



Love and Rebellion: Analysis of Imperative Themes in Bhakti Poetry

Sonum Khajuria and Dr. Rinu

Abstract

This paper is about those themes of Bhakti Poetry which have a variety of suggestions. The discussed themes may not be new to the reader but the different perspectives through which the same themes are being re-visited are new. The discussion covers the themes of love and rebellion from varied lenses to prove the thesis that they are the imperative themes of Bhakti Poetry and most of the Bhakti poems are structured around them. Besides, the paper also analyses the use of simple diction and the reasons for the ineffability of bhakti poetry. Bhaktas challenged everything from casteism to language and deconstructed them in order to express their feelings and experiences which were beyond logic, words, caste or any other barrier to freedom.

Keywords: Love, Rebellion, Longing, Language, Union.

1. Introduction

Bhakti Poetry is that cultural, ideological and philosophical shift which shook the very foundations of our existence and beliefs. It explored the 'Self' but with the fearless and shameless expression of inward tumult. It inspired people, and is still giving impetus for thousands of existential queries. The following paper explores the imperatives of love and rebellion, as depicted in Bhakti poetry, by re-reading verses of some Bhakti poets.

The paper explores how Bhakti poetry is transcending the existing notions of love and how this love is the underlying tone of every expression present in Bhakti poetry: rage, despair, longing, bewilderment, irony, etc. When Akka Mahadevi walks out of her husband's court; naked; and when Lal Ded sings on the hills of Kashmir with her bare skin: they challenge everything and choose rebellion and unorthodoxy, over convention. To support this statement, I am going to use verses where love is expressed in different ways by the Bhaktas. The object of love is desperately sought; the body is compared to a vessel which is ready to receive God and the lover is awestruck at the mere idea of uniting with his object of love. The object is of course God, which has different connotations from ultimate liberation to union with the Self. A number of ideas are taken up by Bhaktas to express their longing as they cannot contain this longing. Sometimes, the longing bursts itself open in the form of rage, and at other times, it just uses the language of paradoxes and ambiguities. This paper revolves around the ideas and ways, given by Bhakti saints to attain freedom of the soul. The idea is to satiate the longing of union with the Ultimate, and the way is of course Love. Moreover, the longing is so intense that it demands their whole being:

This is a throb so definitive, so encompassing that it blurs the conventional divide between the sacred and the profane. It is a throb that demands union and annihilation, love and liberation, ecstasy and extinction, more and no more- and demands it now (Subramaniam, 2014)

The paper has three main sections which will discuss the following: Origin and meaning

of Bhakti poetry, Spirit of Rebellion and Love.

2. Origin and History

Svetasvatara Upaniṣad, *Bhāgavata Purāna* and *Bhagwadgita* are the first texts to witness Bhakti tones in them, and Tamil culture is the first one to experience its blows before an elaborate movement took birth. The term Bhakti comes from the Sanskrit verb *bhaj*, which initially meant to divide, share or distribute. Over the time, it stood for varied meanings like to enjoy, partake, to eat or to make love. For many thousand years, Bhakti was known as a path to spiritual realization. However, it was not the only path per se, for *Karma yoga*, *Jnana yoga* and *Raja yoga* had occupied an equal place, if not less, to lead to ultimate liberation. However, a new expression took birth when it suddenly appeared in ninth century A.D. in Tamil country. It generated a 'passionate, unyielding, and existentialist attitude to the devotee's own experience' (Schelling, 2011). This means, it erupted as a devotion which was personal and scornful of religious and priestly doctrines, it believed in the 'spiritual truth' which lied in the heart of the believer. Moreover, it emphasized on embracing desire, longing and uncertainty. "Immersion in the physical body and its stormy emotions leads the bhakta away from theory, theology, doctrine, or elaborate metaphysics; it draws him or her into realms of dance, poetry and song." (Schelling, 2011).

Bhakti poems are composed in intense moments of self confronting the self. This moment is a moment "that sears through the smog of belief and doctrine, the endlessly recycled traffic of theology, the air waves of opinion." (Subramaniam, 2014). Their attempt is an attempt into self-exploration and confrontation of the deep longing of freedom (from the limitations of 'Self') within them. Besides, Bhaktas were passionate to fill the mundane life and conventional religious teachings with the juice of Love; "Into stone as into language, these poets sought to breathe life." (14) They encompassed all classes, spheres and cultures to give one common shape of thirst for divinity. They had somewhere tasted the innate wine of divine presence within them and realized that nothing else was true.

Moreover, there are four paths of God-realisation – *Karma Yoga* (The Path of Action), *Gnana Yoga* (The Path of Knowledge), *Bhakti Yoga* (The Path of Devotion), and *Raja Yoga* (The path of Meditation). Bhaktas approach self-realization through devotion or bhakti towards any God whom they see in and around them; and at the same time aspire to become one with It irrespective of anything. This is their aspiration and lust for the divine which they cannot contain or hide. However, the aspiration is for self-realization only, and their journey is no less than any other existential journey.

3. Spirit of Rebellion

The poetry is marked with the confluence of Sanskrit with India's vernacular traditions. It absorbed local vernacular themes and Indian culture or classical Tamil culture into itself before spreading to other parts of India. Its impulse was full of passions and A.K. Ramanujan has called these passions as deliberately 'anti-tradition' because of the following trademarks of this poetry: Defiance of ritual and orthodoxy, rejection of educated speech or lofty metrics, a turning away from classical training in poetics, modern imagery, rhythm and idiom; distinctly personal voices with a thrust towards illogic. They defied logic because logic could not fill the void within them. All the above points brought out by Ramanujan, speak about the unconventionality and rebellious spirit in Bhakti poetry. The incapability of language is expressed through contradictions and extreme imagery. For example, a poet calls out for God in moments of utter desperation and says that if he sees Him, he would eat him up. His hunger for God is so intense that all his senses can muster is this language: "While I was waiting eagerly for him/Saying to myself/ "If I see you anywhere/ I will gather you /and eat you up,"/He beat me to it and devoured me entire/ my lord dark as raincloud/ my lord self-seeking and unfair." (Subramaniam, 2014)

3.1. Rebellion against conventional Language (Language of Paradox)

Bhakti poetry is an expression of people's culture as it developed in response to narrow minded practices of that time. It broke the shackles of feudalism, casteism and formalism of ancient

poetics. Most of the Bhakti poets were non-brahmins singing songs of devotion which they were barred from singing. It was a people-oriented literature free from classical effect of high diction as present in Sanskrit, Pali or Prakrit poetry. It was more like oral tradition of village songs and it bridged the artificial gap between the so called literariness of conventional poetic language and sheer spontaneity of day-to-day language. It proved that words are only a pretext and real essence lies beyond words as says Rumi;

Do you know a name without a thing answering to it? Have you ever plucked a rose from R, O, S, and E? You name His name; go, seek the reality named by it! Look for the moon in the sky, not in the water! If you desire to rise above mere names and letters, make yourself free from self at one stroke. Become pure from all attributes of self, that you may see your own bright essence, Yea, see in your own heart the knowledge of the Prophet, Without book, without tutor, without preceptor. (Nicholson, 1974)

To prove my point here, I used the quote of Rumi who was not a Bhakti poet but a great Sufi. Bhakti poets and Sufi poets were both poets of devotion who loved God desperately and profoundly, and addressed him in their own respective terminologies which were quite similar. One movement was influenced by the other, and hence, many Sufi saints of India are sometimes counted amongst Bhakti poets like Bulleh Shah, Kabir, etc.

Ramanujan says that the language is dark and ambiguous and quotes Mircea Eliade: ‘analogies, homologies and double meanings’. As the paper will study Bhakti poetry through translated texts, only the linguistic parts of the poem will be highlighted. But the fact is, Bhakti poetry is replete with tones and ornamental descents which are beyond words. It cannot do justice to vocal sounds that hold no fixed meanings, or to words that undergo deliberate or ritual distortion. Above all, language is inadequate to describe the experiences beyond logic. It is constricting and inadequate. Whether it is the *doha* of Kabir, the *abhangas* of Tukaram, the *kirtana* of tyagaraja or the *vachanas* of Kannada poets, the intention is to dislocate language and to deconstruct what traps us thereby: the word itself. For example, Kabir says:

man mast hua tab kyon bole/ heeraa payo gaanth gathiyaya/ baar baar vaako kyon khole/ halkee thi tab chadhi taraajoo, poori bhayee tab kyon toule/ surat-kalaari bhayee matvaari madwaa pee gayee bin toule/ hansaa paaye Mansarovar, taal talaiyaa kyon dole/ tera sahab hai ghar maahin, bahar nainaa kyon khole/ kahyen kabir suno bhaai saadho, sahab mil gye til ole

(where is the need of words, when love has made drunken the heart/ I have wrapped the diamond in my cloak; why open it again and again/ When its load was light, the pan of the balance went up: now it is full, where is the need for weighing?/ the swan has taken its flight to the lake beyond the mountains; why should it search for the pools and ditches any more?/ your Lord dwells within you: why need your outward eyes be opened?/ Kabir says: “Listen, my brother! My Lord, who ravishes my eyes, has united Himself with me”) (Tagore, 1915).

Here, Kabir is pointing that silence only can express the feeling of union and he is short of words. In a different *doha* he expresses his longing as an ‘unsounded sound’ because it cannot be directly expressed but through wit, obscurity and conceit.

The language is *sandhyabhasha*- intentional language – but the intention is camouflaged by paradox. Derrida also said that the language of poet saints is “specific” and “exemplary” –specific to the idiom of culture and exemplary in possessing elements of universal significance. Thus elements of modernity are embedded in the poetry of saints. “For one thing, they represent temporally, the quest for authentic experience validated individually and not mediated by *smriti*, even the Vedic texts are not exempt from skepticism.” (Sivaramkrishna)

The presence of multiple, magical and mystical folk traditions across India has alerted one to the possibility that the most important part of a song may not be ‘what it says’. This tradition of secret languages in India is known as *sandhya-bhasha*. This secret language however, exhibits a secret code says Marcea Eliade in *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*. American poet Archibald MacLeish wrote, ‘a poem should not mean but be’. For Bhakti tradition, a poem takes the listener into a state of awareness and sometimes into mystical

experiences. They dance and sing with joy and ecstasy and experience what words cannot even express. Moreover, it always remained far from the centers of power. But being orature, they remained vulnerable to distortion, and influence of sectarian religions or nationalism of coming ages, kept them from remaining original.

3. 2. *Rebellion against Hollow Worship*

Bhaktas were not just worshipping God. They transcended the conformities of worship and started showing love for him like for a beloved. Another striking feature of Bhakti poetry is no conventional parameters can be used to understand it. They spoke words of day-to-day language to convey their rebellion against conformities. Their love was a rebellion against existing notions of love which they presented as love between two individuals in the language of humans. In the Upanishads, the bliss of *Brahman* is compared with the loving embrace of a beloved woman. The love was more elaborate and limitless and free from reason and education, as Kabir says “*pothi padi padi jag muah pandit bhaya na koye/ dhai akhar prem ke padhe jo pandit hoye*” which means that reading books doesn’t make one a scholar but reading love or understanding the philosophy of love does. Now, how is this Love so different from the Love that we know?

Sufis and Bhakti poets say that there is only one type of Love and that is the love for God; all other loves are pseudo loves because of their ephemeral nature. True love is directed towards a formless, flawless God within oneself, in the form of the true self, the *atma* or *hamsawithin*. He cannot be found in man-made illusions of religions and superficial pursuits of things. Mirabai for instance, sings in her songs, of her madness for Krisna. She loves him desperately and does not get involved with anything less than the God himself. She does not even consummate her love with her husband, and does not care a wee bit for the defamation people bestow upon her. One of her songs begins with the lines:

My eyes are greedy. They are beyond turning back.

They stare straight ahead, friend, straight ahead,

Coveting and coveting still more...

To get a look at Mohan when he comes (Subramaniam, 2014)

She is waiting for her lover/ God whom she calls Krisna or mountain lifter in most of her songs. Here, love is directed towards a deity but the concept goes a bit deeper where she considers him her husband. She finds everything else useless and meeting him is her only desire. This is mad love if we look at it from modern day perspective but if we look at it in light of Sufi and Bhakti philosophy, it is that truth which one seeks all his life running from one desire to next. Meera, being different, due to meeting a yogi at childhood who uttered some lines in her ears is, awakened. She realized it soon enough that the only purpose of her life is to become one with her lord who is Krisna. Rather, she dreams of consummating her love with him, because it is so intense and in terms of human vocabulary that is the only close relation she can express. God cannot be apprehended by the senses; he is beyond logic and argument and can be seen only through whole-hearted devotion or Bhakti. In the *Narada Bhakti Sutra*, Narada defines Bhakti as

...of the nature of intense love for God. Love culminates in the ultimate communion of the human with the divine. All love is the result of and results in attachment-worldly love or human love on the one hand is our attachment to our friends, and relatives, or worldly materials and Divine love on the other hand, our attachment towards the Divine. (148-149)

A.K. Ramanujan says, “A bhakta is not content to worship a god in word and ritual, nor is he content to grasp him in theology; he needs to possess him and be possessed by him. He also needs to sing, to dance, to make poetry, painting, shrines, sculpture; to embody him in every possible way.” (Subramaniam, 2014)

4. Love

All Bhaktas, Sufis and saints say that they are born out of love. However, there are two dimensions of this love- the external and internal. When love limits itself to people who are

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related to us, it becomes egoistical love with 'me' and 'mine' in it. It expands to love for one's assets and money and attachment to places, etc. This leads to trapping us into an endless vicious cycle of greed where we are running for more and more. Inner world comprises of criteria-less and ego-less love. Once the inner world is realized, the search ends in the ultimate blissful communion. Bulleh Shah, a Sufi master of Bhakti era said that loving itself is the greatest pleasure, there is no purpose behind loving someone because love itself is the purpose. Love with the greed of return is no love but business and transaction, says Shah. (*Ishq vee lalach naal keeta the ki keeta*- if you love with greed in heart, do you call it love?)

Love between a man and a woman, as depicted in movies and songs is a glimpse of the deeper love the bhaktas felt. Saints and Sufis often use imagery and vocabulary of beautiful woman or beloved to explain their love for the divine. For them God and beloved become same. For instance, Rumi, the great Sufi master from Iran has always addressed his friend and guide Shams as his beloved for whom he craves. Kabir's beloved is Rama and Meera's beloved is Krishna. This divine presence is located within oneself as Kabir says in the following doha: "like fragrance in the heart of flower/ in you the Lord dwells// musk is lodged in the navel of deer/ like the deer you seek him everywhere." (Das 6)

Kabir chooses to wait for his final union with the Supreme Soul like a passionate lover eagerly waiting the day of union

O my Beloved! Come to my house.

...

Then what is this love of mine? I have no taste
For food, I have no sleep; my heart is ever restless
Within doors and without.

...

Who is there that will carry my news to my Beloved?

Kabir is restless: he is dying for sight of him (lines 26-27)

All living beings are encompassed by love. "Love is omnipotent and all pervading" says Swami Vivekananda in his *Religion of Love*.

Maulana Azad Rumi, 'the greatest mystical poet of any age', said in *Mathnawi*; "A lifetime without Love is of no account/ love is the water of life/ drink it down with the heart and soul" (Whinefield, 2002). This love is the blissful experience which itself is exhilarating, and without it we are just selfish, utilitarian, transaction machines. The freedom of the soul to achieve absolute truth requires melting of ego and total surrender in order to commune with the Divine. As Kabir says of this communion in one of his *dohas* translated by Dilip Chitre (1990, p. 12)

If the heart mingles in the Lord's
There is complete union
As melting ice mingles in water
In God the man of devotion. (lines 1-4)

Lastly, love has no limits; it has to encompass all creation, and unity of all creation. Eknath Easwaran (2002, p. 72) said in his book titled *Love is God: Nurturing Devotion for God Everyday*, "the way of love is a path toward love of God...if we fail in love of others we cannot say we know God, for God is love. Even to love another person completely, our consciousness has to be united, which is the very essence of the spiritual life". This means love is a feeling with which we were born, it is neither a transaction nor is it dependent on a limited number of people; it is all encompassing. We just have to open the closed doors within us to become one with the entire cosmos. Then, we become, conscious of the trees, sun and every tiny creature around us and of the oneness of everything. To put in the words of Bhaktas using a verse from one poem of Kabir which goes like: "you are an ocean, I am a fish inside you: I live in water but water I crave."(Dharwadker, 2003).

Religious texts have mentioned time and again that we are born of love and that 'God is love', which implies that it is of paramount importance in life to love because, otherwise, we are restless and in constant misery. Bhakti poets have discovered the true nature of this love

and they choose the journey of love to find their ultimate destination of union as “for all its ordeals and trials, the journey can offer, through the alchemy of love, moments as exhilarating as the destination.” (Subramaniam, 2014)

5. Conclusion

A mystic is the quintessence of love because he has discovered the meaning of love. He knows that love is God and he remains immersed in that ocean through awareness. The best way to love is realization of our essential nature. We are seekers and Bhaktas are not much different from us; who have identified and realized the cause of suffering. Buddha realized it in a different way and reached it through another way. Bhakti is the path of surrender and love and it is called by many as the shortest path. They should not be looked at as creaky lovers lost in illogical pursuits and running away from their worldly duties but as our “true genealogy”. This is what Meera did and this is what Rahim preached through his poetry. They gave up their ego and devoted completely to the love towards God and as God is not a material form so they saw him through the existing forms but felt them as energy or greater consciousness within themselves. They always felt god in the current moment and that is why awareness is their chief device. Meera says ‘I am in love/ who cares what happens next’. They do not care for future and past and live with their lover completely in the present moment. The yearning is deep and impassioned, so much so that the Bhakti poet wants it “now”.

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Bio- note

Sonum Khajuria is a researcher at Department of English and Foreign Languages, Central University of Haryana. She is working in the areas of Indian Poetics and Mystic Poetry and has submitted her thesis on the topic “Exploring ‘meaning’ in Select Mystic poetry through *Dhvani Siddhanta*”. She has also taught at different government and private colleges before embarking on her research journey. Having four published papers and seven paper presentations to her credit, she is all set for her Ph.D. viva in December-January 2022. Her email id is: sonumkhajuria@gmail.com.

Dr. Rinu is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Foreign Languages, Central University of Haryana with eight years of teaching experience. Her research areas include Stylistics, Indian Poetics and Diaspora Studies. She has around eleven publications to her credit. Recently, she has been awarded Best Presentation Award at University of Mumbai for her paper on “Trauma Studies”. Her contact details are: Department of English and Foreign languages, Academic Block 4, Central University of Haryana, Mahendergarh, 123029, email: rinueng@cuh.ac.in.

