of our past are primarily in male voices robbing women of their selfhood. Women's articulation is often at odds with the dominant male voice which is the only voice that is heard in traditional historiography. Gender becomes a useful category of analysis for elucidating the many ways in which relations of power are constructed and represented in society.² Gender has to be situated in the Indian Context and here the residue stems from the ritual practices which encode meaning of cooperation, cooption and protest. Western feminist methodology have to be located here using indigenous categories like the concept of chastity, loyalty, devotion and divine reward. Further in the Indian context to reconstruct women's history it needs to look into the rituals and such an exercise was done by NN Bhattacharya in his work title *Ancient Indian Rituals and their Social content*. However one of the shortcomings of this book is the absence of a feminist perspective, but it has nonetheless shown a path that women's history can retrieved in the Indian context and the study of the rituals of the bhakti is a step in this direction.

The idea of gender is a social construct which is continuously reinforced by various mechanisms and in India it is in the form of rituals. Of all the mechanisms through which gender differences are perpetuated, ideology as manifested in culture seems to be the most effective. It cannot be denied that all aspects of reality are gendered and gender must serve as a mode of questioning that undergirds all efforts at historical reconstruction. Yet at the same time since the experience of gender itself was deeply implicated in other categories such as class, caste race, nation and sexuality focus on gender can never be adequate for feminist historiography.³ It is in periods of historical transition, ideological reinforcement of notions of gender get strengthened manifold. While transformation in socio- economic spheres may be afoot, cultural and ideological changes do not keep pace which leads to a mismatch. On the contrary, renewed and new mechanisms are fashioned to control social change itself, more so in the case of women. Coming again to the Indian context we see that the idea of class and other categories subsume gender thereby marginalizing whatever little space that women had inscribed for themselves in the past. An example of this would be the patronage of the Satavahana royal ladies to Buddhism whereas the men predominantly patronized the Vedic religion. Here we see that religion as a conceptual category was fluid. Though the focus of Indian history had class tilt, yet the royal ladies were excluded largely from the area of enquiry. There are many such examples of donations by queens to Buddhism and the royal women commissioning works of art revealing their religious predilections and preferences, yet this never became a serious area of enquiry.

India witnessed significant socio-economic changes during the medieval period giving rise to new social groups which could not fit into traditional hierarchy. We have a large number of inscriptions of the newly emergent groups who prosper because of the changes in the economy, particularly agrarian expansion and crop diversification. The polities that appear through out the subcontinent during the Middle Ages were not the dispersed fragments of a previous central government, but new formations arising out of the extension of agrarian settlement and the resulting growth of population. The increasing number of political powers who figure in the historical record do not evidence the usurpation of royal power by the formerly dependent class, but instead the emergence of political elites among the evolving societies along the agrarian frontier.⁴ The inscriptions with their different patterns of distribution help us in tracking the historical processes and also the various cultural practices of the communities practicing craft traditions. Inscriptions like medieval court literature and

other sources are a form of discourse containing representation of the self and the world. Among these groups we also notice some pastoral and tribal groups who were being peasantised like the Marathas, Jats, Ahoms etc and in this process also continued to retain some of their tribal and egalitarian characteristics that gave space to women who performed many functions in the social domain. But this historical fact is hidden by the historiographical intervention that viewed Hinduism as a monolithic from 19th century onwards, on the basis of scriptural tradition rather than viewing Hinduism as a series of extended minorities with a mixture of scriptural and local traditions.

During the medieval period these newly emerging social groups, attempted to redefine their position and status within the given traditional hierarchy and spearheaded a movement articulating their demands for restructuring the existing order. By declaring that God dwells in each individual and one could attain God through faith these saints brought religion to the downtrodden and henceforth marginalized sections of society. This movement is referred to as the Bhakti movement. What is important is that women could also now practice bhakti and they were regarded as an equal in the eyes of God. Unfortunately over the years many of these voices have been lost. We need to bring women to the center stage of the historical process and investigate into the various aspects of their lives and thought. Most of the women's studies books in history concentrate on the European experience and there are very few books which have attempted to look at women from women's perspective in the Indian context.

Since religion was an overarching influence in the lives of earlier and present societies this can become a good beginning point. When there arose a movement in medieval India which could be traced to an earlier period, that questioned the Brahmins and their monopoly of religion, women also participated in this wholeheartedly because this movement generally referred to as bhakti movement claimed that God resides in each and every individual and each one has a right to attain this God.

The word bhakti means devotion, participation, reverence or adoration. For the common person the term is understood in terms of religious devotion only. The historical works on Hinduism written prior to the nineteenth century by western scholars did not mention this term. From the second half of the nineteenth century different theories were propounded on the movement and its origins. The word was first used by H.H. Wilson to denote Krishna bhakti of the Vaisnavas of Bengal.¹⁵

Monnier Williams did not limit the word to Krishna Cult but extended it to the whole of Vaisnavism.¹⁶ It was George Grierson who developed the idea that bhakti is a religion, a cult and a doctrine.¹⁷ Medieval period saw both *nirgun* (worship of a formless God) as well as *sagun* (worship of a form) worship. There is an ambiguity that helps render multiple meanings and in one way bhakti as unquestioned devotion also turned the clock back and perpetuated unquestioned devotion to the swamis meant as householder and also landlord thereby bringing about the dominance of the landed male householder.

Earlier the bhakti movement was treated as literary or at best an ideological phenomena which has religion at the basis of its inspiration. This has mainly happened due to the lack of emphasis on social history and hence the socio- economic factors that have been responsible for bringing in a change have been ignored. This lacuna has been removed by some recent studies on the movement. Tarachand felt that the movement borrowed a lot from Islam.¹⁸ Yusuf Husain also felt that this movement was influenced by Islam.¹⁹ To some this was an attempt at bringing about an egalitarian society²⁰ and others view it as a protest against brahmanical monopoly.²¹ Some have looked at the movement as a product of the feudal society²² and others have seen it as a result of the expansion of artisan classes due to the number of changes in the various crafts as a result of improvement in technology²³ and some due to the increase in commodity production as a result of trade expansion.²⁴ The increase in commodity production shows a clear rise in the inscriptions regarding temple donations in Vijaynagar period also. This has been referred to by Cynthia Talbot, Karashima and Sinopoli. Carla Sinopoli examines a diverse range of crafts to explore the role and significance of craft production in the political economy of the fourteenth through seventeenth-century South Indian Vijayanagara Empire. Ranging from poetry to pottery, Sinopoli utilizes evidence from twenty years of fieldwork at the Vijayanagara capital, providing a focused account of a dynamic and extensive range of craft production activities, complete with social, political and economic implications for a wide spectrum of actors and institutions within a diversity of temporal and geographical settings. This, 1350 to 1650 A.D. was also a period of urban expansion the capital city of Vijayanagara being home to quarter million inhabitants.²⁵ The nearness to the temple and its co-relation to higher social status relegated women farther as they came nearer only through identities as housewife, mother, daughter etc. In their autonomous capacities only service groups like temple servants and devadasis were nearer to the temple. Thus the counter

narrative of the egalitarian spirit of the bhakti with the rise of a new landed order is noticed. It is possible to decipher this in the case of each geographical region by undertaking a painstaking study of the temple sthala Puranas which would reveal how layers of practices came to be superimposed on the original idea of the shrine over a long period of time.

The bhakti movement was a product of a transitional society where a number of changes were taking place on the political, economic and social front. On the political front the thirteenth to sixteenth century saw the decline of an all powerful state and the rise of a number of provincial and regional states.²⁶ By the beginning of 16th century India saw the rise of a number of feudal states like Bengal, Khandesh, Jaunpur, Malwa, Bihar, Kashmir and Sindh in the North and Golconda, Bijapur, Bidar, Gulburga, Ahmadnagar, Berar in the south. On the economic front the Delhi Sultanate witnessed a number of changes. This period saw an economic organization which was considerably superior to the earlier one. In its earlier phase the Delhi Sultanate had released forces that led to the expansion of towns and alternations in agrarian conditions. As a result by the 14th century there was a considerable growth in the growth of these towns and expansion in craft production and commerce. All this had occurred due to a number of changes in the various crafts as a result of improvement in technology. This can be seen in Seri culture, carpet weaving on the verticle loom, introduction of the spinning wheel(*charkha*) in the cotton textile sector, the Persian wheel in irrigation, the introduction of paper, the appearance of magnetic compass as an aid to navigation and the invention of accurate time keeping devices for the regulation of economic activity.²⁷ The increase in commerce can be seen in the increase of coinage as a result of the transfer of stored silver and gold into minted money.²⁸ There is also an increase in the slave market, to provide artisans conversant with the new technique and cheap labour for the various crafts.²⁹ Though a large surplus was being generated it was appropriated by the ruling classes through taxation.

Though a large number of artisans were coming from the rank of people outside the profession, they were not accepted as equal among the Indian artisans organized along hereditary custom bound castes. On the other hand even though the merchants and tradesmen had attained a lot of wealth they had no place in the social hierarchy. The situation was similar to what had happened during 6th cen. When the rise of Buddhism and Jainism had taken place and the city had produced its own stratification where the artisans or merchants were more powerful, yet the Brahmanical

literature did not include the trader and artisan among the superior groups.³⁰ The social front was characterized by Brahmanical oppression of the worst kind. In order to maintain their status quo, complex rites and rituals were practiced and those that did not fit into the traditional four castes were termed outcastes or *chandalas*.³¹ The outcastes were denied any social prestige and all the privileges of a Brahmin such as recitation of the Vedas, offering of sacrifices to the fire. If a Sudra or a Vaisya was proved to have recited the Vedas and he was accused by the Brahmin before the ruler, the latter would order his tongue to be cut off.³² This was a period when Jainism and Buddhism had practically disappeared and it was the orthodox Brahmins that had reigned supreme. They alone understood Sanskrit in which the ancient religious texts were produced and this made the performance of various rites and rituals their monopoly. As they had acquired a lot of power due to the land grants which they had received and these saw their transformation into a landed elite.³³

Recent works on identity drawn by the concerns of the post colonial writers have raised many questions regarding medieval India for which we have to see the medieval understanding rather than judging them through modern eyes. This has rehabilitated many pre modern mystics with out reflecting on modern biases.³⁴

Even among the Muslims when it came to prayers and worship, the caste and class differences were ignored and the poor and the rich worshipped side by side but caste was recognized in social relations. The Muslims were clearly divided into *Sharif Zats* or high castes and *Ajlaf Zats* or low castes. The conversion to Islam had certainly not made an individual change his old environment which was deeply influenced by caste distinctions and a general social exclusiveness. The different classes of Muslim communities also began to live aloof from one another, even in separate quarters in the same city.³⁵

Indian Islam has been greatly influenced by the Sufis whose interventions have led to a more different pattern of identity formation and practice of Islam on a day to day basis. Abdul Rahim proceeds to discuss the various eras such as *Tretya*, *Dwapar* and *Kalyuga*, which are very much Hindu concepts. There was an exchange between Islamic and Hindu metaphors to explain certain theological points. Hence there were diverse ways in which political Islam, from the time of its arrival in India in the 12th century to its decline as the ruling theology in the 19th century, adapted itself to the Indian context and became "Indianized". Sheikh Abdul Rahman Chisti

sought to explain some Hindu legends and made a plea for them to be adopted in Muslim ideas and beliefs.³⁶

What was very important is the fact that the bhakti movement also opened up the space for women. By emphasizing that God dwelt in all- high and low alike and by rejecting book learning as a way of reaching God, the bhakti movement opened their doors not just to supposedly low status groups but also to women. Even though most bhaktas, including the women bhaktas rarely address themselves specifically to be women, the shift in the language of worship from Sanskrit to the language spoken by the common people brought about a new opportunity for women's creativity to express it self in devotional literature.³⁷ It is significant that the work of many of these women, have survived in popular culture not as a subterranean tradition but as a major contribution to main stream. Their heritage has been kept alive more by the ordinary people and has become an important part of the cultural world. Many of the festivals and farm works and local folk songs invariably refer to women saints when talking of characteristic like perseverance, bravery and honesty. The women saints were gifted with enormous powers and were role models of the people in their immediate vicinity. In the farm works we find narratives that are very different from the domesticated and modified narratives of the later day. The rawness that pervades them also is rooted in tradition which is grudgingly acknowledged by the mainstream brahmanical rituals. For example the songs of the farm working women are lewd and depict the landlords as rapacious while ideal male is also idolize in sensual terms. This nuanced approach comes alive in the temple festivals that accompany each temple during the beginning of the harvest season. It is during these occasions that the local goddesses are venerated and a survey of these fairs would point to a version of history that is more local and one in which more women are visible. An example of these varieties of histories are the festivals and legends associated with the different regions (corresponding to eco-zones) like chorwad in Gujarat, Nanjil nadu in Tamil Nadu and Shekawati and Hadaut in Rajasthan, Malwa in Punjab and Konaseema in Andhra. Most of these narratives also correspond to the epigraphs and other material than can be situated in a proper temporal and spatial sequence. Yet this remains hidden from history and requires painstaking work and a collaboration of archeological, folk and literary approaches combine with methods from social history.

In spite of various commonalities between the male and female bhaktas coming of bhakti meant different things to women and men. While the

male bhakta could follow his chosen path and remain a householder this was not possible for the women. The women had to choose between their bhakti and married and domestic life. Many of these women could proceed on their chosen path by discarding their marital tie altogether. Some remained childless, did not consummate their marriages or had to walk out of marriage. The number of women saints who remained married is very less.

The altruistic saintly wife in elite Hinduism called the good woman is epitomized in female form of self willed death called *sati*. This extraordinary act exemplifies wifely devotion and loyalty par excellence. On the other hand we have saints who emerge when order prevails and it becomes routine and mundane. Some saints who rupture order by turning the power upside down in order to reveal the power of chaos. In Hinduism several high caste females have pursued religious life outside marriage though lack of official orders or communities have always made it problematic for them. Because it takes a great deal of courage this is considered heroic and it makes the woman saint virtuosos despite their normative refusal to legitimise a spiritual life for woman outside marriage. Thus these women communicate with deities directly often in a state of possession and spontaneously in the vernacular. This aspect of possession is one of the spaces for women. Their spirituality is a powerful anti dote to the official religion and attractive to many men and women alike. This gives them an extra ordinary power in the eyes of those who are constrained by norms and institutions. In other words, precisely because of lack of institutional role in some religions women have had great opportunities to be flamboyant and free spirited.³⁸

Though there is very little historical evidence about these women saint's we have to reconstruct their lives reading their poetry. Many of these women saints were individual women and went about their bhakti as individuals. They did not establish any monastic traditions or have disciples, who might have preserved their sayings or compositions. Many of these saints did not receive any recognition for their spirituality during their life times. It was only later on after three centuries that around 17th century some of their poems were written down. There has been a lot of interpolation in this and since most of this was an oral tradition it is very difficult to find out which is the original verse and which an interpolation. Yet we do get a sense of the teaching and philosophy of these women saints for a lot of this has survived in popular literature. We analyse the

writings of these women saints in order to understand their delmmas, triumphs and travils.

The claim that women's place is in the private, at home, is an old one strategy that mobilizes notions of feminity, locates them in the private and imposes an ideology of domesticity through which female are socialized to believe and accept that the narrow male privileging space called 'home' are the most appropriate space for them to spend all their lives in. There are certain clear cut rules as to how women must behave and act here, and this is what distinguishes a respectable decent woman from the other women. Hence women are a constituency that is affected by patriarchy in uniquely gendered ways. Present day readings of the household talk of unpaid work ie. child rearing, domestic production etc. If we take into account this factor in the production process, in the medieval period we get the smooth running of the household as one of the great unacknowledged roles of women in history. When women become articulate about who they are sexually and caste off old patriarchal myths about what a woman can be and what she is not allowed to become, women become powerful to acquire the ability to say no, demand to dictate life in accordance to their own wishes. They are thus able to transcend a given culture by negotiating it and move into a new one. This is exactly what happened in the bhakti movement from 12th to 17th century.

Religion is one of the areas where there is an avenue open for protest but paradoxically, religion is also the one area which is the last to change though the overall socio-economic context has long changed. Thus change occurs in society at different levels in different contexts. In this context what ever change occurs tradition cannot be destroyed. Therefore old ideas emerge once again from different angles. In the case of Indian women the domesticity has been reinforced through insistence on following the family tradition, to maintain the household and therefore the movement always negated the achievements of women outside the household. Here we may point out to a major disagreement based on two assumptions, one being that the Indian family structure did not change, which is a orientalist reading of Indian history and has been refuted since many communities like Jats, Nayars, Ahirs had different familial set up and did not confirm to the ideal textual definition of the family as expounded in the sacred texts. The ideal family existed only in the theory of Hindu legal system as the case of Kerry Kolitani is quoted by Tanika Sarkar. The second assumption is that tradition does not play a positive role. The historical