
UNIT 4 BAUL GAAN, AKKA MAHADEVI AND MEERABAI

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

When you finish studying this Unit, you will

- have learnt about the Indian religious poetry movement
- appreciate the contribution of Baul singers to the Indian Bhakti Movement
- understand the folk song, 'Baul Gaan' translated by Rabindranath Tagore
- learn about Akka MahaDevi, the Kannada saint poet and understand her poem 'Vacana'
- learn about Meerabai and understand her last Bhajan,

Mere tho giridhar gopal doosro na koi

मेरे तो गिरिधर गोपाल दूसरो न कोई।

Words in **bold** are explained in the **Glossary**

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we give you three samples of devotional songs from medieval Indian poetry - one from Bengal, another from Karnataka and the third from Rajasthan. The poems are 'Baul Gaan' from Bengali folk poetry, 'Vacana' by Akka Mahadevi and a 'Bhajan' by Meerabai.

This is a continuation of Unit 3 where you were introduced to the *Bhakti* and Sufi movements in medieval India. You will now read about the compositions of the ecstasy of these three Indian Bhakti singers in their quest for merger with the Lord.

4.2 INDIAN RELIGIOUS POETRY

We have seen in the previous Unit (Unit 3) how the Bhakti movement was a pan India movement starting from the 8th C in South India and spreading to the North, East and West between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. We have also seen how devotional poetry brought the Bhakti movement and the Sufi movements close to each other and how Sufi poetry continued well beyond the medieval period into modern times.

The medieval period of religious poetry was both devotional and reformatory in that it lifted the control of religion by the priestly class and made it accessible to all and did away with the hypocrisy and irrational rituals that were practiced in the name of religion. In India, religious poetry sung by individual poets was a spontaneous rendering of the poet's personal love for the deity and every poem focused on the individual's inner experience of devotion and ecstasy in the presence of the Lord. The poems are expressions of complete love and total surrender unto the Supreme Lord.

Bhakti poets of different regions wrote in their respective languages and thus Indian religious poetry contributed to the development of poetry in Indian languages. India enjoys a unique multi lingual status whereby languages in different regions show a wholesome development that is reflected in the rich Indian literature that has come down to us from very ancient times. In this Unit we will give you samples of a Bengali poem, a Kannada poem and a Tamil poem. This will help you understand the growth of literature in Indian languages and in particular, the compositions of saint-poets of the Bhakti movement. These songs were originally preserved in the oral tradition and later recorded for posterity as written documents.

Activity 1

What do you think are the main characteristics of Indian religious poetry?

The history of devotional poetry in India dates back from the ancient texts of Rig Vedic hymns in 1200-900 BCE to songs and slokas (or prayers) that are composed even today. It is to the credit of the Bhakti movement that it could produce the largest number of devotional hymns and songs in praise of the Lord and which were the spontaneous outpourings of the devotees' inner experiences and their ecstatic journey towards their final merger with the Lord. The stotras (or prayers) were addressed mainly to Siva, Vishnu, Krishna and Devi (the Goddess) and in our selection of three poets, we have a devotee of Siva, another of Krishna and the third of the Supreme Lord. We have chosen two female poets and a group of singers as samples of Indian religious poetry.

In South India, in the early medieval period between the 6th and the 8th C, there were sixty three *Saiva* poets called *Nayanars* (teachers of Siva) and twelve *Vaishnava* poets known as *Alvars* (those immersed in God) who through their hymns inspired faith in the masses and influenced the Bhakti movement. It is to

be noted that most of these poets did not belong to the Brahminical class. Yet another group of the South Indian *bhakti* movement was that of the *Siddhas*. In Tamil, 'siddha' means 'great thinker or wise man' and in Sanskrit, it means 'a perfected man' – someone who has surrendered and is completely receptive to God. *Siddha* poetry like the mainstream *Bhakti* poetry was also critical of Brahminical rituals and practices and the pseudo religiosity that accompanied them. Between the 10th and the 12th C, we have in Karnataka *Virasaiva* poets who dedicated their songs to Lord Siva. Among them, the four greatest and pioneering poets were Basavanna, Devara Dasimayya, Akka Mahadevi, and Allama Prabhu. They composed *vacanas*, short free-verse utterances expressing intense personal experience and sometimes trenchant criticism of what the poets regarded as superstition and hypocrisy. We have analysed a 'vacana' by Akka Mahadevi in this selection.

Activity 2

What are the main streams of *Bhakti* poetry of South India? What are the special features of these forms of poetry?

Apart from South Indian *bhakti* poets, there were many contributors to *bhakti* poetry from the rest of India. Among them were (i) Lal Ded (Kashmiri poet of the fourteenth century) who was a woman devotee of Shiva (ii) Guru Arjun with his compilation of *Adi Granth* (1604); its second edition was brought out by Guru Govind Singh in 1708 with additional 115 hymns of his father, Guru Tegh Bahadur (iii) the Sufi poets who wrote in Punjabi, Sindhi and Kashmiri, and (iv) the Hindi poets, Tulsidas, Surdas, Kabir, and Meerabai. Also we have Gurû Nânak (1469–1539), who founded Sikhism and composed poems revering the formless God and criticizing superstitious practices. Mention should also be made of the poetry of the North Indian *yogins* called *Nath Panthis*, who belong to the same broad tradition as the Tamil *siddhas*. The most significant collection of the *Nath Panthis* is attributed to Gorakhnath (eleventh century?), its semi-legendary founder whose teachings pervaded North Indian religious thought in the medieval period.

We have in this Unit discussed a *Bhajan* of Meerabai, a Rajput princess who became a wandering saint totally devoted to Krishna whom she regarded as her husband. Although she is believed to have spent the later part of her life in Dwarka, Gujarat, and a considerable body of poetry ascribed to her exists in Gujarati, she is more closely linked to her native Rajasthan and to its regional form of Hindi.

The story of Bengali *bhakti* poetry begins with a Sanskrit poet, Jayadeva, and his master piece *Gita Govinda* that sings the drama of love between Krishna and Radha. Then came Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533) who developed the Bengali *Kirtan*. The Bauls, unique to Bengal, were iconoclastic wanderers who partook of the devotional poetry of both Hindu and Sufi mysticism and their worship was exclusively through singing.

Two great Sanskrit poets appear in the second century CE. Asvaghosa is most famous for the *Buddhacarita*, a biography of the Buddha in the form of a *mahâkâvya* (lyric narrative). His contemporary, Matrceta, wrote beautiful Sanskrit hymns to the Buddha. The seventh-century Chinese pilgrim Yi Jing reported, "Throughout India everyone who becomes a monk is taught Matrceta's two hymns as soon as he can recite the ... precepts." In the 7th century, Santideva composed

many stotras in praise of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas (those with a high degree of enlightenment) and expressed his dedication to the Buddhist path. There also exists Jain poetry in Hindi and Gujarati, the most famous being the *Bhaktâmara Stotra* of Manatunga, whose dates have been estimated to be as early as the third and as late as the ninth century. Several Jain authors composed both philosophical works and devotional poems. A large number of Jain poems are known for their ornate verses. Religious poetry was prevalent in other parts of the country as well.

4.3 RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Tagore, also known as “the greatest of the Bauls of Bengal” is also the discoverer of the Baul songs. Tagore was greatly influenced by the spiritual tenor of the Baul poems and was among the most prominent writers to bring the Bauls to the notice of the west. The Baul song tradition reached its peak in the 19thC, thanks to the English translations by Rabindranath Tagore. It was through his efforts that the Baul songs were made accessible to the West and the non Bengalis in India.



We give below the Nobel citation when Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The extract is from *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967*, Editor Horst Frenz, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1969. This autobiography/biography was written at the time of the award and first published in the book series *Les Prix Nobel*. It was later edited and republished in *Nobel Lectures*.

“Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was the youngest son of Debendranath Tagore, a leader of the Brahmo Samaj, which was a new religious sect in nineteenth-century Bengal and which attempted a revival of the ultimate monistic basis of Hinduism as laid down in the *Upanishads*. He was educated at home; and although at seventeen he was sent to England for formal schooling, he did not finish his studies there. In his mature years, in addition to his many-sided literary activities, he managed the family estates, a project which brought him into close touch with common humanity and increased his interest in social reforms. He also started an experimental school at Shantiniketan where he tried his Upanishadic ideals of education. From time to time he participated in the Indian nationalist movement, though in his own non-sentimental and visionary way; and Gandhi, the political father of modern India, was his devoted friend. Tagore was knighted by the ruling British Government in 1915, but within a few years he resigned the honour as a protest against British policies in India.

Tagore had early success as a writer in his native Bengal. With his translations of some of his poems he became rapidly known in the West. In fact his fame attained a luminous height, taking him across continents on lecture tours and tours of friendship. For the world he became the voice of India’s spiritual heritage; and for India, especially for Bengal, he became a great living institution.

Although Tagore wrote successfully in all literary genres, he was first of all a poet. Among his fifty and odd volumes of poetry are *Manasi* (1890) [The Ideal One], *Sonar Tari* (1894) [*The Golden Boat*], *Gitanjali* (1910) [*Song Offerings*], *Gitimalya* (1914) [*Wreath of Songs*], and *Balaka* (1916) [*The Flight of Cranes*].

The English renderings of his poetry, which include *The Gardener* (1913), *Fruit-Gathering* (1916), and *The Fugitive* (1921), do not generally correspond to particular volumes in the original Bengali; and in spite of its title, *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* (1912), the most acclaimed of them, contains poems from other works besides its namesake. Tagore's major plays are *Raja* (1910) [*The King of the Dark Chamber*], *Dakghar* (1912) [*The Post Office*], *Achalayatan* (1912) [*The Immovable*], *Muktadhara* (1922) [*The Waterfall*], and *Raktakaravi* (1926) [*Red Oleanders*]. He is the author of several volumes of short stories and a number of novels, among them *Gora* (1910), *Ghare-Baire* (1916) [*The Home and the World*], and *Yogayog* (1929) [*Crosscurrents*]. Besides these, he wrote musical dramas, dance dramas, essays of all types, travel diaries, and two autobiographies, one in his middle years and the other shortly before his death in 1941. Tagore also left numerous drawings and paintings, and songs for which he wrote the music himself."

Activity 3

What was Tagore's singular contribution to Baul songs?

4.4 WHO ARE THE BAULS?



Bauls are known as wandering minstrels (the term usually applied to medieval singers). They hail from the eastern part of India, particularly from Bengal, Assam and Tripura. Their songs are known for their religious content - love and devotion to God - and are sung, following a musical tradition.

The Baul culture is a mix of the devotional bhakti streams that we see in both the Islamic and Hindu cultures of the medieval period, and they have remained a strong presence in Bengal till today. The Baul tradition was mainly an oral tradition, inspired by the well known 12thC poet Jaydeva, the composer of *Gita*

Govind. It continued from the 14th to the 16th C when the *Vaishnava Bhakti* movement was at its peak, declaring the unity of the heavenly and earthly loves.

Bengal has two large rivers flowing through the state - the Ganga and the Brahmaputra. The Baul used the river and the boat as metaphors. The Baul Gaan (the Baul song) uses a lot of metaphors, some of which are universal such as “life is like a river.” The theme of the songs is about the inner quest to be a part of the Divinity whence we have come and negates all formal visits to the temples and mosques in search of God. This is a common phenomenon present in the Sufi and Bhakti traditions.

Activity 4

What is the similarity between the Sufi tradition and the Baul songs?

4.5 ‘BAUL GAAN’ (THE SONG)

I am the boat, you are the sea, and also the boatman.

Though you never make the shore, though you let me sink, why should I be foolish and afraid?

Is reaching the shore a greater prize than losing myself with you?

If you are only the haven, as they say, then what is the sea?

Let it surge and toss me on its waves, I shall be content.

I live in you whatever and however you appear. Save me or kill me as you wish, only never leave me in other hands.

(Anonymous, translated by Rabindranath Tagore)

4.6 ANALYSIS OF ‘BAUL GAAN’

The Opening line “I am the boat, you are the sea, and also the boatman ” affirms the power of the sea and of the boatman steering the boat across the seas. The boat has no power of its own to move. It is propelled by the boatman who rows it through the waters. It is often said that neither the flute nor the harmonium knows how to make music; it is the player who plays the musical instruments to create the desired music. So is the boat passive and rooted to its anchored position till the boatman paddles it through the waters. The sea is often used as a metaphor for the flow of life. In one single line, the song distils the meaning of how the boatman (God) steers us through life as we neither have the power nor the skill to sail through life without His grace.

The next line “Though you never make the shore, though you let me sink, why should I be foolish and afraid?” is a rhetorical question which has an in built answer that we need not be foolish or afraid as we are steered through by the boatman. Implied in this line is that life is always in the forward movement and it never goes back to the past. Once the boat leaves the shore it does not return even if it sinks in the sea. So are we forever on the move from birth to death, but in our firm belief that He, (the boatman) guides us (the boat) through life, we need not be afraid even if we do not return to the shore. The word ‘sink’ is not to be misread as something calamitous, sinking in the sea is merging with Him, as

the next line reads: “Is reaching the shore a greater prize than losing myself with you?” The phrase losing myself with you means merging with the Lord. The rhetorical question has the answer that reverting nostalgically to the life left behind is not as worthy of seeking as the becoming one with the Source one comes from.

“If you are only the haven, as they say, then what is the sea?”

“haven “ is a place of shelter, safety. By plumbing the depths of the sea, one experiences and explores the haven, the safe shelter provided by God

Let it surge and toss me on its waves, I shall be content.

I live in you whatever and however you appear.

Save me or kill me as you

wish, only never leave me in other hands.

The metaphor used here is that of the waves and the sea. The waves are a part of the ocean and are distinct from the ocean. But after their ebb and fall, they become one with the ocean. Hence the singer says s/he lives in the Ocean of Grace - the Lord and will be content so long as the Lord abides by him/her.

4.7 AKKA MAHADEVI

Akka Mahadevi, a saint poet who wrote in Kannada belonged to the second half of the 12thC. Akka in Kannada means elder sister. Akka Mahadevi was not only a poet, but also a mystic and a social activist. She was a contemporary of Basavanna, the founder of the sect of *Veersaivism*. *Veerasaivists* are today addressed as *Lingayats*. *Veerasaivism* has been a reformatory socio-religious movement. From her childhood she was initiated into the worship of Shiva and remained a devoted worshipper all her life. The form of Shiva she worshipped was known as *Chennamallikarjuna*, which translates as “The Beautiful Lord, White as Jasmine.” Much of Akka Mahadevi’s poetry refers to her vivid descriptions of her beautiful Lord. And indeed she always signed her poems, O Lord White as Jasmine.” This is an important feature of poems in Indian languages where the poet’s signature is built within the poem. This is seen in the *pad*, a form used by saint poets, which is the most influential medium for the expression of devotion. The poet’s name is registered within the poem, somewhere in the last one or two lines.



Though we have contradictory reports about her marriage to a local Jain King, her spiritual acceptance of Shiva as her Lord made her renounce her worldly life. She became a wandering mendicant and her devotion to Lord Shiva was without the formal outer rituals associated with Shiva worship (for that matter with the worship of any God) Her only desire was to merge with her *Chennamallikarjuna* and in her later years she retreated to a cave where she gave up her earthly life and merged with her Lord. In her intense devotion to Lord Shiva and single minded quest of Him she spurned the riches and comforts of a palace, cut asunder domestic bonds, and set out as a wandering devotee meeting with and overcoming many hardships on her journey to this final goal. In addition, she had the gift of imaginative expression. A few of the outpourings

of her experience are preserved for posterity in the shape of *Vacanas* “sayings” in rhythmic Kannada prose. Her *vacanas* are characterized by intense feeling and deep insight.

As stated above, Akka Mahadevi wrote in the *vacana* form, which can be briefly described as a kind of free verse or prose poem with a rhythmic structure specially evident in the sentence patterns. These *vacanas* are a good example of her total devotion to Lord Shiva, unmediated by customs, traditions and rituals. In her life and in her love for the Lord, we see a clear differentiation between *dharma* and *bhakti*, where *dharma* emphasizes adherence to codified rituals while *bhakti* focuses on one’s inner and fervent devotion to God, keeping aside the conventional worship in practice in society. It is in this defiance of conventions and rituals that Akka Mahadevi reveals her modernity. It is said she had thrown away her clothes and covered her body only with her long tresses, in a gesture of ultimate social defiance against the male gaze. In the words of A.K.Ramanujan in his book *Speaking of Siva* “The intense poems of personal devotion to a single deity also question traditional belief systems, customs, superstitions, image worship and even moral strictures, in verse that speaks to all men and women regardless of class and caste... Her search is recorded in her *vacanas* as a search for her love, following all the phases of human love as set forth by the conventions of Indian, especially Sanskrit, poetry. The three chief forms of love - love forbidden, love in separation and love in union are all expressed in her poems, often one attitude informing and complicating another in the same poem. She remains a symbol of women’s rights and dignity.”

Activity 5

Why do you think Akka Mahadevi gave up wearing clothing?

4.8 THE POEM ‘VACANA’ - BY AKKA MAHADEVI

I love the Handsome One:
he has no death
decay nor form
no place or side
no end nor birthmarks.
I love him O mother. Listen.
I love the Beautiful One
with no bond nor fear
no clan no land
no landmarks
for his beauty.
So my lord, white as jasmine, is my
husband.
Take these husbands who die, decay,
and feed them to your kitchen fires

4.9 INTERPRETATION OF THE POEM

This is a simple poem, with no complicated meaning to reach for. It is a penetrating description of Siva, a deity, handsome, immortal and one who has neither birth nor death. The poet says her love is unmediated - without the intervention of any custom, tradition or convention which are laden with rituals and pseudo religious formalities. She loves him for His beauty. Beauty is not to be interpreted as solely a physical attribute because no one has seen Siva except as He appears in one's imagination, inspired by passion and devotion. She compares Him to white jasmine. The jasmine flower is usually associated with love. Jasmine also symbolizes beauty and sensuality. In some cultures, *it* represents appreciation and good luck. When used in religious ceremonies, jasmine represents purity and the meanings vary depending on the culture and setting.

Here the poet associates jasmine with white colour. White jasmine flowers are mostly used in art and literature as a symbol of purity and innocence. White jasmine flowers are often used in wedding ceremonies where these symbolic meanings are perfect for the occasion. White jasmine is a perfect gift for a person whom one respects and has a high regard for. Hence white jasmine is for Akka Mahadevi, none other than Siva.

The last three lines strike a jarring note though they reflect a realistic view of life. The poet brings in a contrast between the Immortal Lord Siva whom she regards as her husband and mortal humans who die and decay and are consigned to fires. Fire is known as “Agni”, the Vedic God of Hinduism. Agni is a symbol of piety and purity. Agni is an expression of two kinds of energy i.e. light and heat and thus is designated as the symbol of life and activity. The mortal beings consumed by fires is a reference to their being transformed from the gross to the subtle, destroying their ignorance and delusions.

“Agni is symbolism for psychological and physiological aspects of life”, states *Maha Purana* section LXVII.202–203. There are three kinds of Agni inside every human being, according to this text - the *krodha-agni* or “fire of anger”, the *kama-agni* or “fire of passion and desire”, and the *udara-agni* or “fire of digestion”. These respectively need introspective and voluntary offerings of forgiveness, detachment and fasting, if one desires spiritual freedom and liberation.

“Feed them to the kitchen fires” is thus a reference to purifying the mortal beings through fire. Agni has two forms –the *Jatavada*, associated with Knowledge and Brahman and *Kravyada*, the fire that cremates the physical body and the funeral fire that recycles it to be reborn - a process that continues till such time all the three kinds of fire within oneself - fire of anger, fire of passion and desire and fire of digestion are quelled and the spirit is purified.

Activity 6

What, according to Akka Mahadevi, is the difference between Siva and mortal husbands?

4.10 MEERA BAI

Meera Bai is a household name in India. There are very few who have not heard Meera Bai's bhajans, depicting her love for Lord Krishna, her ecstasy in reaching

her lord's (Krishna) feet and her final merger with the Lord.

She was one among the great saint poets of the Bhakti movement, born in 1498 and who gave up her earthly life when she merged with her Lord in 1546 at an early age of 48. She was born as Princess of Mewar but she had a lifelong engagement with Lord Krishna, whom she addresses as Giridhar Gopal and whom she regarded as her husband. In fact, her parents had initiated her into Krishna worship through a simple marriage ceremony with a Krishna statue when she was a child. As she grew up and composed songs in praise of Lord Krishna, in song after song, she described herself as Krishna's 'daasi', ('devotee', though the literal translation is 'maid' or 'servant'). Her marriage to a prince at a very early age, his death due to wounds sustained in a battle, her refusal to be a part of the royal household and her moving out of the royal palace, first to Brindavan and later to Dwaraka, where at the end she miraculously disappeared (seen as her merger with the Lord) sum up her life story. She composed a large number of songs dedicated to Lord Krishna, though scholars are divided as to how many were her own compositions. The significant fact is that her songs were the spontaneous outpourings of her devotion - 'bhakti'. Some bhajans of Meerabai have been rendered into English by Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield as *Meerabai: Ecstatic Poems*.



Meerabai is truly an embodiment of divine love. From her early years she had renounced all the luxuries of the royal palace and dedicated herself to the worship of Krishna. She was constantly in dialogue with Krishna. She hailed Krishna as her Beloved. Her songs were from her heart and were a spontaneous expressions of her ecstatic experiences in her contemplation of Krishna. She ate and drank, she slept and woke up with Krishna on her lips. She was indeed one of the foremost embodiments of Premabhakti (divine love) and an inspired poetess that ever walked on earth.

One of her celebrated songs is "Paayoji maine Ram Ratan dhan paayo" (पायो जी मैने राम रतन धन पायो।) (today I got the most precious wealth of Lord Rama's name. The poem is a testament to Meerabai's devotion to the Lord and her renunciation of all earthly material wealth.

Activity 7

What was it that sparked Meerabai's devotion to Lord Krishna?

4.11 THE POEM 'MERE TO GIRIDHARA GOPAL'

We give you the last Bhajan of Meerabai before she merged with Lord Krishna at the Krishna Temple in Dwaraka. This is a famous and popular Bhajan and celebrates the ultimate merger of Meerabai with Lord Krishna. To make it easy for you and to enjoy it fully, we give you both the Hindi version and the English translation of her last bhajan:

Mere to giridhar gopal doosro na koi (मेरे तो गिरिधर गोपाल दूसरो न कोई।)

There is none other than Giridhar Gopal for me

Jaake sar mor mukut mero pati soi जाके सिर मोर मुकुट मेरो पति सोई ।

He who wears the peacock feather on his turban, is my husband

taat maat brat bandhu aapno na koi तात मात भ्रात बंधु आपनो न कोई ।

All other relationships like father, mother, brother, friends – none exist for me
(except my husband, Giridhar Gopal)

chaandi lai kul ki kaani kaha karilai koi छाँडि लई कुल की कानि कहा करि है कोई ।

I have stepped across the line of my dynasty but who can do anything about it

Santan dhing baithi bhaiti lok laaj khoi संतन ढिंग बैठि लोक लाज खोई ।

I have lost dignity in the eyes of the people by being in the company of saints,
the wise men who sit in bliss lost to all worldly ways

Chunari ke kini took audh linhi loi चुनरी के किये टूक ओढ़ लीन्ही लोई ।

I have torn my colourful sari into pieces and have draped myself with the ochre
coloured one

Moti moonge uttar banmala poi मोती मूँगे उत्तर बनमाला पोई ।।

Having flung away the pearls and corals, I wear a garland of wild flowers

Asuvan jal seenchi seenchi prem beli boi अँसुवन जल सींचिसींचि प्रेम बेलि बोई ।

The waters of my tears have sown a creeper of love

Ab tho bel pheli gayi aanand phal hoi अब तो बेल फ़ैल गई आणँद फल होई ।

Now that creeper has borne the fruit of bliss

dood ki mathaniya bade prem se biloi दूध की मथनियाँ बड़े प्रेम से बिलोई ।

I have churned the curd with great love

maakhan jab khadiliyo chaach piye koi माखन जब काढ़िलियो छाछ पिये कोई ।

You get the butter and someone else gets to drink the buttermilk

Bhakt dekh raaji hui jagat dekhi roi भगत देख राजी हुई जगत देखिरोई ।

The devotee sees this and is joyful while the world is upset

Daasi meera laal giridhar taro ab mohi दासी "मीरा" लाल गिरिधर तारो अब मोही ।।

Your servant, Meera, oh beloved Giridhar, you are MINE, now!!!

4.12 INTERPRETATION OF THE POEM

This is a simple poem that ends with the affirmation that the merger of the devotee (daasi meera) with her Giridhar Gopala (Lord Krishna) is through and over. The poem reveals not only Meerabai's open proclamation that Giridhar Gopala is her husband, it also reveals her defiance of the world which refuses to acknowledge her acceptance of the heavenly Lord as her husband. She has no use for human relationships as she seeks her one and only bonding with the divine lord. She has renounced colourful saris and pearls and coral necklaces in exchange for Krishna's garland of wild flowers. For her, the wreath of love she has woven for Lord Krishna with her tears of happiness is more precious than all worldly goods.

Krishna is always shown as a great lover of butter. Meerabai says she has churned the curd with great love to separate butter from it. With love she offers it to her lord while other human beings will have to be content with the buttermilk that remains after the butter is removed.

According to Meera legend, on Krishna's birthday, (Janmashtami) at the temple of Krishna in Dwarka, she sang 'Oh, Giridhari, are you calling me, I am coming'. To the awe and astonishment of everyone in the temple who were watching, there was a light which enveloped her and the doors leading to the sanctum sanctorum closed on their own. When the doors opened again, Meera's saree was seen enveloping Lord Krishna's idol and the people assembled could hear her voice to the flute accompaniment of Lord Krishna. Meera thus merged with Krishna in Dwaraka.

Activity 8

What is the significance of Meerabai giving up her jewels and colourful clothes?

4.13 LET US SUM UP

This unit has three sections on three poems. We learnt about Baul singers and the contribution of Rabindranath Tagore's translations which brought this tradition out into the public eye. We also read a baul song and looked at how it could be interpreted in the Bhakti tradition. We went on to read about Akka Mahadevi, a saint-poet of the Bhakti period and read and analysed a Vacana, a Kannada literary genre that reads like a prose poem, suffused with metaphors. At the end of the unit, we spoke about the life of Meera Bai and attempted to understand and experience the ecstasy of her last Bhajan.

4.14 AID TO ACTIVITIES

- Activity 1:** Devotional, reformatory and multilingual
- Activity 2.** Saivite by Nayanmars, Vaishnavite by Alvars and Siddha-intense personal ecstasy and criticism of superstitions and hypocrisy that had become the practice among people in place of true religious worship
- Activity 3:** Making baul songs popular to the West and to the non Bengalis in India through his translations
- Activity 4:** To fulfill the inner quest to merge with the Divinity
- Activity 5 :** As a symbolic surrender of worldly life
- Activity 6:** Siva is neither born nor does He die whereas mortal husbands die and decay
- Activity 7:** Her parents' gifting her with a small statue when she was a child and who they referred to as her husband
- Activity 8:** Her act signifies her total surrender to her Lord and a turning away from material pleasures

4.15 QUESTIONS

- 1) Write a brief note on Indian religious poetry.
- 2) Identify and explain the metaphors used in the song 'Baul Gaan'.
- 3) Attempt a summary of the poem 'Baul Gaan'.
- 4) Illustrate this poem as a meeting of the Bhakti and Sufi traditions.
- 5) Why did Akka Mahadevi renounce her worldly life?
- 6) Explain why the poet uses the phrase "the white Jasmine" for her husband, Lord Siva.
- 7) What is the symbolic meaning of 'fire' used in the last line?
- 8) Trace the strands of devotion in the three poems that you read in this unit.

4.16 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

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