



Samvāda Series-16

THE PLACE OF WOMAN IN RELIGION



Udasin Karshni Ashram
2022

The Sixteenth Samvada Annual Seminar

“THE PLACE OF WOMAN IN RELIGION”

4 to 6 November 2019



UDASIN KARSHNI ASHRAM

Ramanreti, Mahavan
Mathura, Uttar Pradesh

WOMAN IN GUJARATI BHAKTI TRADITION

Vinayak JADAV

Abstract: This paper traces the Bhakti-path of women from the late medieval to the early modern Gujarat. It examines their specific socio-cultural and political context and the literature they created. In following the trajectory of their religious ethos, it focuses on the social narrative which highlights their struggle against patriarchy and male-chauvinism of their time. In an era of feminism, examining the Bhakti tradition of the women from the perspective of emancipation is relevant. The paper therefore draws special attention on how these medieval women emerge triumphant after a heroic struggle. The paper describes the oppressive social milieu and shows these women transcending it with the weapon of religion and literature. Women thus have an inherent power and can become the torchbearers not just of a soft piety but of a prophetic social transformation. The paper also reflects upon the potential of religion and literature towards liberation. The life and works of women of bhakti tradition mirrors not only the emerging face of women but a transformative power of religion and literature.

Keywords: Bhakti tradition, Oral tradition, Medieval period, Social milieu, Legend, Religion, Literature, Oppressive, Emancipation, Transformation.

Author: Dr. Vinayak Jadav, S.J., is the Vice-Principal, St. Xavier's College, Ahmedabad, where he also teaches in the Dept. of Gujarati and of Journalism.

He is also the editor of the monthly JIVAN: Jesuits in India Views and News.

The Bhakti tradition of Gujarat can be traced back to the medieval period of world history. Medieval history is dominated by exploration of art and culture with resurgence of religious spirit across the world. Marred by bloody wars and chivalrous battles that ended in the fall of the Roman Empire, deadly diseases and decimating epidemics, the world witnessed turmoil that lead to

seeking of solace in and through expressions of peace and aesthetic pleasure readily met in art and religion. Humanity stood face to face with death leading to centralization of theology and spirituality. The supernatural took the centre stage giving way to magic and superstition. The fall of the Roman empire and the rise of the European Christendom staged Christianity to the centre of world culture and politics.

The oral tradition of medieval literature reflected the socio-political ethos of the time expressed in religious themes. Beginning with Chaucer, literature reflected what middle age was, the age of faith. Poetry and story-telling were the closest to the oral tradition that grew as the popular literary genres of the time. Women voices grew from the middle ages itself although they were largely male-dominated. Clare of Assisi, Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Sienna were the leading women writers of the time though largely from within the boundaries of their nunneries. Later Europe witnessed the widespread acceptance of the mysticism of the likes of Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila while Indian horizon witnessed the rise of many women writers in the late medieval period.

Medieval Gujarat: Sociol-cultural and Religious Context

Gujarat of the medieval period extended from Mathura in the north to the western nose-tip of current Gujarat-Dwārka. Early phase of the late medieval period (13c) of Gujarat witnessed the princely battles fought for the royal kingdoms. The Solanki and Vaghela dynasties of Rājput kings battled hard to reign over Gujarat. It was the time of bravado and macho chivalry. Each of those dynasties prevailed not without prosperity and progress of the kingdoms. According to Shri Anātrāy Rāval, just as commerce and agriculture grew for economic prosperity, art and aesthetics developed as cultural civilization. The Brāhmins were brought from the north for cult while sculptors and artisans were invited too from outside Gujarat. The business in Gujarat prospered with the coming of the Vaṇikṣ (Baniās) from Rājasthan with whom Jainism ushered in too. Jainism also enjoyed the patronage of the kings along with Shaivism. King Vimalśhā and his art-loving ministers Vastupāl and

Tejpāl expressed art and sculpture in the Jain temples of Delwārā, Gīrnār and Pālītāṇa. The patronage to the scholars (Pundits) provided by Kings Sidhrāj, Veerdhaval and Viśaldev on the other hand encouraged erudition and literature. The initial Gujarati literature is the glory of these patron kings sung by these pundits becoming apparently the literature of male-chauvinism. Gujarati literature of medieval period in their first phase was the saga of chivalry and romanticism of the kings, a literature of Shringar and Vīra Rasa. Against this, the Jain monks (Sādhus) typically create at this time Jain literature for the pilgrim monks (Śrāvaks) introducing religion in Gujarati literature for the first time. However, this was the pre-natal stage of Gujarati language that was breaking from its Apabhṛmṇa foetus into a birth of Gujarati language.

Bhakti tradition in the medieval Gujarat and women: A cultural movement

According to Raymond R. Parmar, the latter phase of the late medieval period (14c) witnessed Moghul invasion on the Vaghelā kings namely Allāuddin Khilji on Karaṇdev conquering Pātan-the capital of the Kingdom. The patronage to Jainism and Shaivism (Brāhmins) was lost due to dominance of Islām. For the fear of religious coercion of Islām, the Jains and Hindus largely went hiding into the localities where people lived and the language of literature changed from Saiskait to local dialects. Little traditions of grass root literature took the place of mainstream literature that enjoyed the royal patronage of the kings. Under the fear of the Mughal rule, literature could expand only orally while not uprooting its roots into the Purāṇas and other religious sources like Rāmāyaṇa-Mahābhārata. The clandestine life under the terror of Moghul dynasts sought easy solace in religion and religious texts. It is this emergence of the local religious ethos and practices precipitated by the Muslim rule that gave rise to poets like Narasiṁh Mehtā, Mīrābāi and other medieval bhakti poets for whom literature was the outcome of not only their daily religious routine but social and recreational need. Literature was the main vehicle of their theological and philosophical ethos while remaining bonded into one society against a political onslaught of a foreign religion.

Literature was also a tool and a weapon against oppressive and unjust social and religious practices. In an era of no other means of mass communication, literature became their sole rescue to convey liberative and emancipatory thoughts and sentiments. In threatening period of the moghul empire, religious literature became their protective refuge that kept alive the communal esprit de corps and fulfilled the need of social belonging.

Religion as a constituent of cultural identity, medieval poets responded not out of mere spiritual need but also to assert their identity amidst a Muslim rule. The bhakti tradition of the medieval period is not just a purely spiritual movement but also a cultural movement. The literary creation of the medieval Gujarat was born out of the fulfillment of the contemporary socio-cultural traditions or customs of the region. For example, Narsimh Mehtā's couplets or poems are what were sung while going for early dawn bathing to the common pond (Dāmodar) of the town (Junāgadh). The women of medieval period especially engaged in the cultural chores, sang either as an accompaniment to the chores or as a response to the cultural customs or popular practices of their time.

The Medieval period ends with the ushering in of the Renaissance and later the reformation period when the British education had enhanced the awareness of social evils and the literature reflected the spirit of reformation in the human society rather than the religion. It was rather a progression in the understanding of religion itself namely from religion as mere devotional piety to religion as means of social transformation.

Mīrābāi (16c): The Pioneer

Born in 1498 in Medtā (Rājashthān) Mīrābai belonged to the royal dynasty of the founder of Jodhpur—Rāo Jodhā and Rāo Dudājī. Having lost mother in 1503, she was brought up by the grandfather because her father Ratansinh chose to stay with his father in Medtā after the death of his wife. In the father's home, the religion followed was Vaishnavism. At young age she imbibed a deep devotion to Lord Kañṇa popularly known in her duet: 'Mere to Giridhargopāl, dusrona koi.' In 1516 at the age of 17, Mīrābāi was married to prince Bhojrāj, son of King Sangrāmsing of Chittod whose family followed Shaivism.

Since the childhood her devotion to Lord Kañña did not allow her to accept this marriage. She had married herself to Kañña and had brought his statue to the house of the in-laws. Soon this was the bone of contention and conflict. Hailing from a Rājput clan, she remained determined about her devotion to Kañña amidst all oppositions and unpopularity. In 1522 her husband Bhojrāj passed away but she chose not to become a Sati though it was the custom of her time. She chose to stay alive for the sake of worshipping her beloved Lord Kañña. Instead of following the customs of a royal widowhood, she mingled with the saints of her time. She had accepted a life of complete renunciation which was highly embarrassing to the royal in-laws who tried to persuade her with threats and coercion. She was sent a poisonous snake in a flower basket and a cup of poison as a nectar. Having miraculously survived these conspiracies, Rāñā Vikramsing, the younger brother of her husband attempted to behead her with his sword but he saw four images of Mīrā that misled him and thus Mīrā was saved.

Having withstood many trials to lead her astray from the path of praise and devotion, she wrote couplets and hymns of Kaiñhṇa that have become a legendary part of the Literature of Gujarat. (Notice the political and geographical Gujarat of the 16c stretched from Mathura to Dwārkā, Rājsthan being integral part of it. Therefore, historically Mīrā is considered a Gujarati poet who wrote in the Gujarati that was of the time, the post-apabhrnsha stage of linguistic evolution of Gujarati language. (Vrajbhāśhā of Vrindāvan, Hindi and Gujarati and many other north Indian languages belong to the family of Indo-aryān languages) She left Mewād, the place of the in-laws and came to Medtā, her ancestral home. Finally, she left and went to Vrindāvan-the birthplace of Lord Kañña. In the Vrajbhūmī, Mīrā found a Guru Jīva Goswami who initially refused to accept Mīrā being a woman but later gave her the Darśhan. Mīrā returned to Dwārkā and as legend has it, she was subsumed in the icon of Kaññawithin the temple of Lord Kañña.

We shall appreciate some poems of Mīrābai to fathom the depth of her religious devotion to Lord Kañña. We shall also learn of the revolutionary Mīrā pursuing her passion of life despite patriarchal pressures and dominations.

According to Ramesh M. Trivedi, religion became the primary source of inner strength for Mīrā to face the social coercions from the family. Literature of mīrā was the weapon with which she challenged the in-laws withstanding her own pursuit of life-mission. Mīrā and her literature becomes a model for women of today in search of identity and freedom, human rights and independence. Mīrā's devotion to Kañṇa was single-minded and absolute. Mīrā's oft-quoted couplet 'Mere to giridhargopāl, dusrona koi' reflects her passionate love for Kṛṣṇa which is also her categorical message to her husband in no uncertain terms. "Jo tum todopiya, main nāhitodu, tori prittod Kañṇakaunsaigjodu" is another crystal-clear message to her husband.

Freedom is the key issue of the struggle of women today. Mīrā not only fights for an external freedom from the social bonds but enjoys an interior freedom which is conveyed in Karnāfakiri to kyādilgiri, sadāmaganmainrahenāji. Well-being of women is a goal of the feminist writers and activists. Mīrā here emerges not just a pious arm chair writer in a hot house but is proclaiming that women are called to be happy at all the time- "Sadāmagan me rahenāji." Mīrā's compassionate heart encourages all to become an insider to understand women. The subaltern perspective of understanding women's plight from within is sung in the line "Ghāyalkī gat ghāyaljane, merodardnā jāne koi." (Only a wounded understands what passes over a wounded). Enlightenment is not the prerogative of just the men. Women are equally capable of attaining the highest stage of knowledge i.e. enlightenment. "Govindo prāṇ hamāro re, mane jag lāgyokhāro re." Mīrā finds everything else insipid as compared to 'Govindo' i.e., Kañṇa. Her intra-personal intelligence, if we may speak in the lingo of Harvard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory enables her to grasp things from the farthest bottoms of the soul. "Mukhadānimāyālāgire mohanpyārā; mukhadu me joyutāru, sarva jag thayukhāru" again explains how everything is insipid before the face the mohan (another name of Kañṇa). The happiness of the world is hollow like the deer chasing an illusory mirage: "Sānsārinusukhevu, jānjhvānānīrajevu." Mīrā's courage in embracing the trials and tribulations of life is phenomenal: "Jher to pidhāchejāñijāñi, mewadnārānā !Nathi re pidhā e ajāñi re!" (Have

sipped the poisons knowingly, o king of Mewād, not sipped unknowingly) Mira's terminology appeals to the modern corporate ethos. Mīrā wishes to sell Kañṇathe pot like the milk-woman selling the milk in a pot: "Ha re koi Mādhavlyo, madhavlyo, venchantivrajnārī re." A characteristic potential of women is adaptation, not adjustment. A key message to the misleading notions of feminism today!

Lest Mīrābāi be considered a woman of soft piety who engaged in a light-hearted activity of singing bhajans with "kartāl" or "manjīrā" in her hands, her bold stance of following her inner voice against all social pressures and carving her own niche space in the medieval spirituality can never be ignored. According to Mansukhlal Sāvalia, the word 'Meera' is derived from the amalgamation of 'Mahi' (Earth) and 'Irā'(light) and therefore it means the 'light of the earth'. Mīrā truly enlightened the path of women through her integrity and independence rooted and grounded in true Kañṇa bhakti (devotion to Kañṇa).

The trailblazers of the middle age after Mīrā (16c-18c)

After Mīrābāi—the legendary women champions of the Bhakti tradition of the Medieval period, who not only trail blazed her path but expanded it with their unique contribution, as stated in Gujarati Sahityakosh, were Gavaribāi, Diwālibāi, Kañṇabāi, Puribāi, Radhabāi, Vaṇārasibāi, Sati Rupānde, Sati Devaḃde, Sati Loyaṇ, Sati Niralbāi and Sati Toral. These were the pioneer women of Bhakti who compelled the contemporary men like Jesal, Lākho, Mālde etc., to accept their discipleship of God thus becoming the icons of feminism of their time.

Sati Toral (1328)

This period of the middle ages is known for saintly couples like Jesal-Toral, Rupānde-Mālde, Devalde-Khimro etc. Sati Toral from among them was born, as the legend narrated by Nāthālāl Gohil, around Mewār (Rājsthan) in the 14c. She was a Mahāpaithi rājput. Mahāpaithis are believed to belong to the race that lived locally before the Aryans arrived in 1500 BC. They professed a faith distinct from the Vedas. They were kept away from the Vedic cult, rites and rituals. Sati Toral was married to Jesal Jadejā from Kutch. Jesal was a

gīrāsdār (Tax collectors of the Feudals) of a village near Anjār of Kutch who was a renowned dacoit but took to renunciation and religion. An interesting legend explains the spiritual commitment of this saintly couple Jesal's sister-in-law challenges his bravery to get three things that were famous in the region: A horse, a sword named *Toyi* and *Toyirāni* (*Toral*) belonging to *Kāthi* from *Kāōhiāwāò* just across Kutch. As Jesal is stealing the horse, it gallops with a noise breaking the nail to which it was tied. From the Bhajan of *Toral* going on nearby, someone comes to the horse and nails it to the ground once again. The nail goes right through the palm of Jesal who is hiding in the stable. Jesal is identified and surrenders confessing the robbery of the horse. The father of *Toral* says, "there cannot be robbery in the house of a renounced person, just ask and you shall receive." Jesal asks for the horse, the sword and *Toral*. On their return, the boat that is crossing from *Kāthiāwād* to Kutch is sinking. The passengers are throwing away their luggage to save the boat. *Toral* challenges Jesal to rid of the heavy moral baggage of his past sins. She sings her legendary song: "Pāpatāruparakahśe Jādeja, Dharam tārosāmbhālare; taribedalinebuòvānahidau, jādeja re. emtoralkahechejī." (Confess your sins and fulfill your duty o Jādejā! I will not let your boat sink). Jesal confesses all the sins of dacoity and becomes *Jesalpir* (saint Jesal) and later is believed to have taken *Samādhi* in Anjār in 1394 having married Jesal.

Here is a woman poet who is leading the bhakti movement, converting a dacoit but ultimately made to surrender to the husband in the *Samādhi*. *Toral* was a leading link in the bhakti chain begun in *Mīrābāi* but did not sustain due to social custom of *sati*. She becomes a legendary figure of medieval history because of her *satihood* and piety. Today we can bestow sainthood upon her for being an emancipator of a man who was submersed in evil.

Sati Rupānde (1338)

Another legendary saintly couple, according to Gohil contemporary to Jesal-*Toral* is *Rupānde-Mālde*. In *Mahāpaithi* sect, traditionally *Jati* and *Sati* are the male and female saintly figures who have pursued together the path of bhakti. *Rupānde* and *Malde* have been mentioned in the "Chovis *Pramana*" of the *Rāmdevji Mahārāj*.

Rupande was born in a Rājput family in Dudhwā near Mār wād of Rajasthan in 1338. Her father Valsang was the 'gāmdhaṇi' (village president) belonging to the Padhiār Rājput caste. In the village Dudhwā a weaver caste saintly person Meghdhāru was familiar with Rupānde because of which Rupānde came to like the path of Bhajansatsang (a religious gathering). Rupande even accepted the Dikśhā from the guru Ugamśi, the guru of Meghdhāru. Rupande being beautiful, king Maldev is attracted to her and marries her bringing her to Mehwā, his kingdom to be one among many other queens. Although Rupānde becomes the princess, she like Mīrābāī is unable to renounce her earlier life of devotion and piety. She brings Meghdhāru her brother to Mehwā arranging for his weaving profession along with continuation of Bḥajan and Kīrtan (Religious prayer meetings).

Rupānde wins over her adversary husband through the legendary incident of 'Mojdi' (Shoe). Meghdhāru invites his guru Ugamśhi to Mehwā for satsang. He also invites Rupānde to participate and Rupānde quietly escapes her palace and reaches the Vaikarvās (the abode of the weavers) at night. King Māldev finding her missing and informed that Rupande is in the satsang in the house of an untouchable, is incensed. He takes his sword and on the way killing the door keeper reaches the house of Meghdhāru. Upon seeing the pearl beaded shoes (Mojdis) of Rupānde outside the house, he steals one of them and returns. The lamp in the satsang dims at the moment with the presence of the king, a pagan (Nugrā) among the satsang. Rupānde at once pleads God who replaces the shoe with another. Next morning when king Māldev summons her, he finds her with no shoe of the pair missing, having her plate full of flowers that did not grow in the kingdom and the door keeper standing there alive. The pagan king at once realizes the sainthood of Rupānde and becomes a devotee of her.

In an era of caste discrimination, enlightened Rupānde accepts the weaver, the so called low caste as her spiritual brother and accepts the discipleship of Ugamśhi—the guru of the low caste. As a Kñhatriya woman, Rupande champions an initiative against social discrimination braving risks from her king husband reminding us of another medieval Nāgar Brāhmin Gujarati bhaktkavī (religious poet)

Narsimha Mehtā who conducted Bhajan-Kīrtan (prayer meetings) in the Harijan locality. Rupānde thus becomes a model of true bhakti that leads to emancipation of the outcaste and downtrodden and restoration of human dignity.

Sati Loyaṇ (1689)

Among the medieval mahpanthi woman saints, thebhajans of Loyaṇ are considered of a higher quality. They are held as the 'Māhpanthi yoginis' (the enlightened women of the Mahāpaith sect). Just as Toral brought about the conversion of the dacoit Jesal and Rupānde of the pagan king Māldev, Loyaṇ is said to have brought about the transformation of the burglar Lākho. In the Gujarati bhakti tradition, these are couples who converted their conjugal relationship into a saintly pursuit of Bhakti.

According to Gohil, Loyaṇ was born in village Kidi of Saurashtra (Amreli district) of Gujarat in the year 1689 in the ironsmith community to Father Veerābhagat and Mother Rudibāi. As the only child of her parents, she was their 'apple of the eye' therefore called Loyaṇā from Lochan which means eye. Her father was a devout man, therefore many sadhus and saints enjoyed the hospitality for 'Satsaiga' and 'bhajan'. Loyaṇā cultivated devotion from her family since the childhood. In this region, Lākho was an ill famed burglar from āhīr or kāthi community. Though Loyaṇā was engaged to her own maternal uncle's son, Lākhowas attracted by the beauty of Loyaṇā and was in love with her. Being a notorious burglar of the region of Sāmādhiāla near Rājkot (Saurāñhtra) no one dared to come in touch with Loyaṇā.

Loyaṇā hailed from a common class of iron smith which was a backward community. She laboured hard in support to her father in manufacturing agricultural and domestic equipment manufactured of iron. She engaged in hard labour of heating and beating the iron to the shapes and sizes of this equipment. The imagery of her poetry betrays her raw experience in the field of an ironsmith using the terminology of the profession to explain certain spiritual mysteries to Lākho addressing him directly with "Ji re Lākhā":

"'Me' and 'mine' are like pieces of iron', heat it with the inhaling and exhaling of the bellows, test it on the anvil of truth while catching

it with the pincers of knowledge.”

Lākho's interest in Loyaṇā was not spiritual but physical. Lākho pretends to accept Loyaṇā as her spiritual guru and sits at her feet to learn spiritual lessons. As the legend goes, one day Lākho leads Loyaṇā into his private apartment and as he attempts to molest her physically, she turns into a skeleton cursing Lākho. The curse turns Lākho into a leper so he asks for forgiveness. Loyaṇā forgives with a condition that after 12 years of spiritual Sādhana, he will be able to rid of the leprosy which he does to become free.

Loyan is unique among all the women of the bhakti tradition. She hails from a common class social background who reforms a deviant burglar and humbles a proud male by her curse and spiritual lessons. Her poems are not just on passionate “Premalakshanā” (love passionate) bhakti but have the touch of intellectually and rationally enlightened insights on yoga and philosophy. She lives for fifty one years renouncing the body in 1796 presumably at the Sati Loyaṇ Temple at Ätkot (near Rājkot) of today.

Other Trailblazers

Given the oral tradition of the medieval literature, reliable sources of the legendary women are rare to find. However, the encyclopedia of the Gujarati medieval literature, the Gujarati Sāhityakosh contains in-depth research on many of the medieval bhakti poetesses.

Kaṇṇabāi (unknown)

The exact year of Kaṇṇabāi is not known but she is believed to be a medieval woman bhakti writer who hails from Vadnagar. Her longish poem “Sitājīnī Kāichli” in depicting Sitā's obstinacy has portrayed woman from a medieval submissive perspective of women. In this poem speaks of “Sitā Vivāh” and “Rukmiṇiharaṇ” as her two other poems.

Gavaribai (1759 approx- 1809)

Born in Duigarapur (Rājasthān), Gavaribāi or Gauribāhi is a post medieval woman poet who blended bhakti with enlightenment. Married at the age of 5-6, and having become a widow within just 8 days of the marriage, she turned towards looking for meaning of life

and bhakti. Having learnt to read and write, she studied Upaniṣads, Gītā and Bhāgwat. She lived in the temple built specially for her by the Shivosin, the king of Duigarpur. After studying yogamārg, she went to Kāshī where she renounced her body. Gavaribāi's poems in Hindi and Rājasthāni are well known too.

Diwālibāi (unknown)

As per the information given by her in her texts, she was a widow who moved from Dabhoi (near Vadodarā) her native moved to Golvā and ultimately to Vadodarā where she built the Rāmji temple and settled in it. She studied Tulsi Rāmāyaṇa under her guru Tulsidās. As the legend goes, she was handed over the role of the Guru, that of her own father who left on a pilgrimage during the famine of 1791. However, certain idioms in her writing betray her presence in the post 1900s.

Devalde (unknown)

Devalde was the wife of Mahapaith or Margipaith saint Devayat Paith. Her poem at the time of the demise of her husband Devayat Paith depicting the lamentation of the body upon the soul leaving it is well known.

Nanibāi (1728)

Hailing from Olpad of Surat district is known for her 'Vanjhāro' following the steps of Premānāid.

Puribāi (1681-1752)

Originally from Ahmedabad but later settled in Umreoh (central Gujarat), Puribāi was the daughter of Bhāñjī. She married at the age of eleven but widowed losing her husband in Cholera. As a child widow, she engaged in serving Raghunāthji which was the profession of her father. She continued the same even after the death of her father. Her poetic works bears the depiction of the social customs of her time.

Radhābāi (unknown)

Also known as Radhebāi, Radhābāi is known for her poems of Kañabhakti with a title 'Rādhe' published in the magazine 'Vasant' whose editor has stated that Rādhabāi was a Mahārāshtrian from Vadodarā.

Radhibāi (1834)

Though with some confusion of her being the same person as Radhābāi, Rādhibai is considered a woman poet who existed in 1834 and who did her writing in Ujjayini. A Mahārāshtrian from Vadodarā, Rādhibāi uses excessively Marāthi and Hindi words. She is believed to be a name under which Chotālāl N. Bhatt wrote considering the similarity of the writings of the two.

Vaṇārasibāi (unknown)

Woman poet of Jñānmārgī (knowledge) tradition, Vaṇārasibāi was from Chhāni of Vadodarā. She was among the sixteen principal followers of Nirānt, a medieval popular saint.

Gaṅgāsati (1843-1894): The enlightened woman of the early modern times

Gaṅgāsati is a contemporary of the bhakti tradition of Gujarat. Her very living has led her to this tradition. Gaṅgāsati was acclaimed with the title 'Mīrābāi of Surāshtra' and her Bhajans are sung popularly in the Saurāshtra (western peninsula between gulf of Cambay and Gulf of Kutch) region of Gujarat. According to Dhairyachandra Buddha, Gaṅgāsati's life span is believed to be from 1843-1894 and hails from the community of Sarvaiyā Rājput who ruled over independent princely states that amalgamated as the united states of Kāthiāwār after the independence of India in 1947. Today they are a KshatriyaKolī or Rājput clan found mainly in Saurashtra. Born in the Rājpar village on the banks of Barvāli River to a royal family of Rājput king Bhāijibhāi Jesaji and Rupālibā, her childhood name was Gaṅgābāi and pet name Hirābā. She was the only sister of four brothers who later married another Kshatriya Gohil of Samādhiyālā named Kasaṃsaig in 1864. Kasaṃsaig himself lived a devotional life and took Samādhi in 1894. Gaṅgābāi wished to become a Satī after the death of her husband but obeying the command of her noble and devout husband she did not become Satī, instead lived an intense spiritual life for 52 days more when she produced devotional hymns called Bhajans which have become an eternal legacy of the women of bhakti tradition of Gujarat. The characteristic end line of all her bhajans end with an address to Pānbāi. As the legend goes, Pānbāi was a childhood friend of

Gaṅgābāī and customarily sent as maid 'Vadāran' or 'Bāndadi' to serve Gaṅgābāī when she was 'sent to the in-laws after the marriage. Kasaṃsaig, a pious person himself had commanded Gaṅgābāī to take spiritual care of Pānbāī and her husband Ajaysiḥ (Ajubhā) by letting them benefit from her spiritual wealth.

The bhajans (hymns) of Gaṅgasātī are not just devotional piety but bear the seal of wisdom leading to enlightenment. She transcended the values of her time by courageously challenging them thus establishing herself as the woman pioneer in socio-spiritual enlightenment after the male domination of poet Akho of the seventeenth century.

The most famous composition of Gaṅgābāī is "Vijalinā Chamakāre" (At the sparkling of the lightening) where one is urged to weave the pearl into the necklace when there is the lightening spark thus making life truly meaningful when the wisdom dawns. In line with Narsimha Mehtā's 'Vaiṣṇavan to' which Gāndhi much admired, Gaṅgābāī gives a list of who truly is a person of God reminding us the psalm 1 (Happy are those who reject the advice of evil men) and 15 (Lord, whom may enter your temple... a person who obeys God in everything) in her oft-quoted hymn "Meru re dage pan jenā man no dage... e to harījannāparamāṇa re" (Mountains may move but whose minds are unmoved are the people of God).

NarsimhMehtā in 'Vaiṣṇavan' promotes not only devotion but social spirituality through lines like "Sakalokmasahunevande" (bows to all in the world) "Samadrastinetaññātyāgi" (One who has egalitarian vision). Gaṅgābāī is a champion of social equality too: "Samānpanesarvemāvaratavu" (to deal with equity among all). Her another line "guru śiṅyanithaigaiektā, matigayujātinumān re" (Master and disciple have become one and the respect for caste has been eradicated). Compare Narsimh's "Paksha' apaksi' ityanahiparmes'war, samdaññōinesarvasamān" (There is not God where there is discrimination and the one who has equitable vision considers all equal), and Gaṅgasātī's "Paksh' āpaksi' inahiharīnādeśamā" (There is no discrimination in God's country). Both have an egalitarian world view on life and society. Her social commitment and vision of justice reaches culmination in

"Jatipaṇuchodineajātithavu ne, kadhvovaraṇ no vikār re; jātibhātinahiharīnādeśmā ne, evi rite rahevunirdhar re" (Abandoning the caste identity, wish to be casteless and eradicate the distortion of caste; God's land has nothing like caste-class, am resolved to live like that). Here is the frustration of a "Saravaiyākshatriya" blood that is boiling with the caste hierarchy! "Praṇimātramāsamdaañhōirākhvi" (equality among every creature) is another witness of her social equality.

In the era of multiple hazards against human health and ecological awareness, Gaṅgāsātī shows an awareness for physical health and ecological reasons. "Sūryamākhāvu and chaṇḍaamājalpivu" (To eat in the sun and drink in the moon) suggests how our body is affected by the sun and the moon and our routine must strike a balance with ecological cycle. Her poem on "Prudence of promise" is a slap to the corporate world and eco summits that enter into innumerable fake MOUs that are just an eyewash for votebanking. The word "Vachan" also implies "word" and so the message is simultaneously relevant to the contemporary culture of blatant political lies and 'post truth'.

Gaṅgāsātī was a seer (Añi) possessing a visionary and prophetic spirit. Living in 19th century, she has predicted the symptoms of the world of 21st century in her poem "Kalyugnā Endhāṇ" (Signs of Kalyug, the evil time). Her prediction about religious gurus and their duplicity has come true in the gurus behind the bars today: "Beta kahinebāputhaibesashe ne, bharmavshebholānarnār re" (Calling you 'beta,' they will become the patrons, thus cheating innocent men and women). In a politically stirred atmosphere of appeasement and prejudices based on minority-majority discrimination, message like "sarvenisāthemitratārākhjo ne, nahipritinahivera" is socially and politically relevant today.

Conclusion

A bird's eye view of these women of Gujarati Bhakti tradition clearly show them emerging as revolutionaries of their time. Within the popular contemporary sector of religion, they have shown exceptional courage to rise above the social pressures of the family (namely in-laws) and other male-chauvinistic or patriarchal social

customs. Having widowed in early childhood, most of them have taken to religion (bhakti) and search of meaning in life by way of a coping mechanism both socially and personally. They have confronted male patronizing pressures either of the husbands or of the kings of their time, in the process, making them their followers. The women empowered by religion compels the menfolk to follow the path of religion (bhakti) led by women. Some women have gone beyond the sentimentality of the path of devotion to a knowledge oriented search for enlightenment by studying Upaniñads, Gītā, Bhāgwaṭ or Rāmāyaṇa. Thus, raising among the cadre of bhakti tradition, many bold and revolutionary icons of a woman identity and independence of its own. They champion freedom and pursue their dreams and convictions. They unearthed the innate power of religion and literature (oral) towards liberation. These women of late medieval and early modern times of the history of Gujarat will always be remembered for their legendary path of self-actualization and social transformation by generations of women to come.

ENDNOTES

- Anantrāy M. RĀVAL, Gujarati Sāhitya: Madhyakālin, Ahmedabad: Gurjar Granthratna Kāryalaya, 2007, p.13
- Raymund R. PARMĀR, Madhyakālin Gujaratni Ādhyātmikta: Ek Jhalak, Sevasi-Vadodara: Gujarat Vidyā Deep Regional Seminary (GVD), 2015, p.8
- Ramesh M. TRIVEDI, Madhyakālin Gujarati Sāhityano Itihās, Ahmedabad: Ādarsh Prakāshan, 2000, p.45
- Mansukhlāl SĀVALIA, Mirāni Uttam Padāvali, Rājkot: Pravin Prakāshan Pvt. Ltd., 2005, p.38
- Jayant KOTHĀRI, Jayant GĀDIT & Chandrakānt SHETH, Gujarati Sāhityakosh, Khand:Ek, Madhyakāla, Ahmedabad: Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, p. 68-392
- Nāthālāl GOHIL, Bhāratiya Santdārshan, sādhanā ane vāni, Khand-1, Gāndhinagar: Gujarati Sahitya Academy, p.419
- Ibid, p.438
- Ibid, p.473
- KOTHĀRI, Gujarati Sāhityakosh, Khand:Ek, Madhyakāla, p. 68-392
- BHĀNDEV, Gangāsatinu Adhyātma Darshan, Rājkot: Pravin Prakāshan Pvt. Ltd., 2010, p.32
- Dhairychandra R. BUDDHA, Gangāsatini Bhajangangā, Ahmedabad: R.R. Sheth & Co, 1996, p.26