

Report of a Comparative Study of Some Indian and European Women Mystic-poets

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Aim: We had undertaken to examine the work of some women mystic poets, both Indian and European; to explore points of similarity between them; and to show how their lives and their poems reveal a sublime disregard for the rigid conventions of their time, for the norms and restrictions laid down by a heavily patriarchal society and an extremely hierarchical religious tradition.

Methodology Adopted: We began with an in-depth analysis of the writings of four women mystics, viz. Juliana of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Janabai of Maharashtra and Mirabai of Mewar, Rajasthan. These writings were examined against a backdrop of the socio-economic and politico-cultural context of the specific writers. Then we made a comparative textual and contextual study of the four, identifying recurrent themes and common concerns, as well as resonances in the poetic voices and similarities in the images and tropes employed.

Some of the questions we addressed were:

- What was the source of the empowerment that these women seem to have experienced?
- Were there specific parallels in their socio-cultural contexts that perhaps served as a catalyst for this magnificent outpouring of radical lyricism?
- Are there traces of similarities in the kind of images and symbols they use in their efforts to express the mystical experience?

The Understanding of Mysticism adopted in this study: The central fact of mysticism is an overwhelming consciousness of God and of the devotee's own soul: a consciousness which absorbs, permeates or eclipses all other centres of interest. The devotee circumvents, transcends or

ignores conventional forms and practices of religious belief, seeing them as secondary to his/her fundamental goal: the intimate union with God that is primary to mystical experience. This experience tends to be highly individualistic, and unique to each person. Yet, it is not even remotely egoistical, for mystical union presupposes that the individual self is subsumed into the all-encompassing reality, the Self that is God.

Socio-cultural Contexts:

Hildegard of Bingen (1098 – 1179): Born the tenth child in an aristocratic family, Hildegard was a frail and delicate child, subject to frequent bouts of ill health. From an early age, she experienced mystical “visions” and was perceived to be different from the other children. This was part of the reason for her being consecrated to the Lord and being sent to a monastery at a young age.

The early Middle Ages saw the beginnings of a revival of interest in art, music and poetry, within a deeply religious context. Hildegard lived in a society that was feudal and highly hierarchical, whether in ecclesiastical or secular circles. The influence of feudal structure and the French courtly love tradition is clearly visible in the literature of the time and Hildegard’s writing also shows traces of this. At the same time, her genius and creative power have forged a unique expression of a dynamic and different sensibility/spirituality.

For Hildegard, as a woman in a religious community, and later as an abbess, the community occupied a very central position in her world. This, together with her foundational and intimate experience of God, seems to have been a source of empowerment that freed her from the normal constraints of the patriarchal and hierarchical church to which she belonged: witness her forthright letters to Pope Anastasius IV, to various European kings and religious authorities, both male and female. There is even a letter written to an ex-communicant – which must have taken great courage, since an ex-communicant by definition was meant to be shunned by all virtuous people.

Hildegard's writings span a vast range of subjects and forms. Her poetic writings, which are being considered here, show clear indications of the same freedom, power and radical transformation we have mentioned above.

Juliana of Norwich (1342 – 1429): Not much is known about Juliana's family or early life. However, we may safely assume that she came from a reasonably well-to-do background, since she was educated. (Though she claimed to be "unlettered" this was probably only a reference to the fact that she knew little Latin.) What we do know is that, following a severe chest infection at the age of 31½ years in 1373, she had a series of "visions" that transformed her life. Shortly after that, she withdrew from public life and enclosed herself in a single cell in St. Julian's Church, Conisford, a suburb of Norwich. In fact, one theory holds that she took the name Juliana because of her affiliation to this church. She spent the rest of her days as a true anchorite in prayer, offering spiritual advice to those who sought it.

The Hundred Years' War (1338-1453) had far-reaching consequences on the life of everyone living in Europe at this time. This war exaggerated chivalric ideals of truth and honour, furthering and refining the courtly love tradition that was already visible in Hildegard's day. (Juliana refers to Christ as her "courteous Lord".) The plague (the "Black Death") ravaged England from Aug. 1348 to the following year: in her Revelations of Divine Love, Juliana shows great sensitivity to suffering and dying.

The Great Schism of 1377 (the scandal of two popes – one in Rome and one in Avignon) created a gross abuse of the system. The Bishop of Norwich supported Urban VI of Rome, and promised indulgences to all who fought for his cause. Juliana's writings are quietly subversive of the official Church stance. She seems to advocate universal values of love, compassion and peace over and above narrow sectarian hierarchical beliefs. Like Wycliffe and the Lollards (early Protestants groups breaking away from the Catholic Church), Juliana expresses a deep devotion to the human Jesus as opposed to the figure enshrined in the Church.

This was also a period when the primacy of Latin was being challenged and local languages were considered fit vehicles for literary expression. One of Juliana's purposes in writing was to popularise the English vernacular. While her writings are in prose, they nevertheless reveal a strong lyrical strain, because of which we have included her in our study.

Janabai (c. 1298 – 1350): Born to a low-caste Sudra family, on the banks of the Godavari, Janabai was steeped in the bhakti tradition from her birth, for her parents belonged to the Varkari sect. From the age of seven, Janabai was a servant in the household of Dama Shetty, the father of the renowned Varkari poet, Namdev. She would have been treated with kindness and would even have been allowed to participate in worship and devotion, since the Varkari tradition was an inclusive and egalitarian one. Nevertheless, the endless routine and the burden of household labour that fell to her lot would have been heavy, and we find many of her poems referring to this. At the same time, being a servant would necessarily have imposed restraints on her participation in religious functions.

The Varkari tradition was at its height during Janabai's lifetime, with Jnyaneshwar and Namdev having infused a new spirit into the sect. They had introduced many revolutionary new ideas, primarily the concept of equality of caste, creed and sex. Varkaris discarded totally the sacrificial rites and rituals, the *chaturvarna* theory and the discrimination against women and the depressed classes that were associated with Brahminical Hinduism. Women and the lower caste devotees could compose poetry in praise of Vitthoba and sing them in public: at that time, this was a feature unique to the Varkaris. The sect encouraged congregational worship, bhajans and kirtans, and frequent meetings of all the disciples/devotees, and thus animated many people with a new feeling of devotion for God and love for humanity. Having eliminated all intermediaries – guru, matha and the like – and with very simple observances required of the devotees, the Varkari movement made worship as a lived experience available to all people. This revival and popularisation of Hindu devotion is significant when we consider that this was also a period of Muslim presence in the state.

Janabai's poetry shows how women have used a dominant cultural tradition and bent it to their own ends. It is located in the domain of ordinary life, the life of the household, the life to which most women of her time were confined. The joys and tensions of this life are reflected in her poems, while at the same time, her dreams of a mystical union with Vithoba are both beacon and comfort in her hard life. Her love and longing for God serve as the conduit through which she can reach for a freedom and a power that go beyond those available to other women during that period.

Meerabai (c.1498 – 1546): As the only daughter of a Rajput noble of the house of Rathod in Rajasthan, Meera's early life was both privileged and sheltered. She was educated together with her cousin Jaymal, the future Rajput hero. When she was very little, wandering ascetics brought to the house a statuette of Krishna. The beauty of this figurine captivated her, and there is a further tradition that she became so attached to the image that her mother jokingly told her that Krishna would be her bridegroom.

In 1516, Meera was married to Prince Bhojraj of the kingdom of Mewar. Tradition holds that the marriage was never consummated, since she always considered Krishna to be her bridegroom. Be that as it may, she was still childless when her husband died some three years after the marriage. His death exposed her to the persecution of other members of his family, particularly the next Rana.

Her devotion to Krishna led her to mingle freely with other disciples, male and female, both in the palace and outside. These disciples came from various social strata, and often from the lower castes. Meera was famous/notorious for her singing and dancing before the image of Krishna in the public temples, thus transgressing the narrow parameters within which a Rajput princess was expected to live. Her royal inlaws perceived her blatant flouting of social and religious mores as an outrage: a blot upon the family honour and an insult to Rajput aristocracy.

Recurrent Themes:

One of the most commonly recurring themes in all four poets is **the presence of God in all things**. God is thus seen as being both transcendent and immanent. While this perception is fairly commonly accepted in the Hindu tradition (Isha vasyam idam sarvam – Isa Upanishad) and is therefore only to be expected in the writings of Janabai and Meerabai, it is less usual in the Christian tradition, though some Christian mystics have shared it. Consequent upon this perception is Hildegard's refusal to accept the polarisation of men and women, especially women, into "good" and "bad", or the polarisation of the self into flesh and spirit (with its implicit rejection of the former and celebration of the latter). This involves a more holistic view of the world, reconciling conventional antitheses, in which the wholeness and oneness of all creation is of central importance. Juliana too speaks of the ecstatic love of God in which his divine nature is shared by human beings, who are thus transfigured.

For all four poets, there is a You and a Me, and at the same time, there is a blurring and even a dissolution of the boundaries of the two selves. The tension between these two opposing positions overflows into the startling paradoxes that characterise mystical poetry. Meera knows that Krishna is within her, and yet she waits for him all the time.

My love,
 he is here
 inside

He does not leave,
 he doesn't
 need to arrive.

Says Meera, I gaze
 at the path day and night. (pp.79-81)

Janabai expresses a similar idea:

I am steeped in your qualities, says Jani.
 How long will I have to wait for you, O husband of Rakhumai? (p. 15)

Another theme that predominates in the work of all the poets we have studied is the freedom from worldly considerations of shame and honour, from conventional notions of respectability and scandal, that circumscribe women under the patriarchal dispensation. This is very apparent in the works of both Janabai and Meerabai: Janabai speaks of her pallav falling away, Meerabai speaks of her hair being loose – both these are radically subversive of the conventions of decency that govern Indian womanhood. Hildegard and Juliana, writing in a tradition that is suspicious of the “flesh”, nevertheless frequently employ sexual and erotic imagery to describe their experience of the divine. “And in the knitting and in the oneing He is our very true spouse,” asserts Juliana, and while this is in keeping with the idea of religious women being “spouses of Christ”, Hildegard’s use of the concept of the “breasts of the Church” at which we must suckle, is certainly startling.

However, the images of the Indian mystics reveal a far more radical abandonment of convention.

It is indeed remarkable that in spite of belonging within a patriarchal framework, three of these women have, at various stages of their lives, referred to God as a feminine force. Here, we do not mean references either to goddesses or the Virgin Mary. Rather, there is a distinct feminisation of a god who was traditionally and initially perceived as masculine. Juliana repeatedly speaks of “Christ our Mother,” Janabai often refers to “Vithabai”, and speaks of Vithoba’s motherly love, while Hildegard not only personifies both Wisdom and the Holy Spirit as feminine, but also writes, “Therefore the faithful...thirst for the justice of God and suck holiness from his breasts, nor could they ever have surfeit.” This cross-sexual imagery and inversion seems to lead us to a God beyond gender, not through a negation of gender-specific images but rather through a plethora of them. Only in the case of Meera, though Krishna is often represented as being gentle and nurturing, he is never referred to as being motherly or feminine in any way. Meera is the exception here, perhaps because of the rigidly patriarchal Rajput ethos, perhaps also because her relationship with the divine is almost always expressed in terms of erotic love. For the others, the gendered visions

and images succeed each other in dazzling profusion, but behind the multiplicity is a figure, neither man nor woman, but the Living Light.

We have found the above-mentioned themes of particular significance, though our study has revealed a number of other recurrent themes and concerns. Some of these are:

- The power of the Divine Name
- Praise of all the divine attributes
- Abandonment of all anxieties, all desires, all needs into the hands of the Lord
- Immense intimacy with the Lord
- Emptiness of the world without the Lord
- An intense longing for union, for a merging of the human and the divine

These will be discussed at length at a later stage.

Noteworthy Images

One of the key elements to be taken into consideration in any analysis of mystical poetry is the directness of the represented experience – an experience that is of its very nature unmediated. The straightforwardness of the imagery brought into play seems to underline this. All four poets repeatedly employ images drawn from nature, as well as from the quotidian household tasks performed by women. “Jani sweeps the floor,/ the Lord collects the dirt,/ carries it upon his head/ and casts it away.” (trans. by Vilas Sarang, in Tharu and Lalitha, 1993:83) Sometimes, it is the plenitude of nature that is invoked to convey the richness of the mystical experience; at other times, that very plenitude provides a contrast with the emptiness around while the devotee waits for the Lord. Meera says:

The spring feast of colour,
with sprinkling and laughter,
tastes like the dust.
Says Meera, I wait. (p. 61)

Nature also provides symbols central to the writings: Hildegard's cosmic egg includes a number of concentric ovals. Outermost is a ring of bright flame, followed by a layer of dark, violent fire. A star-filled region of pure ether surrounds a circle of moisture. At the centre sits a globe within which is a great mountain. As a whole, the egg represents both the majesty and the mystery of the Creator. At the same time, the different layers serve as a kind of paradigm for her own relationships – at the centre is the yolk, the source of life, and this stands for Hildegard's relationship with her creator, the essential spiritual source of her existence. This source has also been represented occasionally as a well and as a spring.

All four see God as the beloved. This is not specific to the mystic tradition. What is specific, and particularly so in the case of our four subjects is the perception of God as lover, and the confidence with which they express the conviction that God is wooing them, the intimacy of the love-relationship between themselves and God. An assumed equality between God and the devotee forms the underpinning for all the love-play that is subject matter for much of the writing. God is here humanised, and equipped, occasionally with all the paraphernalia of human existence.

The body, and bodily needs, often provide the metaphor for an expression of the yearning for the Lord that is so much a part of the mystical quest. Contemporary psychoanalysis also uses the language of longing: Lacan speaks of Desire being forever rooted in the field of the Other, and of the subject fading along a chain of desire. For the mystics, this Other is God. Sexual desire is, of course, a metaphor commonly employed by all four, but so is hunger and thirst. According to Juliana,

This is the ghostly thirst, [God's] love-longing, ... the incompleteness of his bliss, that he has us not as wholly in him as he shall have [at doomsday]...

(Beer, 1993: 142)

Less obvious images also occur:

Where has the blind man's stick got stuck?

Which forest has the doe lost herself in?

I am a dumb calf, lost, and trying to find her way home.
 What shall I do without you?
 How long can I wait with my heart in my mouth?

(Janabai, 1997: 14)

The devotee's longed-for union with the Lord finds ecstatic expression in images of sensual pleasure, of dance, of sexual consummation: Janabai loses her senses with delight at the sight of Vithoba standing, arms akimbo, on the brick. Meera sings:

The Lord held a glass in front of my heart and I'll dance.

(Futehally, 1994:47)

Hildegard amazingly speaks of consecrated virginity in sexual terms:

O Virginity, you stand in the royal bridal chamber.

O how tenderly you burn in the King's embraces...

(Newman, 1989: 223)

Other images – images of darkness and death, the serpent, the rain, the seasons, references to Hindu or Christian mythologies (as the case may be), etc. – abound. These will be analysed in detail at a later stage.

Conclusion:

All four of the women mystic poets that we have studied broke out of the boundaries of caste and class and transcended their specific socio-cultural and religious contexts, which were extremely patriarchal and hierarchical. The motive power in each case seems to have been the God-experience, which each expressed in a highly individualistic manner. This was a time when women's voices were either silenced or ignored: yet, these women spoke with a force and power that has kept their words alive to the present day, reclaiming a space and a voice within a discourse that traditionally devalorised the feminine. They have been able to appropriate a traditionally masculine/patriarchal domain to voice their special insights and perspectives. These visions and insights liberate

them from traditional social constraints, setting them free to explore and express a radical and deeply transformative intimacy with their God.

*The translations of Janabai's poetry are, except where otherwise stated, by ourselves, with the help of Prof. M.S.Malshe, Dept. of Humanities & Social Science, IIT, Bombay.

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