

# Gendered Desire and Devotional Discourse: Re-theorising Bhakti through a Feminist Lens

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**Abstract:** This essay explores certain prominent practices and precepts of Bhakti, understood as a distinct articulation of desire. Bhakti, which can be traced back to medieval India, continues to powerfully inform and shape not only modern Hindu religious customs but also the broader popular-cultural imaginary. For several Indians, Bhakti saints are household names - people they may worship, consider their gurus, or even be named after. It would be no exaggeration, therefore, to say that Bhakti provides both diffuse and direct inspiration as well as direction to many Indians today. In doing so, it serves in people's lives as an avenue of prescriptive possibilities and/or a set of proscriptive interdictions. Gender sociality is one of the major areas that continues to be critically influenced by Bhakti practices and precepts. Examining these, this essay contends, would be helpful in understanding their implications for gender relations, both in their own time and in the current conjuncture.

**Keywords:** Bhakti, Gender politics, Practices and Precepts

## **Introduction**

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them, this essay contends, would be helpful in understanding the implications for gender relations both in their own time and in the current conjuncture.

### **Desire as Lack: Bhakti**

The slip between the cup and the lip—that’s what desire as lack would amount to in common parlance. The attempt here is to read its imprint in the more specialised idioms of the Bhakti movement. As a term, “Bhakti” has a composite character. It serves as a convenient label to collectively refer to various strains of religious/spiritual devotionism that have found expression in different temporal, regional, and affective registers of India. According to Vinay Dharwadker,

[t]he practice, discourse and theory of bhakti are internally multifarious: major divergences appear between saguna and nirguna theologies; among the bhaktas of Shiva, Vishnu and the Devi (the Goddess); between ‘sober’ and ‘intoxicated’ styles of devotion; among formations defined by criteria such as male and female, upper-caste and low-caste, dvija-caste and untouchable, and wealth and property; and socially between conservative and progressive communities. (Kabir 292)

Krishna Sharma contends most emphatically that “the Bhakti movement was not a unified or homogeneous movement, as such. The designation, in fact, covers a number of religious movements—each with its own distinctive features and ethos. Some of them were even antithetical to one another, notwithstanding their common denominator bhakti” (“Towards a New Perspective” 291–92). However, it is to A. K. Ramanujan’s understanding that I’d like to turn. According to Ramanujan, “Bhakti ... is local, expressed through the mother tongues—yet, like the folklore, it has a pan-Indian network, a repertoire of types and genres that is trans-regional” (“Where Mirrors are Windows” 27).

Indeed, despite its differences, he maintains that:

All devotional poetry plays on the tension between saguna and nirguna, the lord as person and the lord as principle. If he were entirely a person, he would not be divine, and if he were entirely a principle, a godhead, one could not make poems about him. The former attitude makes dvaita or dualism possible, and the latter makes for advaita or monism... It is not either/or, but both/and; ... bhakti ... would be impossible without the presence of both attitudes.  
(“The Myths of Bhakti” 295)

Without necessarily insisting with Ramanujan on the “pan-Indian network” of Bhakti poetics, this essay attends to the interplay between dvaita and advaita, paratatva and saulabhya that he identifies as common in some form or the other to the phenomenon as a whole, for its elaboration of Bhakti desire as lack.

Bhakti (glossed as loving devotion) is occasioned by a gnawing experience of want or lack within the self—by the *anubhava* of a self-deficiency and a concomitant awareness of an all-powerful, all-pervasive Presence. As such, it is urged by an intense longing for fulfilment—through union, *samadhi*, right cognition. This passionate yearning is what can be called Bhakti desire. The object of the devotee’s desire is variously the *nirguna* Principle/Brahman or the *saguna* God/*Ishvara*. So, Bhakti desire actually exists on the basis of a necessary dualism: the difference between the Principle/God that is all-in-all and the *bhakta* who is a lovelorn and abject being. But given the fact that this desire is born of an initial and/or actually illusory dualism that either disappears with right recognition or is dissolved in merger; given that the feminine is associated with want and dependency while the Supreme Consciousness is deemed masculine; and given that the final aim of the *bhakta* is to realise oneness with this consciousness or to lose himself/herself in it, there would be no

exaggeration in saying that, in its own way, Bhakti desire is geared towards recognising the lie and/or lack that is femininity, and thus neutralising it through *samadhi*.

What follows is a speculative gloss on how the phenomenon of Bhakti desire is caught up in the web of gender relations.

If they see  
 breasts and long hair coming  
 they call it woman,  
 if beard and whiskers  
 they call it man:  
 but, look, the self that hovers  
 in between  
 is neither man  
 nor woman  
 O Rāmanātha.

(Dasimayya as qtd. in Ramanujan, “Where Mirrors Are Windows” 28)

On the one hand, there is this recognition - nay, assertion even - of the superficiality, the utter inconsequentiality, of the markers of gender identity/difference in Bhakti thought. More stress is laid upon the sameness rather than the difference between men and women: both are considered embodied souls; both are also in the same state of separation from the Lord, the Supreme Soul. Thus, the sameness between them is seen as eternal, while the difference (merely of the mortal body) is deemed ephemeral, in the ultimate analysis.

But, on the other hand, there is also copious evidence of a counter spirit at work in Bhakti theologies. Gender differences here are understood in dichotomous terms. Masculinity and femininity are seen as polarised conditions of power and powerlessness, fullness and lack. The interesting point is that this antithesis finds its fullest expression not so much in the

difference between men and women per se but in the difference between the Lord and the devotee. Thus, the deity's power is masculine, while the devotee's lack is feminine.

This is what allows Meera to humble Jiv Goswami (who had refused to meet her because she was a woman) by informing him “that as far as she knows there is only one male in Vrindavan and that is Krishna” (Nancy M. Martin, “Mirabai” 10). It is also what inspires Mahadeviyakka, for instance, when she claims:

... I saw His glory,  
and seeing, I quell today  
the famine in my eyes.  
I saw the haughty Master  
for whom men, all men,  
are but women, wives ...

(*Speaking of Siva* 120; song no. 68)

In fact, a “guiding feature of Virasaivism is the belief *Sharana Sati-Linga Pati*, meaning the *Sharana* or spiritual aspirant, whether male or female, is always the virtuous wife and Siva the eternal bridegroom” (Ramaswamy 163). Most importantly, as mentioned before, such an orientation also implicitly feminises desire itself.

Given the pervasive patriarchal predilection to confuse femininity with the female, women were seen to enjoy a “natural advantage” over their male counterparts in certain Bhakti modes vis-à-vis their relation to the Lord. This explains why male *bhaktas* often assume a feminine persona in their relation to God, while female *bhaktas* engage only infrequently in gender-switching impersonations, since “they are already, quite naturally, wives or slaves of the Lord” (Carmen, Introduction 266). As Ramanujan explains, “It is as if, being already female, she has no need to change anything to turn towards God... she need

shed nothing, for she has nothing to shed: neither physical prowess, nor social power, nor punditry, nor even social pride” (“On Women Saints” 277).

Ironically, the female *bhakta* is privileged by virtue of her completely abased status as a woman in patriarchal social milieus. My purpose here is neither to scoff at the potency of the woman *bhakta*'s spiritual experience, nor indeed to belittle the magnitude of her disregard for social conventions in her spiritual quest. Through her *bhakti*, quite possibly, she is as one who is beyond the pale of worldly concerns and dualisms. But for those still trammled by this-worldly cares, it must be admitted that the Bhakti valorisation of extreme feminine self-abnegation and helplessness, more often than not, only reinforces existing misogynistic social values. Kumkum Sangari reaches similar conclusions but with a different emphasis when she writes that:

Mira's *bhakti* is contradictory: it protests and assists in its appropriations, has both a radicalising potential and compensatory character... Her *bhakti* is internally poised to lose the ground it sets to gain. For us Mira represents a struggle, not a victory.” (“Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti” 1551)

My own reading would stress that it is “for us” (who have standards, goals and worldviews other than hers) that Mira represents a struggle. By her own yardstick, who is to say she was not victorious?

Whatever access to agency/power that Bhakti thought affords women, therefore, can only, at best, be deemed paradoxical: a woman gains only through accepting her deficient identity as feminine; through self-abasement, she achieves Self-realisation. In the meantime, the almost axiomatic identification of lack with femininity in Bhakti thought, especially in Vaishnava and Shaiva *bhakti*, only props up popular prejudice.

Ambivalence, often slipping into distaste or distrust, vis-à-vis the position and role of women and/or femininity is also not hard to come by in Bhakti theologies. For instance, even the fiercely nirguni Kabir is not averse to affixing a gender-sex tag on Maya. If in “Maya” illusion is female incarnate—a “con-woman,” “robber and thief” (Dharwadker, *Kabir* 146–47)—then in “Deadly Business,” Maya, if not explicitly female, is definitely feminine (Dharwadker, *Kabir* 152–53). The argument that *Maya* is grammatically feminine goes only so far. For one, when Kabir is questioning so many pieties, it is unlikely grammar would be sacrosanct. For another, in his poems Maya can be “wife and child” and everything else under the sun—but never the husband. The normative subject of Kabir’s poem is very clearly an adult male. Needless to say, Kabir’s Maya is destructive as well as obstructive, so that only “Where there’s no Maya / there’s knowledge / of the ultimate reality” (“Deadly Business” 152).

Sri Ramakrishna is similarly convinced of the femininity of Maya. He even divides her into *vidyamaya* and *avidyamaya*, the benign and malignant aspects of Kali that comprehend all relative phenomena. But where he differs most crucially is in his passionate insistence that this *saguna* Shakti is the same as the *nirguna, niranjan* Brahman:

Brahman and Shakti are identical, like fire and its power to burn. When we talk of fire, we automatically mean also its power to burn. Again, the fire’s power to burn implies the fire itself. If you accept the one, you must accept the other” (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* 108).

Then again, the enthusiastic worship of the feminine principle “in Srivaishnavism, [where] Lakshmi is considered the divine mediatrix, without whom access to Narayana is not possible... [or] in the Gaudiya tradition [where] Radha is seen as the Supreme Goddess, for it is said that she controls Krishna with her love” (Rosen, *Introduction* 2) can be seen as subtly participating in—and sacralising—patriarchal prejudices.

In Bengal Vaishnava theology, the Supreme Being (Krishna) has several *shaktis*. Of these, the three most important are *svarupa shakti*, *jiva shakti*, and *maya shakti*. The *svarupa shakti* is further divided into *samdhini (sat)*, *samvit (cit)*, and *hladini (ananda inclusive of sat and cit)*. Radha is supposed to be Krishna's *hladini shakti*.

In Bengal Vaishnava philosophy, *jivas* (souls, spiritual essences) are understood to be manifestations of God's *hladini shakti*, his most essential self, which is nothing but pure bliss and epitomized by Radha. *Jivas*, however, are inhibited from expressing their true nature due to the influence of *maya*, which often makes *jivas* averse to God. Salvation is simply the process whereby man recognizes his true nature and gives it vent in the devotion to Krishna..." (Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute* 70, 64).

As is clear, though Radha is divine, she is only a divine *amsha* of the Supreme Being. If all *jivas* are Radha, and Radha is female while Krishna is male, what is implicit is the understanding of the female/feminine as part of the male/masculine. In Srivaishnavism, meanwhile, Lakshmi is supposed to always reside in the heart of Vishnu. The female/feminine is celebrated here as a means to the end—granted, it's an important, even vital, means, but a means nonetheless.

Thus, even certain forms of the worship of the Goddess confirm, in unobtrusive ways, the instrumental and/or ancillary position of the feminine/female vis-à-vis the masculine/male. The protestations that theologically the male and the female, end and means, are the same do nothing to obviate the discriminations and subordinations that are written into such delineations of the masculine and the feminine. And before this attracts the standard patriarchal dismissal as a motivated feminist over-reading, it might be meet to recall that the female *bhaktas* themselves were not too convinced by the argument that the means and the

ends are the same. If they had been, it is hardly likely that they would have refused to settle for loving devotion to their scripturally enjoined earthly Lord (husband) as a means to the immortal, and instead yearn for the real McCoy. In fact, with uncompromising tenacity, the *bhakta* resolves to: “go cuckold my husband with Hara, my Lord / ... I will make Him / my good husband.” (*Speaking of Siva* 141; song no. 328, Mahadeviyakka)

As for that arrant imposter himself, there is a rather novel use. Mahadeviyakka says: “Take these husbands who die, / decay, and feed them / to your kitchen fires!” (*Speaking of Siva* 134; song no. 283). On the whole, therefore, the gender assumptions that ground Bhakti logic are not, at least theoretically speaking, fair to women—or indeed to the feminine principle. The lines along which I see it proceeding in aniconic and non-dual traditions are, roughly put, as follows: Desire is born of dualism → desire is born of deficiency and dependency → the feminine is both deficient and dependent → desire is feminine → the devotee is feminine → self-sufficiency (the other of desire or what is desired) is masculine → the deity is masculine → dualism is an illusion → deity and devotee are one → desire is an illusion → the feminine is an illusion → oneness is real → and One (the Principle) is masculine. As A. K. Ramanujan says, “androgyny, like ... Ardhanarishvara, the form of Shiva who is half-woman, is a male phenomenon” (“Men, Women and Saints” 291).

When I say Oneness is masculine, what I mean is that this non-gendered entity is conceived in terms that take the male experience as normative, thereby surreptitiously gendering it—and gendering it masculine. Within qualified dualist or dualist frames, the above pattern more or less holds up to the point where the deity’s masculinity is affirmed. Thereafter, it would read something like the following: Deity is Merciful → devotee is abject → dualism is real and an affliction → the feminine is real and dependent → desire is the devotion of the dependent for the Deity → the object of *bhakti* is to lose oneself in the divine → the object of *bhakti* is for the feminine to be subsumed by the Masculine.

If, rendered thus, Bhakti thought is none too radical in its gender-role delineations, what about the practice of Bhakti? Taking a broad view of things, Ramanujan writes:

After the sixth century, a new kind of person comes upon the historical scene in India, first in Tamilnadu and later in other parts of the country. Their poems are their best introduction. There is no single word, like the English word 'saint,' in Indian languages for this kind of person, but one can find different words depending on the religious group: the Kannada Virasaivas call them *sarana*, the Kannada Vaisnavas *dasa*, the Tamil Saivites *nayanmar*, the Tamil Vaisnavas *alvar*. In northern traditions, such religious persons are called *sants*... The Hindu saints do not appear alone, they seem to appear in droves, in interacting groups of three and four in these early times. They often form a composite saint, each taking on a different face of the religious experience... The Virasaiva or the Vaisnava movement... was not made by any one of the saints, but by this composite. The Virasaiva saints, for instance, overlap in time, like strands in a rope: they are elder and younger contemporaries to each other—they are *anna* or elder brother, *akka* or elder sister, to each other. They are often thought of as a family, as a society... The saint is not born into this family, but reborn into it. The second birth often cancels the characteristics of the first, with its caste, name, inheritance, household, and often gender... They, with their followers, form a new society, a second society within the larger one. Thus together, they constitute a family, a cult, a culture, a society, a counter to the ones of ordinary men and women: they form, in Victor Turner's terms, a

counter-structure at all levels, a community seeking *communitas*.

(“Men, Women, and Saints” 279–83)

Vijaya Ramaswamy points out how the concept of community is implied in the etymology of the word *bhakti*. To quote her, “The term *bhakti* comes from the root  $\sqrt{bhaj}$ , which has a wide range of meanings. The root  $\sqrt{bhaj}$  can mean to serve, thus underpinning the concept of loyalty. It can also mean ‘to share’ or to participate equally, implying the concept of community” (109).

Then again, glossing Jayant Lele’s work in Marathi, she shows how the concept of *bhakti* as sharing draws inspiration from the Bhagavata movement:

In pre-historic society, necessities were produced in common and shared equally. People themselves were ‘Bhagavata’ meaning the custodians of all wealth and property. *Bhakti* derived from ‘*Bhagavata*’ therefore meant mutual sharing and participation within the community. It is only in the course of historical evolution that this ‘*bhagavat*’ becomes externalised in the form of *bhagavan* and a *bhakta* becomes a devotee. *Bhagavata* as a community cutting across caste/class/gender boundaries is one of the strongest features of the movement of the Azhwars and the Nayanars. It is this notion of ‘community’ contained in the concept of *bhakti* that has made it such a powerful vehicle of social protest and reform (112–113).

Elsewhere, Dharwadker also notes the importance of community in the Bhakti framework (*Kabir* 61–62). Both the Bhakti saint and the Bhakti community produce anomalies and paradoxes at the level of social conventions, which, if not revolutionary, are at least interruptive of orthodox gender socialisation.

For one, as the worship and *sampradaya*—ideologically—of the “have-nots,” the Bhakti ethic, aesthetic, metaphysics, as well as collective, is not only protestant and democratic, but also, through a standpoint lens, more inclusive (for clarification, see Nupur Chaudhuri and Rajat Kanta Ray 226–44). Pre-Bhakti, the spiritual domain and *ascesis* had been deemed off-limits for women in orthodox Hindu writ. Hindu monastic orders and *maths* established by Shankara, for instance, were—and continue to be—all-male affairs. Bhakti communes flouted these patriarchal homospiritual pieties by making room for the dedicated female spiritual aspirant within the Hindu fold. That the move to accommodate women within Srivaishnava Tamil Bhakti, for instance, may well have had to do with the challenge posed by Jain and Buddhist practices to Hinduism, as contended by Katherine K. Young (“Theology Does Help Women’s Liberation” 261), does nothing to dispute the changed practices on the ground in the Bhakti *sampradaya*. As a result, although bearing the stigmata of social deviance, as Ramaswamy asserts, the female *bhakta* was both profusely expressive and devotionally bona fide as never before.

One major cause for this, of course, was the tendency in certain forms of Bhakti to read the votary as feminine and the Deity as masculine. That paradigmatic ordering, in fact, has another interesting implication for gender relations. Because in all the traffic between the (feminine) devotee and the (masculine) Divine, what is also produced is a curious ambivalence about the human masculine. As against its destitution vis-à-vis the Godhead, the feminine—and through it, the female *bhakta*—actually gains a density, a granularity in social concourse, where the human masculine—and through it, the male *bhakta*—stands emptied of content, as a masquerade, as a faux identity. Among other things, this made possible the kind of exchange between Mirabai and Jiv Goswami cited earlier, carrying out a levelling—even reversing—of the usual hierarchy that fixes gender interactions, caste, class, age, and other social markers of command being equal. It also accounts for how the woman *bhakta* could,

and did, explore and express her loving devotion more directly from her subjectivity (see Daud Ali's essay on the genealogy of female subjectivity as it shifts from *nayika* to *bhakta* in early medieval India for a helpful account of the structural-ideological complex that underwrote the subjectivity of feminine devotionism), while the male *bhakta* often appears constrained to search for an appropriate feminine persona to articulate his *bhakti*.

Practically destabilising Bhakti definitely was, in this wise. However, for all the recognition of female spirituality, for all the inclusion of women in the spiritual *sampradaya*, as Ramaswamy notes:

It is seldom that women saints have established an order, boasted of a large following or left behind strong spiritual traditions... Virasaivism in theory admits women into the Jangama order, thus recognizing the possibility of the foundation of monastic establishments by women. However, this has rarely operated in practice; a few unique exceptions merely proving the convention that monastic orders founded by women were untenable. (25)

Elsewhere, Uma Chakravarti maintains that:

A reading of the lives and the poetry of the south Indian *bhaktins* reveals a difference between the experience of *bhakti* for the *bhakta* and the *bhaktin* in the arena of marriage. An important dimension of the *bhakti* movement... was the breakdown of the householder and renouncer divide... In practice, however, the collapsing of this boundary operated only in the case of men. For women, the dichotomy persisted, and the tension between marriage and devotion to a personal god was never successfully resolved... (*Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories* 283)

Similarly, different critics have commented on how, from the evidence of their purported legacies at least, social reform and protest were more the preoccupation of male *bhaktas* than their female counterparts. For the latter, it was the personal quest that seemed to take precedence over issues of social justice, amelioration, and equity. Of course, this was radical insofar as the personal and spiritual were precisely what were denied to women in orthodox prescription. Nonetheless, their poetry, steeped in phallogocentric symbology and assumptions, did little to unsettle the terms of patriarchal discourse in the final analysis.

Then again, while the human masculine underwent a type of effacement within the specific gender dynamics operationalised in Bhakti desire, the logic of that same dynamic meant only a human male could ever lay claim to being God incarnate. Whereas an Akka Mahadevi could only say, “A woman though in name / I am, if you consider well, / the male principle” (Ramaswamy 23), Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, as the embodiment of Radha and Krishna, was “the divine golden dancer, a God in whose eternal dance the highest aspects of divine love, culminating in *raganuga-bhakti-sadhana* and the bliss of a faithful *manjari*, are revealed” (Rosen, “Raganuga Bhakti” 130). Karin Kapadia makes a similar point in discussing the gender dynamics underwriting divine possession rituals amongst the middle-ranking castes in Tamil Nadu. To quote her:

when men are ritually empowered through possession, being filled and energized with divine power, they are, unlike women, able to direct these divine “female” powers as well. This is because, unlike women, men, when they are “female,” can represent and embody Deity in a whole and complete manner, for they encompass both Power/Energy and Wisdom.

Furthermore, she writes:

This ideology of male completeness is given subtle but powerful iconic [form] in the remarkable androgynous image of Shiva Ardhanari...

Though androgynous, the identity of the divine image is male. This is suggested by the slight predominance usually given to the male half of the sculptured image and it is unambiguously stated in the name of the icon: Shiva Ardhanari, that is, “Shiva as Half-Woman.” It is rarely described as “Parvati as Half-Man.” (“Pierced by Love” 198)

In the final analysis, therefore, it would perhaps be unfair to judge Bhakti, in its heterogeneous expressions of desire, as either exclusively radical or reactionary. Bhakti both questioned/reordered/upset and consolidated certain discriminatory gender norms. And if some forms of Bhakti were doctrinally orthodox and practically reactionary (from a gender perspective), then there were also enough manifestations of it that were practically radical and doctrinally inclusive. From the perspective of a useful gender politics in the present, understanding this about Bhakti is important for two reasons. One, like Mirabai, we are better placed to utilize the resources of Bhakti to effectively deconstruct and delegitimize its more sexist contemporary pop-cultural and doctrinal articulations. Given the continued influence of the idioms of Bhakti in mainstream Indian life, this is no insignificant matter. And two, we are better placed in the present to build on its more inclusive aspects to freely explore, as women, all forms and intensities of spiritual experience afforded by the modalities of *bhakti* and *prapatti*—but without the baggage of patriarchal overdetermination. Ultimately, understanding and engaging with Bhakti precepts and practices is important for Indian women (and men) who want a different tomorrow—but one that is not entirely discontinuous with the past and its possibilities.

### Notes

I am grateful to Professor Udaya Kumar for calling my attention to this aspect of Bhakti thought and practice.

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