Chapman University

Chapman University Digital Commons

Religious Studies Faculty Books and Book Chapters

Religious Studies

10-17-2019

The Gendering of Voice in Medieval Hindu Literature

Nancy M. Martin

Chapman University, nmartin@chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/religious_studies_books

Part of the [Hindu Studies Commons](#), [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#), [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Religion Commons](#), [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Martin, Nancy M. "The Gendering of Voice in Medieval Hindu Literature." In *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Philosophy and Gender*, edited by Veena R. Howard, 97-123. London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Religious Studies at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Faculty Books and Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC and the Diana logo are trademarks
of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2020

Copyright © Veena R. Howard and Contributors, 2020

Veena R. Howard has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act,
1988, to be identified as Editor of this work.

Cover image: Three Maidens Under a Willow. Attributed to Baijnath c. A.D. 1810,
copied by Sumahendra, Jaipur. Wall painting, Deogarh Fort

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying,
recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission
in writing from the publishers.

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc does not have any control over, or responsibility for, any
third-party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given in this
book were correct at the time of going to press. The author and publisher regret any
inconvenience caused if addresses have changed or sites have ceased to exist but can
accept no responsibility for any such changes.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4742-6958-2
ePDF: 978-1-4742-6960-5
eBook: 978-1-4742-6959-9

Series: Bloomsbury Research Handbooks in Asian Philosophy

Typeset by Newgen KnowledgeWorks Pvt. Ltd., Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain

To find out more about our authors and books, visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters.

The Gendering of Voice in Medieval Hindu Literature

Nancy M. Martin

The search for women's voices from the past has led many to turn to the female saints of medieval Hindu literature, an extraordinary array of women known for the songs they composed. Their songs have been enlivened and amplified across the centuries by countless subsequent singers and composers. Selected songs have also been committed to writing in order to aid memory and featured in scribal traditions as acts of devotional piety and the institutional consolidation of devotional teaching lineages or *sampradāys*, whether their founders were Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, or devoted to the Lord beyond form. Songs of the ninth-century Tamil Śrī Vaiṣṇava saint Āṇṭāl, the twelfth-century Kannada Vīraśaiva saint Mahādēviyakka, and the sixteenth-century North Indian devotee of Kṛṣṇa Mīrābāī continue to ring out, not only in religious gatherings but also from concert stages, on All India Radio, in films and television programs, and even as cell phone ringtones.

The life stories of these female saints, woven into hagiographic narratives, are as integral to their popularity as their songs are and as essential to understanding the meaning of their verses as the specific lines of poetry. Indeed, the saint is effectively a character internal to the song as its singer (Hawley 2005: 40–3). The voices therein are understood as belonging to very specific women with a known set of life experiences. Perhaps not surprisingly, their songs have been treated as if they give us direct access to female subjectivities and voices that can then be compared with those of their male saintly contemporaries. But is this really what we have? In the vast majority of cases it is definitively not, for these bodies of song belong to the improvisational realm of oral performance and most bear the marks of innumerable contributors in an ongoing process of co-creation by women and men from a vast range of social locations that cross the boundaries of language, culture, religion, and time.

What we do have, then, is a language in which many people speak, grounded in a theology in which gender plays a pivotal role and marked by a collective recognition of diverse gendered subjectivities and of the fluidity of such social constructions. These voices offer a vehicle to publicly articulate and reject patriarchal norms (especially in the voices of female saints) and to explore alternatives. They open up an intersubjective space to experiment with gendered identities and cultivate empathy (particularly as male saints speak in female voices), thereby fostering spiritual and/or psychological wholeness and transformation and even, potentially though not necessarily, inspiring positive social change. The songs sung in these voices and the stories told about their saintly initiators thus reveal a rich cultural heritage and wisdom with respect to gender and provide an immense resource for interrogating and creating alternative formulations of gendered relations and identities. In their shared singing and telling, these songs and stories provide a sanctioned arena for public conversation and debate, and in their theology, they provide a ground for action in love and for an egalitarian and holistic embrace of the masculine and feminine.

To fully grasp the implications of the gendering of voice in this literature, we must first understand the religious context that generates these voices and the life stories of the saintly figures in whose names these voices continue to be spoken. Accordingly, we will trace the origins and nature of devotional Hinduism. Theologically gender inclusive and embracing a feminine spiritual identity, the stories and songs of its saints will nevertheless reveal an ongoing bias against women and upholding of patriarchal norms that is continually challenged, particularly by women saints whose life stories follow very different trajectories than their male counterparts, and that male and female devotees alike must transcend. We will explore the nuances of male saints speaking of their love for God in female voice, in contrast to women saints doing so. Such analysis will lead us to consider the larger implications of subsequent devotees, both male and female, speaking in these gendered saints' voices. While touching on a wide range of male and female saints' stories and songs, we will focus in more detail on arguably the two most popular poet-saints—the sixteenth-century royal female devotee of Kṛṣṇa, Mīrābāī, and, by way of contrast, the fifteenth-century low-caste male devotee of the Lord beyond form, Kabīr.

Bhakti, Poet-Saints, and Their Songs

Beginning in the sixth century in South India, a new mode of devotional religiosity, *bhakti*, began to emerge in the broad flow of what is now commonly

known as “Hinduism.” Regional variations and teaching lineages developed across the subcontinent in the millennium that followed and continue to be widely embraced today. *Bhakti* is marked by a deeply personal relationship with the one divine reality, experienced as loving Lord, whether manifest in a particular form (*saguṇa*) or transcending the limitations of form (*nirguṇa*). The word *bhakti*, though generally translated as “devotion,” is immensely richer in its implications than the English word. As A. K. Ramanujan has explained, the registers of meaning of its root *bhaj* include

- to divide, distribute, allot or apportion to, share with; to grant, bestow, furnish, supply;
- to obtain as one's share, receive as, partake of, enjoy (also carnally), possess, have;
- to turn or resort to, engage in, assume (as a form), put on (garments), experience, incur, undergo, feel, go or fall into ...
- to pursue, practise, cultivate;
- to declare for, to prefer, choose (e.g., as a servant);
- to serve, honour, revere, love, adore. (Ramanujan 1993: 104)

The relationship between the divine Beloved and devotee lover traverses the full range of possibilities embedded in this term, in “a mutual participation of the Infinite Soul and finite souls,” as John Carman and Vasudha Narayanan describe it, with the Infinite Self or God as desirous and needful of the human devotee as the devotee is of the divine (Carman and Narayanan 1989: 39). Further, in the Hindu scheme of things, though personal, God is all in all, the multiplicity of the world a manifestation thereof, so that the human lover, divine Beloved, and the love which unites them are all part of that one divine reality, manifesting and actualizing the love that is God. For some devotees, the experience will be of the One who encompasses and transcends all form, the *nirguṇ* Lord. Others will encounter the Ultimate, at least at times, in more limited and thus more graspable and notably gendered forms as Śiva, Viṣṇu (most often in his incarnations as Kṛṣṇa or Rāma), or Mahādevī, the Great Goddess in her myriad guises. In either case, they will pour out their love in song.

Extraordinary individuals appear across the centuries who follow the path of *bhakti* and enter into powerful relationships with the divine. They compose and sing songs that illuminate the terrain of those relationships—songs of praise, of love and longing, of complaint and request. These songs incorporate iconic and mythic descriptions and draw on the most intimate of human relations—between parents and children, servants and their masters, friends and lovers. Their composers utilize tropes and images from classical literary genres, as well as those of more ordinary song traditions, to craft a language of religious realization and transformation. The songs of these extraordinary devotees draw

others into ever-deepening devotion through hearing and singing. Indeed, these lyrics are the principle “literature” of the *bhakti* religious stream, coupled with the stories of their saintly composers. Both songs and stories are regularly performed in communal gatherings to foster devotion. These are supplemented by *purāṇic* (mythological) compendiums of stories about divine incarnation and by works of theological and philosophical reflection.

Only vernacular languages are deemed appropriate for expressions of such intimacy, making singing and composition accessible to all, in dramatic contrast to the Sanskrit of elite Brahmanic traditions. As a corollary, religious authority is based on the publicly recognized depth of a person’s devotion and his or her ability to draw others into deeper devotion, not on birth or education or institutional affiliation. Among the greatest devotees are those formerly deemed “untouchables,” *brahmīns*, and everyone in between—including women, men, and even children. Thus, *bhakti* traditions cut across the boundaries of caste, gender, and status, making religiosity available to all people. For our purposes, however, it is the complex understandings of gender that emerge in the devotional theology of *bhakti* and through the lives and especially the songs attributed to these male and female saints that are of particular interest.

Gender-Inclusive Theology and Saintly Gendered Voices

In Hindu traditions, gender as well as caste is recognized as a characteristic of a particular birth, not an essential or eternal aspect of the true self (*ātman*), with each of us sometimes male and sometimes female in a “serial androgyny” across rebirths (Doniger O’Flaherty 1982: 303–10). The self is, thus, at once neither male nor female and yet also both male and female. The tenth-century Viraśaiva male saint Dēvara Dāsimaṃya sings,

If they see breasts and long hair coming, they call it woman;

If beard and whiskers they call it man—

The self that hovers in between is neither man nor woman.¹ (Ramanujan 1973: 110)

These words reflect a deep awareness not only of the assumptions people make based on outward appearances but also of the socially constructed and superficial character of gender assignments. It is not surprising that caste and attendant designations of purity and impurity are similarly denounced. Low-caste saints

from the tenth-century Śrī Vaiṣṇava Nammālvār to the fifteenth-century *nirguṇ* devotee Kabīr, as well as *brahmin* saints such as the fifteenth-century Gujarati Vaiṣṇava Narasī Mehtā, equally decry privilege or prejudice on the basis of caste (Hess and Singh 2002; Ramanujan 1993; Shukla-Bhatt 2015).

Theologically, the one divine reality, too—whether experienced as the transcendent *nirguṇ* Lord or taking form as Śiva, Viṣṇu, or Mahādevī—stands inclusive of all the distinctions of manifest existence, constrained by none. Divine androgyny (albeit of male deities) is vividly portrayed in the image of Ardhanārīṣvara—Śiva as half male and half female—and in the depictions of unified embrace of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. Such representations recognize gender as a fundamental aspect of manifestation, in its diversity, inner relationality, and wholeness. However, in contrast to such ultimate androgyny of the singular divine reality, as well as the deities and the true self across lifetimes, the bodies and most intimate relationships of the great devotee poet-saints of *bhakti* are profoundly marked by particularity. They are specific individual men and women, high caste and low, from different linguistic and cultural regions and times, who experience God in divergent ways and manifest forms, paradoxically side by side with the Lord who is all in all. As historical individuals, their lives are lived and their voices speak out of this gendered embodied experience.

As particular human beings, the saints experience varied challenges, and their livestake different trajectories. Yet distinctive patterns emerge in the hagiographies that develop around them, their immense diversity notwithstanding. David Lorenzen has examined the life stories of a number of male *nirguṇī* saints (devoted to the formless divine), identifying common elements of their lives (Lorenzen 1995). In his analysis of their narratives, he notes that lower-caste males must in some way overcome the social strictures of caste prejudice and, in certain cases, religious affiliation. Their stories also characteristically include uncommon birth stories; demonstrations of their piety, power, and/or divinity in childhood; authorizing transformative experiences mediated by a guru, celestial voice, or vision; tests by religious authorities and rulers that prove them beloved of God and immune to the temptations of wealth and power; and an “unusual death, often at a very advanced age” (Lorenzen 1995: 185–9). With regard to family and sexuality, they may be celibate or married, they may have children naturally or miraculously, or they may renounce family and social life altogether (Lorenzen 1995: 185–6). If they are married, most often their wives are fellow devotees, as is the case for Kabīr and Pīpā, though for a notable few spouses are a hindrance, as is the case for Tukārām who rails against his wife’s bitter

complaints about his obsession with God and resulting neglect of the family.² Overall, however, gender is not an impediment to these male saints' life choices.

Women Saints, Marriage, and Defiance of Normative Gender Roles

The life stories of women saints differ considerably. A. K. Ramanujan identifies five shared stages in the stories told about them—childhood devotion (without any need for the kind of transformative experience male saints typically undergo), escape from the trap of marriage, challenges to caste and gender norms, initiation by a guru, and merging/marrying God (Ramanujan 1999: 270–8). Their femaleness is front and center, and their absolute devotion to God is largely incompatible with the normative expectations for a *pativrata* (an ideal wife). According to *dharma* texts like the *Laws of Manu*, an ideal wife is enjoined to treat her husband as her god and find her salvation only through him. How women saints manage this conflict varies in the stories told about them, but they must do so, unless they are the wives of male devotees who share their absolute focus on God.

The very first saint of *bhakti* was a woman—the sixth-century Tamil devotee of Śiva, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār. She is portrayed by her twelfth-century male hagiographer Cēkkiḷār as an ideal wife who unintentionally terrifies her husband with her miraculous powers, which arise from her devotion (Craddock 2010: 73–89). Her husband abandons her as his wife, worshipping her from afar instead as a goddess and releasing her to pursue her devotion to Śiva unimpeded. She in turn renounces her beauty and femininity, asking Śiva to give her the form and identity of one of his ghouls (*pēy*) who inhabit the cremation grounds where he practices austere meditation. In her now demonic form, the saint takes up residence there, where she might enjoy Śiva's cosmic dance. This transformation motif is found in the stories of other female saints. While the Kannada Viraśaiva saint Tilakavve became “a male by God's grace,” the Tamil saint Avvaiyar, known for her poetic skill and wisdom as well as her unwavering commitment to education and ethical engagement, was “transformed into an unmarriageable old woman” by Ganesh at her request to avoid an unwanted marriage and to be able to move about freely (Ramanujan 1999: 274).³

Still others refuse marriage or are freed by widowhood or simply leave. The Viraśaiva saint Mahādēviyakka was utterly in love with Śiva but wed to a king who desired her, attracted by her beauty rather than her devotion. However, she

ultimately left the king and all else behind. It is clear from her poetry that she, nevertheless, continued to be subjected to harassment by other men who still saw her only as an object of potential sexual satisfaction (Dabbe and Zydenbos 1989; Ramanujan 1973: 111–14). The fourteenth-century Kashmiri Śaiva (or some say Sufi) saint Lallā would do the same, finally leaving behind the harsh mistreatment her in-laws and husband continually meted out to her (Hoskote 2011; Kishwar and Vanita 1989b; Odin 1999). Both she and Mahādēviyakka are said to have discarded even clothes to wander naked in their ecstatic love for God and absolute repudiation of patriarchal norms for women's behavior.

Only the seventeenth-century Maharashtrian Vārkarī saint Bahinā Bāi remained in a bad marriage, even having a child. But in her autobiography she recounts her regret and details her husband's brutality and violent opposition to her practice of *bhakti* (Abbot 1996; Vanita 1989). Even for her, however, the situation would eventually be mitigated by his conversion. Being a devotee in a woman's body, it seems, is highly problematic—a tension also voiced in tales told by more ordinary women devotees (Gold 1994). Many songs attributed to women saints dramatically reject normative *pativrata* ideology. Indeed, both Mahādēviyakka and Mirābāi refuse to accept their erstwhile husbands, instead affirming their “marriage” to God alone. Mahādēviyakka emphatically declares, “Take these husbands who die, decay and feed them to your kitchen fires” (Ramanujan 1973: 134).⁴ In so saying, she affirms devotion while rejecting a mortal man as its proper object or the source of a woman's salvation and repudiates the ideology that credits a woman with ensuring her husband's life through her virtuous behavior, while laying the blame at her feet if he should predecease her. The saint leaves no doubt that the only one worthy of such devotion is God and thus if “marriage” is defined in this way, then God is the only “husband” she will recognize.

The voices of these women become audible in their stories, especially in the context of their defiance of gender and caste norms and in the tests they are reported to undergo before being recognized as great devotees (and sometimes also being initiated) by male gurus. In the case of Mahādēviyakka, she is challenged to defend her naked wandering by Allama Prabhu, the spiritual leader of the short-lived Vīraśaiva community established on the casteless egalitarian principles of *bhakti* in Kalyāṇa. She responds in song that nothing can be concealed “when all the world is the eye of the Lord, onlooking everywhere,” but the guru counters asking why then she in fact covers herself with her long flowing hair (Ramanujan 1973: 131). She responds wisely, again in verse, that her exposed nakedness would arouse lust in men, so she does it for

their protection. Sixteenth-century Kurūr Amma of Kerala wins a similar battle of words when reprimanded for chanting the name of God while in a state of menstrual impurity. She points out that death may come at any time and asks her accuser whether it is not better to die with the name of God on your lips regardless, and of course he must concur (Ramanujan 1999: 275). Also living in the sixteenth century, the poet-saint Mirābāi challenges the male saint Jīv Goswāmī (or in some tellings Rūp or Sanātan), when he categorically refuses to meet or look upon a woman. She responds by sending him the message, “Are not all as women in the presence of the decidedly male god Kṛṣṇa?” In so saying, she upends any notion of male superiority before God, using an argument from the theology he himself espouses, and he immediately agrees to see her.

The Third Gender of *Bhakta* and Gender Bending Devotion

In dismantling the gendered assumptions of their interrogators, A. K. Ramanujan suggests that these women have transitioned into a third gender, that of *bhakta* (devotee). They are no longer “female” in its socially constructed normative embodiment, and they act in ways that are usually reserved for men, particularly by becoming wandering renunciators (Ramanujan 1999: 291). Mirā’s challenge suggests that men, too, must move beyond maleness to this third gender. The tenth-century male saint Dēvara Dāsimayya affirms the self as “neither male nor female” and his fellow Vīraśaiva saint Basavaṇṇa declares to the world openly, “I wear these men’s clothes only for you. Sometimes I am man, Sometimes I am woman” (Ramanujan 1973: 110, 87).⁵ Indeed, among those who enter this third gender as saints, Ramanujan observes, “The lines between male and female are crossed and recrossed in their lives” (Ramanujan 1989: 10). Whether anatomically male or female, these saints traverse the full range of socially defined femininity and masculinity in their love for God and their radical transgressions of social norms, restrictions, and expectations based on gender (Ramanujan 1999: 291).

Maleness, thus it seems, is equally an impediment to the practice of devotion but in a very different way than female embodiment is for women devotees. From the earliest strands of *bhakti* directed to the divine youth Kṛṣṇa, male poets have identified with the cowerding *gopī* women of his adopted community, who all fall completely in love with the ravishing divine youth. For devotees, the narrative of Kṛṣṇa’s life (recounted in full in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*) simultaneously describes both his incarnation in time and the eternal drama of the human–divine love affair, in which all participate.

The ninth-century Tamil male saint Nammālvār was a devotee of Viṣṇu and composed songs that brought the listener into his Lord's presence in his multiple incarnations—in the midst of battle with Rāma's forces in Laṅkā, beside Viṣṇu's dwarf incarnation as Vāmana as he grew to cosmic proportions with Bali's offered boon of all the land he could command in three steps, and into the groves of Vṛndāvan to hear and feel the irresistible call of Kṛṣṇa flute (Ramanujan 1993: 4–13, 47–51). For Nammālvār and so many other poet-saints, the emotions and language of erotic love come closest to the impassioned desire that drives them toward God and the experience of embodied union, where the lines between one and two, self and other, become translucent and dissolve. Gendered social constructs of erotic love place the devotee (whether male or female) in the role of female to the decidedly male God. Consequently, Nammālvār and many other male poets at times speak from the subject position of the imagined female lover in relation to the male divine, whether in the form of Viṣṇu or his incarnations or of Śiva, or even when addressing the *nirguṇ* (transcendent) Lord.

An elaborate theology and religious discipline (or *sādhana*) was developed in later Vaiṣṇava traditions to facilitate this shedding of male identity to become spiritually female. As David Haberman has so carefully detailed in his study of Rūp Goswāmī's sixteenth-century formulation of *rāghānugā bhakti sādhana*, the stories of Kṛṣṇa's incarnation form the script for the ultimate drama, one that is in a sense more real than our transitory ordinary, individual social lives and identities (Haberman 1988). Through dramatic enjoyment and the cultivation of the emotional states (*bhāvas*) of the characters in this narrative world, the practitioner readily moves beyond imitation to identification with paradigmatic figures therein. Practitioners come to know, enjoy, and identify with these characters outwardly through story, song, and theatrical enactment and inwardly through performance and visualization practices. Individuals' identities and the world of ordinary existence and physical bodies recede in importance and are emptied of substantial reality as practitioners come to reside more and more fully in this ultimate and eternal realm, manifesting their true identity as lovers of God.

In this theology, the ideal self is decidedly feminine in its relation to the male divine, but the degree to which the physical and social being should be brought into alignment with this transforming internal identity is highly contested among later theologians. Only a limited few male practitioners actually take up *sakhī bhāv*, and others insist that such a taking on of the

feminine characteristics, mannerism, and actions of Kṛṣṇa's *gopī* lovers should be restricted to visualizations and subtle bodies rather than performed outwardly by those with [male] physical bodies. Increasingly, practitioners were encouraged to identify with the male Goswāmīs (the authors of this *sādhana*) as ideal models of devotion and to enjoy the exquisite and unmatched love of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā from the position of observers rather than feminized participants (Haberman 1988: 53–4). Actual women, needless to say, had no place in this discourse.

Yet the degree to which normative masculinity may impede devotion is evident even when *bhakti* is directed toward the divine in the female form. According to the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (chronicling the acts of the Great Goddess), male devotees must abandon the defensive stance and dominating qualities tied to their gender identification—egoism, lust, arrogance, and pride—before intimacy with the female divine is possible (Ramanujan 1989: 10). In a famous mythological story, when the great gods Śiva, Brahmā, and Viṣṇu want to come to the Goddess' island paradise and join in attending her, they too must become women before they will be admitted to enter her intimate presence (Brown 1990: 206–12; Martin 2000b). Such stories and practices show clear awareness of the socially constructed nature and limitations of gendered identities and hierarchies, with a concomitant affirmation of valued qualities associated with the feminine.

Contradictory Attitudes toward Women and Gender Biases

Notwithstanding such poetic language, devotional theology, and mythic narratives, women are still denigrated in songs of male saints. Ironically, these saints continue to condemn actual women, even while speaking in female voice as lovers of God. The seventeenth-century Maharashtrian Varkari saint Tukārām speaks contemptuously of his wife, calling her a “shrew” and a “stupid bitch” (Chitre 1991: 40–9). Songs attributed to the fifteenth-century devotee of the *nirguṇ* Lord Kabīr speak of the temptress Māyā, who “wanders all over the world, carrying her noose” of illusion, and they make negative reference more generally to women as devouring wives, “whores,” and “sluts” (Dharwadkar 2003: 146–7; Hess and Singh 2002: 75, 119). Kabīr's voice also lauds the *satī* (the woman who ascends her husband's funeral pyre, lighting it by the inner heat of her virtue, to accompany him into the next life) as heroic and brave like the

fearless warrior who rides out into battle in the attire of a renouncer to certain death (Hess 2015: 88; Martin 2002: 208).

Needless to say, such imagery is nowhere to be found in songs attributed to Mīrābāī, though in one song the saint Mīrā emphatically refuses to become a *satī* as she rejects the status of widow, acknowledging only the immortal Kṛṣṇa as her husband and Lord (Pauwels 2006: 235–7). In other songs, however, Kabīr speaks as the bride about to marry God or a young woman who must leave behind her parental home to join her in-laws, stepping out alternately into an unknown future or to meet death, as indeed we all must do alone (Dharwadkar 2003: 133–4; Henry 1988: 174–5; Martin 2002: 209–10).⁶ Still other times Kabīr identifies men and women as “nothing but [God’s] forms,” gender being one of so many distinctions by which we falsely judge one better than another (Dharwadkar 2003: 130).

A number of scholars have looked at the songs attributed to *bhakti* saints, male and female, to address this contradictory attitude toward gender and identify distinct differences between male and female saints’ poetry generally and, more specifically, between the “female voice” as it is employed by both men and women. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita note that in songs attributed to male saints, women are viewed as a primary temptation—along with wealth and power—that draws men away from spiritual pursuits. Such statements fuel the negative projection of sexual desire and aversion articulated in these male voices that is evident in a long-standing Indian male perception of women as spiritually eviscerating. Women, however, do not seem to view men as the same sort of temptation, though as prospective or actual husbands they may be an immense impediment. It is rather the social approbation, status, and privileges of *suhag*—the happily married state—that women saints identify as the obstacle that would keep them from embarking on the arduous path of *bhakti* (Kishwar and Vanita 1989a: 85–6).

The prevalence of patriarchal oppression can be gauged through the stories told about these female poet-saints as well as songs sung in their voices. Mīrābāī outwits a lascivious *sādhū*, who declares that Kṛṣṇa has ordered him to make love to her, by setting up a beautifully decorated bed for the tryst in the midst of the company of devotees. His lie and lust unmasked, he is mortified, and, seeing her now as saintly guru rather than as a woman to be exploited, he begs both to be forgiven and to be allowed to become her disciple. Kabīr’s wife Loi agrees to prostitute herself to a rich merchant in order to get the supplies necessary for Kabīr’s promised meal for fellow devotees. However, the merchant releases her from the obligation when she arrives dry-footed despite the rain because Kabīr,

hearing about her bargain, carries her there himself. She is true to her word and willing to pay the price to fulfill the promise and obligation of feeding fellow devotees, as is her husband Kabīr who assists her in reaching her destination unsullied by the mud. In the face of such simple virtue and generosity, the merchant must recognize their full humanity, beside which his own pales. The same story is also told of the saint Pīpā's beautiful wife Sītā, whom he repeatedly and freely offers to other desirous men as a prostitute with her consent, both willing to share all with anyone who asks, though her virtue is such that they are unable to touch her and they instead become Pīpā's disciples (Callewaert and Sharma 2000: 11–17).⁷

Saint Mahādēviyakka leaves her royal husband, whose proposal of marriage her parents had no choice but to accept, when he takes her against her will three times, after she had warned him she would leave if he did. In her poetry, she describes all men as having “thorns in their chest” and asks “brothers” and “fathers” why they keep bothering her (Ramanujan 1973: 125, 135). It is clear that though she has shed her socially prescribed gender to enter the third gender of *bhakta*, men still look at her with sensual desire, unable to see beyond outward appearances and their own assumptions. She addresses them with familial terms, even as her own appellation as *akka* affirms her status as “older sister,” though she warns of the danger of getting too close to them.

Female Voice as Bhakti Ideal

Though songs of male saints may continue to condemn actual women and employ negative female imagery and female saints may continue to undergo challenge and harassment by men (evidenced by their stories and songs), there remains a paradoxical glorification of femaleness in devotional poetry and theology, and male poet-saints readily employ female voice to speak of their love and longing for God. As Kumkum Sangari observes, “Once gender is stretched into the metaphysical realm, femaleness becomes something men can adopt in order to gain spiritual advantage ... [and t]he female voice thus qualifies to be simultaneously the essence of devotion, a *patra* or vessel/medium, and the *marg* or path of bhakti” (Sangari 2006: 247). Ramanujan acknowledges that there are preexisting traditions of poets speaking as women in love, and he identifies multiple levels of possible religious and psychological meanings for male devotees who engage in speaking in female voice:

to become bisexual, whole and androgynous like the gods themselves (Puruṣa, Śiva, and Viṣṇu); in a male-dominated society it serves also to abase and reverse oneself, rid oneself of machismo, to enter a liminal confusion, become open and receptive as a woman to god; and it is possibly also a poetic expression of the male envy and admiration of women. (Ramanujan 1999: 293)

Sangari concurs with much of this and notes further that “the explicit adoption of the female role and voice inadvertently revealed both to be cultural constructs, hinted at the limits of such construction, transformed their fixity into at once a liminal and a universal space which could be occupied by a male devotee” (Sangari 2006: 248). Such analyses explore the wide-ranging implications, both psychological and spiritual, for an individual man assuming female voice as a poet or singer or a female persona as a devotee.

For a female saint poet to speak as a woman in love requires no parallel transformation of gender identity, though when love becomes so intense that the boundary of self and other begins to dissolve, she may be as one possessed to such a degree that she “becomes” the male Beloved. Indeed in one *Mīrā* song the saint declares that she will dress as Kṛṣṇa, take up the flute, and herd the cows herself in his absence, and I have encountered a woman devotee in Vṛndāvan who behaves in a similar way (Alston 1980: 110–11). Widely known by the name “Bansidhārī *Mīrā*” (the flute-carrying *Mīrā*), she routinely dresses rather flamboyantly in sparkling gold as Kṛṣṇa, with trademark flute in hand, and has been observed on at least one occasion dancing amidst a group of male Bengali drummers attired as Kṛṣṇa’s female *gopī* lovers, in a complete reversal of social genderings and identities in the liminal space of a temple celebration (Martin 1997: 24–6).⁸ She is the exception rather than the rule, of course, as is the above-referenced *Mīrābāī* poem, while male adoption of female voice is a standard trope and identification with the *gopīs* a cultivated religious practice. Yet there is clearly a mutability of gender here for both men and women that *bhakti* opens up, allowing for and indeed sanctioning such gender-bending behavior.

John Stratton Hawley explores the psychological trajectory of men assuming female voice further, focusing particularly on the *virahinī*—the impassioned woman separated from her lover, desperate in her longing for his return—a common figure in classical and folk love songs as well as devotional songs (Hawley 2005: 165–78). Theologically, this figure corresponds to the separation between devotee and Lord required to actualize the relationship of love and to periods when, for the devotee, God feels impossibly distant and unreachable, despite the intellectual realization that the devotee is not ultimately separate

from God, who is all in all and thus dwells everywhere, including in the human heart. At such times, the devotee is filled with intense and even unbearable longing for the experience of divine presence and [re]union, and the gendering of the voice that articulates such vulnerability and longing is decidedly female.

Such love longing is often described as a disease that wounds the *virahiṇī* and threatens her very existence. The only cure is her lover's return, which she is powerless to effect. Hawley offers a comparison of nearly identical songs of this nature sung in the voices of Mīrābāī and the great male Kṛṣṇa poet-saint Sūrdās. He notes "how many registers are provided for the language of female suffering in Mīrābāī poems, and how active these tend to be," reflecting the nuanced experiences of embodied women and their agency rather than mere passivity in longing (Hawley 2005: 173). In contrast, he notes that in Sūrdās poems "the persona of the *virahiṇī* [as] helpless victim of separation" predominates, and he ponders why it is "that men revel in the weakness—and specifically in the sickness—of women" and whether "a woman ... gets the same sort of buzz that a man does from the idea that Kṛṣṇa serves as a magnet for numberless, often rather faceless women" (Hawley 2005: 173).

Such imagined overt male power over women and infinite and irresistible attractiveness to them clearly has masculine appeal. In such a reading, male speech in the female voice of the *virahiṇī* serves to reinforce normative gendering and patriarchal relations but in its excess also hints at the fragility of male control and identity. Many of these songs are set in the rainy season, as Hawley observes, when separation is said to be most painful, a time also when uncontrollable goddesses are alleged to give and cure diseases like small pox and cholera at their whim. For those composing, singing, and hearing such songs, the presence of these powerful goddesses is inseparable from the generativity of the rains and stands in stark contrast to images of feminine weakness and passivity. Hawley turns to the psychogenesis of masculine gender identity through separation and opposition to, rather than continuity with, the mother by way of possible further explanation of this male fascination and characterization. He reads here:

a man's game, a game of trying on women's clothes and women's feelings ... a game of playing God, the way God (or Goddess!) plays with us men ... [a] game [that] gives a gender to longing. (Hawley 2005: 178)

Indeed as we noted at the outset, *bhakti* does imply trying on, enjoying, partaking, possessing, and being possessed. Manifest existence, too, has this quality of *līlā* (play), both as an unfolding drama and as God's playful creative manifestation. It is also the case that the gendered language of intimacy, whether

between lovers or parents and children, is emotionally laden and psychologically entangled with experiences and conflicts of its mundane counterparts and issues of control and mastery that are part and parcel of human existence and limitation. Such a trying on then may give substance to unconscious conflict and desire but equally may promote psychological integration and healing. At its best, it may serve male devotees as a “spur for discovering their own humanity,” as Lorenzen suggests, and allow them to tap into the vulnerability and powerlessness that are a mark of embodied human existence, as Sangari proposes (Lorenzen 1995: 192; Sangari 2006: 248). It is in transgressing the boundaries of an oppositionally defined masculinity and embracing or at least trying on (rather than denigrating or denying) banished “feminine” aspects of self and experience that a more complete and balanced vision of humanity might arise, a humanity shared by men and women, with a concurrent loosening of gender normativity. As powerful as this analysis is, however, it remains limited, speaking primarily to the spiritual and psychological implications for individual men speaking in female voice and playing at being women. And such play and even realization does not necessarily transform men’s attitudes toward actual women, if we are to judge by the continued condemnation of women in songs attributed to male saints.

Viraha in the Voice of Women Poet-Saints: Songs of Mīrābāī

Women saints also speak of *viraha*, or “love longing in separation,” in “female voice” as *women*, and when they do, it seems something much different is afoot. In her own comparative study of *viraha* and “female voice,” Sangari notes,

Even as [*viraha*] emerged from a socially determined world, displayed patriarchal relations of dependence and subjugation through the female voice ... and crafted a sensuous inwardness with a socially constructed vulnerability, *viraha* also imaged a transgressive love (un)able to transcend these barriers. Thus with Mirabai customary subjection was transformed into a matrix of rapture and agency and achieved new dislocations and contradictory spaces. (Sangari 2007: 283–4)⁹

Mīrābāī’s life story infuses the meaning of ostensibly almost identical words with the choice to take God as her lover and embrace the renunciation that marks such immense longing, disavowing her marriage and the privileges of her caste and class.

From the earliest hagiographic accounts of her life found in Nābhādās's *Garland of Devotees* (c.1600), it is clear that Mīrābāī's public speech evoked violent but ultimately unsuccessful suppression (Hawley 2005: 35). Needless to say, the same words in "female voice" attributed to a male saint elicit no such response. Safely confined to the realm of imagination and subtle bodies and at least potentially reinforcing normative feminine dependence, vulnerability, and passivity, they are readily incorporated into the canons of Vaiṣṇava and *nirguṇ sampradāys* (sectarian teaching lineages), where Mīrābāī's have not been. When a woman sings such songs, they are embodied much differently, and the psychological resonances differ starkly from those of the male singing in female voice. Sumanta Banerjee has noted the long history of Bengali women's use of images of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa to articulate their own emotions—from the pain of abandonment or separation to the joys of erotic pleasure—as well as "women's grievances in contemporary society" (Banerjee 1989: 136–7). Indeed, Vidya Rao, finding overlapping songs of courtesans and female poet-saints, suggests,

They encourage us to question the sharp distinctions we make between ... the erotic and the devotional ... [a]nd by doing so ... encourage us to question the many divisions we set up—of forms, gender, place, and religion. (Rao 2011: 206)

Women singing these types of devotional songs in "female voice" no doubt do speak at many levels, their own voices and desires becoming audible, perhaps sometimes for the first time, in the "I" of the woman poet-saint's speech. Such an observation goes a long way toward explaining the complexities Hawley noted in *viraha* songs attributed to Mīrābāī in contrast to Sūrdās.

In carrying out such analysis, however, we have still been speaking largely as if poems attributed to male and female saints were composed by those particular male and female individuals. In fact, the songs that we have available to us emerge out of the intersubjective realm of improvisational oral performance and collective devotional practice. In the case of Mīrābāī, Kabīr, and Sūrdās, most certainly the vast majority of the songs sung in their names reflect the innovations and creative interventions of countless others (Callewaert 2004, 2005; Hawley 2005: 89–116; 2009: 24–8). Although some number of the songs undoubtedly were initiated and performed by these individuals, it is impossible to determine which ones, and in this milieu even they may not have always sung the songs in the same way (Callewaert and Friedlander 1992: 58–9). Manuscripts do exist that allow us to glimpse early repertoires of songs sung in the names of Kabīr and Sūrdās, but even such early manuscripts are not available for Mīrābāī. In any case, what we do have is not sufficient to verify authorship. Further, the

recorded poems are only freeze-frames of a devotee's performance, with "writing ... an *aide memoir*, a mnemonic device, for materials to be rendered orally ... [s]peech l[ying] dormant on a page until it is awakened by ... voice" (Ramanujan 1999: 538–9). To treat such songs as if they give us access to the subjectivities of these individual men and women saints and as if their meaning were completely contained in a singular written artifact is therefore unwarranted. There are rare exceptions, however, where individual authorship is more certain as for the poetry attributed to the Tamil woman poet-saint Āṇṭāl.

Āṇṭāl is credited with composing two major works: the *Tiruppāvai*, still recited publicly during a month-long winter festival undertaken especially by young, unmarried women in South India, and the *Nācciyār Tirumōli* in which she speaks in far more intimate, erotic language of her love for her Lord (Dehejia 1990; Meenakshi 1989). Her poetry, together with that of other Ālvār poets of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition, was recorded in the tenth century (Ramanujan 1986: xiii). We might reasonably assume that these texts may actually give us access to the thoughts and feelings of this specific ninth-century woman of a *brahmin* household (Dehejia 1990: 9).

In the *Nācciyār Tirumōli*, we find her frank and exquisite articulation of embodied female desire.¹⁰ However, unlike the *Tiruppāvai*, this work has been preserved but marginalized, neither widely recited nor known (with the exception of one verse that has been incorporated into Tamil marriage celebrations) (Dehejia 1990: 5–6; Meenakshi 1989: 36). This marginalization suggests that a woman's explicit expression of embodied desire is much more problematic than male expressions of women's desire, such as those found in male Bengali Vaiṣṇava poetry (Dimock and Levertov 1967). The perceived danger of such self-expression is mitigated by her life story, however. Āṇṭāl was reportedly found in a field and raised by her *brahmin* devotee stepfather. Her miraculous birth supported her deification, as she was equated with the earth goddess Bhūdevī. As a child she was known for shamelessly trying on the daily garland to adorn Viṣṇu before offering it, an act that ordinarily would be defiling but which her Lord affirmed he treasured, and her garlanded image can still be found in Śrī Vaiṣṇava temples today. She married and merged with her Lord at Śrīraṅgam Temple at the age of 16, making her erotic words the expression of the soon to-be-wed bride, her love ultimately uncontainable in embodied mature female form.

For the vast majority of other *bhakti* poet-saints, it is impossible to legitimately assume that "their" songs are the actual words of specific historical male or female authors. Certainly with saints like Mīrābāī as well as Kabīr, Sūrdās, and

many others, the poetry we have in their names is decidedly intersubjective—co-created by men and women, high caste and low, rich and poor, sung in the improvisation milieu of performance and manifest in multiple languages and cultures across India and beyond. Aware of this intersubjectivity, scholars try to find alternate ways to write about the saints’ “song traditions” or “voices” and strive to describe the nature of this “co-authorship.” The songs are in some sense “impersonal,” reflecting a “public consciousness,” as Sangari notes, but they are not anonymous in the way that folk songs are (Sangari 2006: 251). They are understood to be the voices of very distinct individuals whose character and stories are widely known and loved.¹¹ Women’s active participation in this collaboration across gender lines is readily apparent, for example, in the presence of women’s song forms associated with weddings and *gaunā* (bride’s leave-taking to the husband’s house) in songs attributed to Kabir as well as Mirābāi (Martin 2000a). So we have both men and women co-creating the voice of a woman saint speaking in “female voice” and the voice of a male saint speaking in “female voice” as well as “male voice.” And these specific gendered voices are recognizable to participants in this process, regardless of who creates or speaks them.

If these songs do not give us direct access to an individual historical gendered author’s voice and people know this—singers and audiences as well as scholars—then there is an additional level of considerable complexity added to the gendering of voice in this devotional Hindu literature. How might it be different if an individual man composes and/or sings in the voice of a woman saint like Mirābāi, speaking in what we might call a “female female voice” or in the voice of a male saint like Kabir, speaking in what we might call “male female voice” (i.e., songs attributed to this male saint but spoken in the voice of a woman in love). Eminent Hindi literary scholar Namvar Singh will opine that even “to be able to say anything about Mirā, the minimum requirement is that at least in the heart each man must think of himself as a woman” (Singh, N., 2008: 219). An imaginative gender fluidity appears to be an essential quality also for speaking this voice—not an abstract female voice of a faceless *gopī* embodying ideal devotion but the voice of a very specific embodied woman, who danced and sang her ecstatic love for Kṛṣṇa in wild abandon and who suffered greatly because she would not conform to the socially prescribed norms of her gender, class, and caste.

In her groundbreaking study of oral song traditions of Mirābāi among communities designated low-caste in Rajasthan and Saurashtra, Parita Mukta makes a much stronger claim:

When men of a society in which the male consciousness and male constructs are used as yard sticks for the whole of human experience begin to sing in the *stri vachya* [feminine gender], then a radical shift occurs in the moral order. It requires a break from and a transcendence of the world created and upheld by men. It requires the recreation of humanity in the female image. The world has to be *strimay* i.e. the world has to become female. This requires more, much more than an empathy with the female subject ... [It requires a] process of becoming Mira and thereby entering the mind and heart of a woman.¹² (Mukta 1994: 87)

What Mukta is suggesting here is that something much more than a superficial appreciation of the feminine is facilitated for men speaking in this very specific “female female voice,” indeed that there is a radically transformative potential in doing so, not readily accessible through “male female voice.”

She goes on to try to distinguish this “becoming Mira” from what happens when a *brahmin* saint speaks in the voices of extremely low-caste people and women in his verses (as the Marathi Varkari saint Eknāth does) and when a very low-caste male saint sings in the voice of a female *gopī* (as the male Saurashtrian saint Dāsī Jīvan does). In the first case, she suggests the high-caste male saint enters into his full humanity and, in this process of merging identities, his empathy deepens to encompass a much wider realm of experience (even as Lorenzen and Sangari had affirmed of male use of “female voice”). In the second, the very low-caste saint “transcend[s] [his abject social standing] to become someone who holds a particular relationship to Krishna and Krishna alone” (Mukta 1994: 89). While “male female voice” brings the high-caste man “down” from his socially granted and internalized sense of superiority to a common humanity, the “male female voice” of the *gopīs* brings the low-caste man “up” from his socially imposed and internalized sense of inferiority into a direct relationship with the divine. For a man to sing in the “female female voice” of Mīrābāī, Mukta claims, in contrast, requires an identification and solidarity such that maleness is left behind as the feminine permeates reality and the world is seen as through a woman’s eyes. Such a becoming Mīrābāī is indeed recognized as possible more widely, with particular women devotees and performers readily referred to as “incarnations” of the saint and some women and even some men taking up “Mīrā bhāv” in much the same way that some men fully adopt *sakhī bhāv* in Vaiṣṇava traditions (Martin 1997; Singer 1966).

In making this comparison with high- and low-caste male saints, Mukta importantly reminds us how essential it is to consider the intersectionality of caste and gender identities, though she slips back into talking about male saints as individuals rather than those who sing in their voices. The voice of each saint is

tied to, but not limited to, the hagiographic/historical individual, as subsequent individuals and communities take up these voices and co-create them such that “the past is evoked and reborn anew and it returns to form a real part of the present” (Mukta 1994: 89–90). Mukta is struggling here to articulate how taking up this very distinctive “female female voice” for a man differs from taking up the “male female voices” of saints like Eknāth and Dāsi Jīvan and to identify what is so distinctive about Mīrābāī’s voice, the collective singing of which seems to transform not only individuals but also people’s relationships to each other.

Mukta makes audible Mīrābāī’s voice as it is sung and heard among low-caste communities in this specific region, and she asserts that to understand it, we must enter into the worlds and experiences of those who sing, in this case “the veil of tears” of their poverty, oppression, and degradation (Mukta 1994: 45). Mīrā’s voice, here, speaks of shared suffering and resistance to the commodification of women in arranged marriage; the strictures of widowhood; the seclusion, silencing, and suppression of women; exile, the itinerant life, and displacement; and caste oppression. In story and song, Mīrā rejects the rights of her class and caste gained through patriarchal and feudal violence and exploitation, standing in solidarity with those of low-caste, living as they live and taking the leatherworker Raidās as her guru. For these communities to sing in Mīrā’s voice and for us to truly hear that voice or to sing their Mīrā repertoires is to enter into this solidarity.

Building on Mukta’s work, Rashmi Dube Bhatnagar, Renu Dube, and Reena Dube also wrestle with the co-authoring of Mīrā’s voice, and they choose to treat “her” songs as “a social text of patriarchal critique” and boldly assert that “a Meera lyric is always an oppositional argument explicitly opposing the Rajput patriarchal values,” including female infanticide (Bhatnagar, Dube, and Dube 2005: 174, 184). They read and hear in poems in Mīrā’s name predominantly the voices of Rajput women (the warrior/ruling caste to which Mīrā herself belongs), though they acknowledge others. They importantly highlight Rajput women’s contributions, though Mukta wants to claim this voice exclusively for low-caste communities. In elite Indian nationalist circles and among Hindi literary scholars, both were largely excluded, with any Mīrā songs mentioning Raidās as her guru or seemingly critical of her husband or not conforming to *pativrata* and Rajput ideals deemed inauthentic and excluded.¹³

Yet many have spoken and contributed to Mīrā’s voice, from all walks of life, so hers is neither the voice of a single historical individual nor exclusively the voice of women or of the oppressed any more than of a conforming elite wife. There is much more that can and is said in this voice, as there is in the voices of

other saints such as Kabīr. Defining the boundaries of these vast territories of song is no easy task, as the songs of one saint's voice overlap in content and even precise wording with those of others as we have noted (Hess 2015: 91–4; Martin 2000a). But the meaning of the song texts is dramatically impacted by whose voice is singing them, both which saint and which individuals and communities enliven them as song.

It is not just anything that is said in these voices, however, and they are understood as decidedly gendered. As we have noted, the very popular male *nirgunī* low-caste saint Kabīr speaks in female voice of his love for God, yet his voice also denigrates women at other times. Purushottam Agrawal ponders this contradiction in Kabīr, particularly given that his voice speaks so stridently against all prejudice based on false distinctions of birth and continually proclaims the divine dwelling equally in all, eliciting the outflowing of love that motivates his social critique (Agrawal 2011). Others have claimed that love songs in female voice do not belong authentically to Kabīr's voice, but Agrawal will argue emphatically that they do:

For Kabīr, femininity is a metaphor for the agency of love, for the capacity to be able to love. In order to attain the capacity to love, he takes the form of a female in his poetry and makes the object of his love, “loving” Ram, not the avatar Ram. Kabir is not a theorist of abstract love; he is a poet of the heart and knows that without being absorbed in some kind of “form,” one cannot be a lover or a poet. (Agrawal 2011: 65–6)

And that form of love is female. Kabīr's love for God (Ram), his social outrage, and his spiritual realization are all of a piece such that body and mind, self and other, internal and external worlds are not walled off from each other but rather are the loving God manifest. And Kabīr “assays all things on the touchstone of love” (Agrawal 2011: 56). Yet Agrawal will also affirm that given his outspoken opposition to social hierarchies of caste and religious squabbling, Kabīr should have spoken out also against gender oppression, noting that just because the saint failed to do so does not mean we should.

Agrawal takes recourse to language approaching that of Mukta in speaking about the “eternal feminine” and the need for the world to become female (rather than man-made) so that a man might truly be “able look at himself and society through the eyes of women in the realm of society, outside the limited scope of spiritual practice” (Agrawal 2011: 75). For those who collectively sing and co-author Kabīr's voice, it seems, his voice may be employed not only as “male female voice” to powerfully express and generate love for God but also

as strictly male voice to uphold patriarchal gender norms and to articulate condemnation of women. It is also a voice that unequivocally exposes the lack of grounds for any hierarchy between male and female and the superficiality of gender assignments with regard to the true self and God. But it is not a voice that might speak against the subjugation of women and of their suffering directly or of the linkage between caste and gender oppression (at least not yet). These realities it seems can only be spoken in a “female female voice,” like *Mīrābāī*’s.

When we step back from identifying these saintly voices with male and female individual authorial subjectivities and instead recognize them as speaking a much broader “public consciousness” (in the words of Sangari), this literature reveals a profound understanding of multiple ways of being and speaking as male and female and a radical awareness of the constructed nature and flexibility of gendering. Songs attributed to male saints in female voice are recognized as one way of speaking, a way that recognizes—among other things—that the characteristics culturally assigned to feminine gender are qualities found in all human beings and essential to fulfillment, wholeness, and liberation. Those same male saints’ voices may speak in male voice about women, sometimes in very derisive ways, at other times with appreciation (though more often than not within the normative ideals of the *pativrata*). These are also recognized as male perspectives.

Their viewpoints are malleable but have real consequences for actual women, and such patriarchal conditioning is deeply embedded and extremely hard to shake. The emergence of a whole range of female saints and the continued speaking of their “female female voices” suggests a recognition and affirmation of all kinds of other ways of being female, even as there are of being male. And many of these female saints’ voices speak directly to unmask male prejudice and violence and offer alternate sets of values and ways of being in the world. In the preservation and continued speaking of these voices, the validity of their perspectives is affirmed, shared, and extended, even as the flourishing of independent and powerful women is instantiated in the social imaginary. The immense diversity of gendered voices and the people who speak in them offer men and women alternate possibilities to taste, try on, assume, play with, and enjoy, with the potential for transformation, both spiritual and social, embedded therein.

Even so, we know all too well that potentiality does not guarantee actuality, a point made poignantly by Mallika Sarabhai in her multimedia dance drama “An Idea Called Mira,” which debuted in Los Angeles in 2002 and which she has since performed around the world. For Sarabhai, *Mīrā* is “a feminist rabble rouser of

the most wonderful kind” in her own time and ours—one of those rare women who “dig deep into themselves to find one’s personal truth” and inspire others to do the same and then to act on it (Roy 2005).¹⁴ Yet though the saint might be beloved and embraced as a national cultural heroine in India, women who would follow in her footsteps, speak in their own voices, and pursue a life of their own choosing might not yet find themselves embraced in the same way. They are still misunderstood and condemned as other stories say the saint was, by intimates as well as the larger society, and subject to violence. Even Sarabhai herself has been harassed and placed under house arrest for her extraordinary nonviolent work for social justice through the arts (Sarabhai 2009). The acceptance and domestication of *bhakti* saints like Mīrābāī can readily close down their disruptive and transformative potential, and there are those who would have it be so (Martin 2000c). This is why A. K. Ramanujan insists, “They have to be constantly renewed, reinterpreted, and rescued from the domestication that they suffer. But they do offer alternatives, humane and creative ways of being and acting, to both men and women” (Ramanujan 2009: 14). Those who continue to speak their voices and tell and perform new and yet familiar stories of their lives—devotees, artists, and scholars—contribute to this process of renewal and keep alive the alternatives offered by these gendered voices, initiated by saintly women and men in centuries past. In this regard, Mīrābāī and Kabīr together with other Hindu medieval devotional poet-saints remain alive and relevant for the modern era.

Notes

- 1 This poem by Dēvara Dāsimayya is also discussed in the context of gender by Ramanujan (1989: 11).
- 2 See Dilip Chitre (1991: 42–9) for a series of poems by Tukārām under the title of “Advice to an Angry Wife.”
- 3 See Uma Chakravarty (1989) for details of Avvaiyar’s life.
- 4 Ramanujan (1989: 11) highlights this particular line from Mahādēviyakka’s poetry in a discussion of women *bhakti* saints.
- 5 Ramanujan (1999: 290) cites this full poem by Basavaṇṇa in his discussion of “Men, Women and Saints” and the third gender of *bhakta*.
- 6 Linda Hess (1987) notes that the songs attributed to Kabīr in which he speaks in woman’s voice appear in the more Vaiṣṇava western *Panchvani* collections of the Dadupanth, as indeed all those translated by Dharwadkar do. G. N. Das has

- translated 101 love songs of Kabīr drawn from diverse sources, with Kabīr speaking in “female voice” in most, in his *Love Songs of Kabir* (1992).
- 7 This all happens after she has been asked by Pipā’s guru Rāmānanda to dance naked in the public square to show she has indeed entered the third gender of *bhakta*, which she does without hesitation, in Rāmānandī Anantadās’s sixteenth-century hagiographic telling.
 - 8 When I first met her in 1993 she was living in small temple known for the immense *śālagrām* (aniconic stones identified with Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa) it housed in Loi Bazaar. She has since then built her own small ashram and is now widely known by the name “Bansidhārī Mīrā,” and when I last saw her in 2011, she had started a tradition of delivering annual month-long public *kathās* or teachings on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.
 - 9 Sangari discusses the patriarchal forces that generated and are reinforced by *viraha* and other dimensions of female voice in *bhakti* in further detail in “Mirabai: The Female Voice and Oral Composition” (2006: 242–51).
 - 10 The fourteen poems of the *Nācciyār Tirumōḷi* are translated in full with notes by in Dehejia (1990: 73–159).
 - 11 The stories told about these saints are also multiple and contested, particularly in the cases of Mīrābāi and Kabīr.
 - 12 Rashmi Dube Bhatnagar, Renu Dube, and Reena Dube quote and expand on Mukta’s statement in their own discussion of the cocreation of Mira’s voice (2005: 210).
 - 13 For an example of such Hindi literary analysis, see Alston (1980).
 - 14 Mallika Sarabhai is responsible for the concept, script, and artistic direction of the project as well as choreographing the dance in collaboration with Daksha Mashruwala, and she incorporates elements from Rajasthani folk traditions as well as a range of other sources on the saint. Excerpts from the “An Idea Named Meera” can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jljABROoIRk>.

References

- Abbot, A. (1996). *Bahina Bai: A Translation of Her Autobiography and Verses*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Agrawal, P. (2011). “The Erotic to the Divine: Kabir’s Notion of Love and Femininity.” In K. Panjabi (ed.), *Poetics and Politics of Sufism and Bhakti in South Asia: Love, Loss and Liberation* (pp. 55–82). Kolkata: Orient BlackSwan.
- Alston, A. (trans.) (1980). *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāi*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Banerjee, S. (1989). “Marginalization of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal.” In K. Sangari and S. Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (pp. 127–79). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

- Bhatnagar, R., R. Dube, and R. Dube (2005). *Female Infanticide in India: A Feminist Cultural History*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Brown, C. M. (1990). *The Triumph of the Goddess: The Canonical Models and Theological Visions of the Devi-Bhagavata Purana*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Callewaert, W. (2004). "Bhakti Literature: An 'Oral-Scribal' Archetype." In R. Modiano, L. Searle, and P. Shillingsburg (eds.), *Voice, Text, Hypertext: Emerging Practices in Textual Study* (pp. 121–30). Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Callewaert, W. (2005). "Kabir: Do We Sing His Songs or Someone Else's?" In A. King and J. Brockington (eds.), *The Intimate Other: Love Divine in Indic Religions* (pp. 129–52). Hyderabad: Orient Longman.
- Callewaert, W., and P. Friedlander (1992). *The Life and Works of Raidas*. Delhi: Manohar Press.
- Callewaert, W., and S. Sharma (2000). *The Hagiographies of Anantadās: The Bhakta Poets of North India*. Richmond: Curzon.
- Carman, J., and V. Narayanan (1989). *The Tamil Veda: Piḷḷāṇ's Interpretation of the Tiruvāymoli*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Chakravarty, U. (1989). "The World of the Bhaktin in South Indian Traditions: The Body and Beyond." *Women Bhakta Poets, Manushi* 50–52: 18–29.
- Chitre, D. (trans.) (1991). *Says Tuka*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- Craddock, E. (2010). *Śiva's Demon Devotee: Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Dabbe, V., and R. Zydenbos (1989). "Akka Mahadevi." *Women Bhakta Poets, Manushi* 50–52: 39–44.
- Das, G. N. (1992). *Love Songs of Kabir*. New Delhi: Abhinav.
- Dehejia, V. (1990). *Āṇṭāl and Her Path of Love: Poems of a Woman Saint from South India*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Dharwadkar, V. (trans.) (2003). *Kabir: The Weaver's Songs*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- Dimock, E., and D. Leverton (trans.) (1967). *In Praise of Krishna: Songs from the Bengali*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Doniger O'Flaherty, W. (1982). *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gold, A. (1994). "Devotional Power or Dangerous Magic?" In G. Raheja and A. Gold (eds.), *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (pp. 149–63). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Haberman, D. (1988). *Acting as a Way of Salvation: A Study of Rāgājugā Bhakti Sādhana*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hawley, J. (2005). *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Hawley, J. (2009). *The Memory of Love: Sūrdās Sings to Krishna*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Henry, E. (1988). *Chant the Names of God: Music and Culture in Bhojpuri-Speaking India*. San Diego, CA: San Diego State University Press.

- Hess, L. (1987). "Three Kabir Collections: A Comparative Study." In Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod (eds.), *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India* (pp. 111–42). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Hess, L. (2015). *Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hess, L., and S. Singh (trans.) (2002). *The Bijak of Kabir*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hoskote, R. (trans.) (2011). *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- Kishwar, M., and R. Vanita (1989a). "Poison to Nectar: The Life and Work of Mirabai." *Women Bhakta Poets, Manushi* 50–52: 75–93.
- Kishwar, M., and R. Vanita (1989b). "A Second Rabia: Lal Ded of Kashmir." *Women Bhakta Poets, Manushi* 50–52: 103–6.
- Lorenzen, D. (1995). "The Lives of Nirgunī Saints." In D. Lorenzen (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action* (pp. 181–211). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Martin, N. (1997). "Mirābāi: Inscribed in Text, Embodied in Life." In S. Rosen (ed.), *Vaiṣṇavī: Women and the Worship of Krishna* (pp. 7–46). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Martin, N. (2000a). "Kabir and Mirābāi in Folk Traditions of Western Rajasthan: Meghwāl and Mānganiyār Repertoires." In M. Offredi (ed.), *The Banyan Tree: Essays on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages* (pp. 391–418). Delhi: Manohar Press.
- Martin, N. (2000b). "Loving the Goddess in Hinduism." In J. Runzo and N. M. Martin (eds.), *Love, Sex and Gender in the World Religions* (pp. 88–111). Oxford: Oneworld.
- Martin, N. (2000c). "Mirabai in the Academy and the Politics of Identity." In M. Bose (ed.) *Faces of the Feminine from Ancient, Medieval and Modern India* (pp. 162–82). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Martin, N. (2002). "Homespun Threads of Dignity and Protest: Songs of Kabir in Rural Rajasthan." In M. Horstmann (ed.), *Images of Kabir* (pp. 199–214). New Delhi: Manohar Press.
- Meenakshi, K. (1989). "Andal: She Who Rules." *Women Bhakta Poets, Manushi* 50–52: 34–8.
- Mukta, P. (1994). *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Odin, J. (1999). *To the Other Shore: Lalla's Life and Poetry*. New Delhi: Vitastā.
- Pauwels, H. (2006). "Hagiography and Reception History: The Case of Mirā's *Padas* in Nāgridās's *Pada-prasaṅga-mālā*." In M. Horstmann (ed.), *Bhakti in Current Research, 2001–2003* (pp. 221–44). New Delhi: Manohar Press.
- Ramanujan, A. (1973). *Speaking of Śiva*. New York: Penguin.
- Ramanujan, A. (1989). "Talking to God in the Mother Tongue." *Women Bhakti Poets: Manushi* 50–52: 9–14.
- Ramanujan, A. (trans.) (1993). *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Viṣṇu by Nammālvār*. New Delhi: Penguin.

- Ramanujan, A. (1999). *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*. Edited by V. Dharwadker. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rao, V. (2011). "The Voices of Bhaktas and Courtesans: Gender, Love and Renunciation in Thumri and Bhakti Poetry." In K. Panjabi (ed.), *Poetics and Politics of Sufism and Bhakti in South Asia: Love, Loss and Liberation* (pp. 181–209). Kolkata: Orient BlackSwan.
- Roy, S. (2005). "An Idea Named Mallika." *Little India* 5. Accessed January 15, 2018, from <https://littleindia.com/an-idea-named-mallika/>.
- Sangari, K. (2006). "Mirabai: The Female Voice and Oral Composition." In J. Grewal (ed.), *Religious Movements and Institutions in Medieval India* (pp. 228–60). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sangari, K. (2007). "Love's Repertoire: Qurratulain Hyder's River of Fire." In F. Orsini (ed.), *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History* (pp. 259–85). New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.
- Sarabhai, M. (2009). "Performing Ecstasy, Performing Agony." In P. Chakravorty and S. Kugle (eds.), *Performing Ecstasy: The Poetics and Politics of Religion in India* (pp. 17–23). New Delhi: Manohar Press.
- Shukla-Bhatt, N. (2015). *Narsinha Mehta of Gujarat: A Legacy of Bhakti in Songs and Stories*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Singer, M. (1966). "The Radha-Krishna Bhajanas of Madras City." In Singer (ed.), *Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes* (pp. 90–138). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Singh, N. (2008). "Mirā, the Ocean of Love and Devotion." In A. Singh (ed.), *The Voice of Women: Gārgī to Gaṅgāsati* (pp. 219–27). New Delhi: D.K. Printworld.
- Vanita, R. (1989). "Three Women Saints of Maharashtra: Muktabai, Janabai, Bahinibai." *Women Bhakta Poets, Manushi* 50–52: 58–61.