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Ideal Devotee or Obstacle to Devotion?: A paradoxical Gender Situation in *Nirgun* Bhakti

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ABSTRACT:

With the democratization of religion brought about by the Bhakti movement in a feudal and patriarchal setting, we see the interplay of conservative rigidity and spiritual fluidity as far as the gender question is concerned, which has been time and again reinforced by socio-religious institutions as well as popular culture. The use of a woman as a metaphor to denote vices that act as impediments in the path of union with the Supreme Lord, while also considering a woman to be the ideal condition of a devotee in this pursuit for union with the Almighty, can only be understood by situating it in its specific historical, geographical, socio-cultural, economic, and political context. Womanhood was perceived as a site of heterogeneity, malleability, and duplicity of personality traits, whereas a man was pre-set with the essential and 'desirable' male traits. With the commoditization of her sexuality came restrictions on her mobility, and her entire existence is brought under the patronage of men, rendering her helpless and worthless without him, whether it be her father, brother, husband, or son. She is also labelled as intensely dangerous, treacherous, and quarrelsome with her husband and in-laws, making puppets of them. It is expected of her 'idealness' that a woman remains docile and submissive to the men in her family.

Key Words: Nirgun, gender, paradox, vices, ideal

The term *Nirgun* has its origins in Sanskrit and is used to mean 'formless' and 'without attributes,' as opposed to the *Saguna* tradition, which involves worship of any deity in form. This forms the essential component of the reformist Bhakti movement, which opposes the ritualistic cult (*karmakânda*) of the later Vedic period, and yet all the essential elements of Bhakti can be traced back to the *Rigveda*, *Âranyakas*, *Upaniṣads*, etc. But Bhakti came to be looked upon as an independent means of liberation only later, in the times of the epics and the *Purânas*, when it became a pan-Indian movement, thus making it truly a mediaeval phenomenon (Rukmani 56). With immense popularity and a

wide geographical expanse, it was accessible even to women and anyone outside the *varnâûramadharma* calling for the democratisation of religion. But, it was a paradoxical gender situation with the existence of both conservative rigidity and spiritual fluidity, which can only be understood through historical and socio-cultural considerations.

An indispensable part of *Nirgun* bhakti is its singing tradition. Recital of *Râmâyana*¹ is very popular in the Hindi belt of North-Central India, and thus specific verses from this text portraying the same philosophy as *Nirgun* are chosen. The singing of *Nirgus*, which depicts the philosophy of life and death, is so popular and well-entrenched in these areas that today many new verses are being constantly composed, sung, and sold as commercial tapes, which in turn helps in the further popularisation of *Nirgun* culture.

*Sant*² Kabirdas composed his *Nirgun* verses in the medieval Bhakti age and his contribution to *Sant Sâhitya* (sacred literature) certainly qualifies as recorded literature in Bhojpuri in the fifteenth century. He labelled the vices of greed, jealousy, and so on as *Mâya*, and used the term *thaginiyâ* to depict *Mâya* as feminine. He views her as an obstacle to male salvation. As quoted in his poetry, “*Mâya* is a harlot, Who sets her snare in the market place...” (Vaudeville 345). He referred to woman as the ‘gateway to hell’ and claimed that she can blind someone simply by casting her shadow on him: *Ja tan ki chhâi pade andhâ hot bhujang*.³ Even the *Bhâgavata Purâna* calls women as “the distracting creations of *Mâya*, to be shunned by wise-men and sages as impediments to devotion” (Tagore 1948-49). Thus, *Maya* becomes the conceptual basis for differentiating between various kinds of women along a typological plane, also tested within the ambit of *pativratâdharma*.⁴ This is, of course, based on patriarchal notions and opinions about women that are prevalent in society. For instance, feudal society attributes the cardinal sins to womanhood and stereotypes women as lustful, greedy, the source of all vices, and the ones who jeopardise the elite-constructed moral fabric of the society. Thus, in this paper, I will try to highlight how the attitude towards women has shaped the *Nirgus* tradition and how *Nirgus* has in turn played its role in the construction and further perpetration of a discriminatory attitude.

The mediaeval Bhakti tradition viewed the female condition as the universal condition of humanity. But why was the condition of the woman taken to be representative of the human condition in a patriarchal world? Perhaps an oral Urdu folk tale involving Birbal and Akbar could be useful in understanding this feature (Orsini 37). Akbar asks Birbal to bring him four individuals with the four different traits of modesty, shamelessness, cowardice, and heroism. The next day, Birbal appears with a woman and, on seeing Akbar’s puzzled face, proceeds to explain:

When she stays in her in-law’s house, out of modesty she doesn’t even open her mouth. And when she sings obscene insult songs at a marriage, her father and brothers, husband, in-laws and caste people, all sit and listen, but she is not ashamed. When she sits with her husband at night, she won’t even go alone into the storeroom and says, “I am afraid to go”. But then, if she takes a fancy to someone, she goes fearlessly to meet her lover at midnight, all alone with no weapon and is not afraid of robbers or evil spirits. (Citation)

Hearing this answer, Akbar is said to have been pleased and to have rewarded him handsomely. Orsini goes on to quote Raheja and Gold to explain that this tale expresses stereotypical South Asian misogyny, which sees woman as a dichotomy of virtues and vices, weakness and strength; essentially duplicitous or hypocritical due to the multiplicity in her nature (Orsini 39). This heterogeneity was thought to be fundamental (by the predominantly male Bhakti saints) in selecting womanhood as the representative state of a devotee. However, this illustration leads us to the conclusion that, womanhood was perceived of as a site of personality trait malleability.

It is a belief prevalent in all faiths that a person has to bear the brunt of his misdeeds in front of the Lord Almighty. There are popular metaphors in *Nirgun* tradition drawing parallels between the vices of a dead man and those of a woman based on a specific opinion about women, which is being accepted by *Nirgun* tradition without any criticism and also disseminated into society in the form of popular culture. This understanding is based on women's sexuality, in which men-folk not only appeal for chastity from women, but also torture them at various levels when they cross the 'line of control.' The guilt of a sinful man before the Lord has been linked here with the shame of a woman with 'slack morality', definition of which is shaped by societal principles. Here is an example:

Baithal rowli gujariyâ ho, chunariyâ mein dâg lag gayil
Kaise jâyi piyâ ke nagariyâ ho, chunariyâ mein dâg lag gayil
Naihare mein châri go yâr banawli
Din râti unhi se nayana ladawli
Unke sutawli hum sejarîyâ ho
Chunariyâ mein dâg lag gayil...⁵

Though this verse talks about the vices in all human beings in general,⁶ which prove to be an obstacle in the pursuit of union with God, the metaphor is in itself a reflection of the patriarchal notions about womanhood, that restrain her from getting involved in any pre-marital love affair. In this thought, her attraction to any men other than her husband and prior to him is attributed to her 'loose character'. Establishing a physical relationship with somebody is equated with staining her *chunri*, making her ineligible for her would-be husband. In this level of thought, *Nirgun* tradition commodifies the women's sexuality and limits their mobility at the level of thought. She cannot love the man of her choice, just as Mirâbai had to fight against all social odds to love Lord Krishna, and devote herself selflessly to His service.⁷ Let us look at the verses of another pertinent *Nirgun* song:

Ab-hu se ghumal chhod gauwan ke khori
Gawnâ ke din niyarâ gayile gori
Apne se âpan kâam dihlu bigâdi
Kawan muh leke tu jaibu sasurâri
Dâg lagawlu chunariyâ mein gori...⁸

In this way, the challenge of being an ideal woman lies in the fact that she confines herself and sacrifices her entire life to the sphere demarcated for her by patriarchal society, which is fraught with restrictions on her mobility and freedom.

Another *Nirgun* song, taken from Tulsidas' *Ayodhya Kând* of *Râmcharitmânas*, begins with this verse (where Sita is on a dialogue with Rama): *Jiya binu deh nadi binu bâdi, Taisi Anâth purush binu nâri*. Here, the entire existence and individuality of a woman are at the mercy of a man's patronage. This mediaeval feudal idea, unlike the *Samkhya* philosophy of *Ardhanârishwara*, which symbolises the inseparability of male and female principles, overlooks the complementary relationship between a man and a woman and makes it unidirectional, where only the female is said to be worthless without a male. This ideology is universally constructed and accepted as natural by society, and it gives impetus to the belief that women are 'inferior' in comparison to men. Women are considered helpless beings that need the support of male forces for their survival. If the husband died, it was expected of the widow that she sacrifice her life at her dead husband's pyre. In the case of Sant Kabirdas, though there is a strong subversion against caste structures, brahminical order, and ritualism through the voice of the *Virahini*, there is no direct challenge to patriarchal structures. Therefore, it would not be completely right to evaluate his work by placing him on the planks of a social reformer. He was a poet, much ahead of his time, and wrote against all the evils that he had experienced as a male in society.⁹ He was not subjected to the social evils that a woman of that period had to suffer from.¹⁰ He uses Sati as a constant metaphor in his songs:

*Now the time has come,
When she obtained her heart's desire:
How could the Sati fear death?
When she has taken the sindoor box in her hand?
The death which the world dreads
Is joy for me:
When shall I die? When shall I behold the One
Who is Plenitude and Joy supreme?(Vaudeville 99)*

Sant Kabirdas brings an element of immense courage into the act of Sati, calling it to the 'heart's desire' and a joyful experience to finally be able to unite with the Supreme Being (here, the husband). Thus, according to him, Sati is a practice not to be condemned but encouraged as it is a fortunate prospect to meet God; what is the use of a soul, if it cannot unite with the Supreme Soul. If she does not sacrifice herself at this juncture, she is naturally barred from participating in any ritual and is considered ineligible to be a part of any social and religious rites.

Nirgun tradition maintains a status quo in the situation where, prior to her marriage, a woman is under the control of her father or brother; these reins are then handed over to her husband and further passed on to her son. Female sexuality is subject to male control in a welfare relationship as well as a marital one. There are numerous examples

of such limited thinking in *Nirgun* singing tradition. Men can survive as individuals without women playing a complementary role in their lives or for survival.

As mentioned earlier, *Nirgun* singing is based on the philosophy of life and death, which believes that the soul is naturally desperate to unite with the Supreme Being but *Mâya* proves to be a roadblock on the spiritual path of men. The metaphor of *Virahini* is used while singing about the pangs suffered by the soul upon being separated from the Lord. But since the futility of a woman in the absence of a man in her life is also highlighted, she is considered to be intensely dangerous and treacherous in this case: *Nâgin baithi râh mein ki birhan pahunchi âye, Ki nâgin darr âp se ki birhan das nâ jaye*.¹¹ She becomes even more poisonous than a snake or a scorpion in her desolate state: *Nahar ke nakh mein base dânt gase bhujang, Bichchhi ke ponchhi base birhan ke sab ang*.¹²

Thus, 'woman' is constantly used as a metaphor to show the vicious web of the vices of man (lust, greed, wrath, envy, pride, etc.), and an innocent argument is given that *Mâya* is possibly depictable only in the feminine gender. There are numerous examples in popular tradition like stories, proverbs, and sayings in North India, where the female character has been branded as '*Triya charitra*', which is seen as a conspiring, selfish, and deceitful personality. This stereotyping has become so deeply entrenched in the prevailing common-sense of the people that nobody criticises it or presents any discussion against it; instead it is popularised even more by moulding the entire thought process into poetry and songs in the name of culture and tradition. For example,

Thaginiya sabke nâch nachâwe

Sabka man ke bas mein râkhe

Bhitar lobh jagâwe...

Kul parivâr paraspar jujhe

Nâri pati ke bâth na bujhe

Sâs sasur se dulhin jhagde

*Siwtha hâth uthâwe, sabke nâch nachâwe...*¹³

Generally, society considers women as the conduits that carry forward its constructed moralities, codes, and values. Feudal society holds the joint family system as an ideal, which is a patriarchal order. The responsibility and burden of managing the entire family smoothly has to be shouldered by a woman, where she has to sacrifice her personal happiness. If this 'ideal family system' breaks into smaller units, it is she who is traditionally blamed. *Nirgun* supports this prevalent view, many times directly and at other times metaphorically. In the verses above, woman is portrayed as *Mâya*, one who constantly quarrels with her husband and in-laws and also makes puppets of them. It is expected of her 'idealness' that a woman remains docile and submissive to the men in her family. If a man does not respect or harms his parents, it is assumed that he does so due to his

wife's persuasion and cajolery. Though *Nirgun* also sheds light on the pitiable social status of women while expressing rage over it, it does so within its limited point of view. A woman is bestowed with the social responsibility of maintaining and augmenting the honour of her clan by default.

Thus, in Nirgun poetry tradition, ideas on women are put forth in two ways: as an 'ideal wife' and as a 'prostitute'. For the latter, strong expressions such as 'gateway to hell', 'creeper of poison', 'tank of lust', 'more poisonous than a snake', *d?kini* (destroyer), *p?pini* (sinner), *mohini* (enticer) are used as vices which a devotee must shed since these come in the way of merging with the Supreme Soul; and for the former, her longing for her husband is taken as an ideal condition of a devotee in pursuit of union with the Almighty God.

It can thus be concluded that the traditional notions about womanhood have their roots deeply embedded in history and are reinforced by socio-cultural and religious institutions. Any attempt to study the attitude towards women in temporal and spatial segregation will render the effort futile.

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