

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *MADHURA BHAKTI* IN THE LIVES OF WESTERN MYSTIC, TERESA AND EASTERN MYSTIC, MEERABAI WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CARNATIC MUSIC

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Abstract

The mystical union with God is the ultimate experience which every devotee yearns for. This divine intimacy or *Madhura Bhakti* is a common theme in the writings of renowned mystics such as Meera Bai of the East and Teresa of Avila of the West. The themes of their writings are love, devotion and plead. These emotions are well expressed in the Carnatic music from the beginning and popularized by the Bhakti poets from fifth century AD. These women mystics, whom we discuss in this article experienced their intimate union with God and expressed it through their life and teachings. They laid a new way to attain Divine Intimacy, through renunciation and passionate spiritual practices. Their profound mystical union with God and their love for the divine have left a deep impact on future generations. This article illuminates further on the concept of *Madhura Bhakti*, thereby, to elevate our own understanding of this unique Divine-human union – *Madhura Bhakti*, interlaced with inter-religious parallels. This study on the suitable ragas will help us understand the rasas in their compositions.

Keywords: Teresa of Avila, Meera Bai, mystics, mysticism, *Madhura Bhakti*, Divine Intimacy, Carnatic Music

INTRODUCTION

One of the basic concepts of Bhakti is to perceive God not as a supernatural power and inaccessible, but to feel that the presence of God can be experienced by the human senses as a concrete reality. Music and Bhakti are inter-related in such a way that it is impossible to separate one from the other. A true devotee who knows that God alone is the source of peace and satisfaction in life. If Bhakti or devotion is not practiced, we miss the rasa comes only through Bhakti and which induces Love. All our great men and women, who excelled in the field of music, were greatly religious and seekers of spiritual truth. The songs of religious nature are found in the music of every country and certain religious practices and rituals existed as a part of Bhakti and worship. Bhakti and music helped man share his sorrows, happiness, emotions, thinking etc. (Bijulal, 2009)

Illustration of God as supreme lover, as the ultimate beloved, has persisted in the religious imagination for many centuries in different parts of the world. Even today, visualisation of God as lover and beloved is still very much alive. (Schweig, 2014). In most of the poems the *Madhura Bhakti* is expressed as a woman's love for her beloved. The sweetness of union conjoined with *viraha bhakti* or the anguish of separation and the pining for union is mostly spoken in the poems. (Ganesh K, 2021).

The ultimate union with God is primary in mysticism. The Supreme lover, Beloved, Bridegroom, Lord, Divine, Paramatma, Prabhu are some of the attributes given to God by

them. In this devotional mysticism also known as *Madhura Bhakti* the Almighty is seen as masculine and all the other devotees, men and women are considered as feminine. This *Madhura Bhakti* is always experienced in a particular religious context. For instance, for Meera Bai, her Lord was Krishna whereas for Teresa of Avila the devotion was centered on Jesus, likewise for other religious mystics. Studying the concept of ‘Divine Love’ in the lives of Meerabai and Teresa of Avila will put us in awe of what these women have witnessed, cherished and given to the world. Therefore, the aim of this article is to bring out how the concept of *Madhura Bhakti* is present in the lives of the Eastern Mystic, Meera Bai and the Western Mystic St Teresa of Avila and to explore the ragas suitable to express these emotions.

MADHURA BHAKTHI

Madhura Bhakti is all about a love-relationship with the Almighty. The devotee transcends from the basic religious practices and considers them as secondary. His/her fundamental goal is the intimate union with God. This is primary to all kinds of mystical experiences. This experience tends to be highly individualistic and unique to each person. Love is not sweet throughout; it involves flare-ups, painful partings, alienation and of course, blissful reconciliations. Just as in *sringar rasa* there are two opposite situations, one of *samyoga* or of being together and the other of separation; so in *Madhura bhakti* there are thrills and joys of being united and there are pangs of being parted. (Sharma P, 1991)

In the western world, the history of the word, ‘Mysticism’ dates back to the Greek Mysteries. A mystic is one who has been, or is being initiated into some esoteric knowledge of divine things. (Butler, 1922).Mysticism is found in all the major religions of today. In the western civilization, it is largely the Catholic Church that keeps it alive. Their teaching of mysticism other than taught in the Bible dates back to about the fifth century, and is still strongly supported by a few examples of catholic saints who expressed their devotional feelings in their writings:

“Thou has created us for Thyself, and our heart is restless till it rests in Thee” – St Augustine

“The third grade of love is when the mind of man is rapt into the abyss of the divine light, so that, utterly oblivious of all exterior things, it knows not itself and passes wholly into God.”–Richard of St Victor “The end I have in mind is the divine Embracing, the union of the soul with the divine substance” – St John of the Cross (Cuthbert butler, 2001)

Certain passages in the Old Testament of the Bible are clearly marked by the kind of love that a wife has for her husband. “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (Song of Solomon Ch1-2) “I am my beloveds and his desire is toward me” (Song of Solomon, Ch7-10)

In the east, from the third century to the eighth century *Bhakti* was based on *virutham*¹² of the Lord. *Bhakti* poems were first composed and sung with various *panns*³. In his thesis Bijulal would say,

“It is not surprising that southern music is called devotional music as most of the songs we find in southern music are devotional. Another characteristic of Southern music is that all the composers are great devotees. The songs composed by them are also devotional. Examples: Devara Trios: Appar, Sammandar, Sundarar, the Adimurtis: Muthuthandavar, Marimuthapillai, Arunachalakavirayar, Music Trinities: Thyagaraja, Dikshitar, and Shyama Shastri.”

Different ragas are indicated to express the nine emotions of human beings, navarasas. Examples; Atana - to express anger, Sama - to express calmness, Surati, Kamas, Useni - to convey the taste of love. (Chelladurai, 1984)

Telugu Kritis form the bulk of sacred songs and the composers are Tallapakam Annamacharya, Chinnayya, Bhadrachalam Ramadasa, Girirajakavi, Ramaswami Dikshitar, Thyagaraja, Vina Kuppayyar and others. There is a profusion of Kannada devotional songs composed by Purandaradasa, which are saturated with *Bhakti*, and have inspired many later composers. (Sambamoorthy, 1960)

In the north, there were composers like Gorakhnath, Meerabai, Jeyadev and Surdas who composed *Bhakti* songs to express their deep devotion and dedication to the Lord. (Sharma P, 1991)

Few examples are:

“Evening has come, but not the Dark One. The bulls, their bells jingling, have mated with the cows and the cows are frisky. The flutes play cruel songs, bees flutter in their bright white jasmine and the blue-black lily. The sea leaps into the sky and cries aloud. Without him here, what shall I say? how shall I survive?” - Nammalvar, 9.9.10 (Ganesh K, 2021)

“O Manmatha! My voluptuous breasts swell for that lord alone who holds aloft flaming discus and conch. If there is even mere talk of offering this, my body to mortal men, then I cannot live.- Andal, Nacchiyar Tirumoli 1.4 (Ganesh K, 2021)

Kabir and the *Sufis* like Farid among the followers of Islam were also familiar with the mystique of Divine betrothal but perhaps because the masculine trait was too dominant in

²A virutham is a Hindu devotional verse sung in Carnatic music concerts. Viruthams do not possess a set tala and are solely improvised using one or more ragams. It is one of the many forms of manodharma (spontaneous improvisations) in Carnatic music.

³In ancient Tamil music the raga is called as panna. According to Arivanar's in PanchaMarabu there existed 103 panna and used in ancient Tamil Music. Out of these 103, 23 panna have been identified with modern ragas and are used by Oduvars of Thevaram today.

them they could imagine their beloved in none other than the feminine form. Here, in our country *Madhura bhakti* has always been a manifestation of a wife's devotion to her husband and not vice versa (Sharma P, 1991).

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS:

Teresa of Avila (1515 – 1582) is one of the most well-known female mystics and saints of the Catholic Church. Whereas Meera Bai (1498 – 1543) was a well-known Hindu mystical poetess. Meera owed her attachment to Lord Krishna, whereas her family followed Vaishnavism. Both of them lived in a context, which was extremely patriarchal and hierarchical. Both of them were bold and beautiful, devoted and serene to face the oppositions and trials from the society.

Spain, where Teresa lived, was renowned for its spiritual pursuits and political primacy as early as the 16th century. Spiritual revolution or renaissance gave rise to various spiritual ideologies. In such an environment many kinds of spiritual confusion also arose. During the lifetime of St. Teresa, women were viewed with suspicion when they talked about spiritual and higher spiritual experiences. Due to the confusion of the time, the Inquisition¹ viewed with suspicion of those who preached prayer, divine experiential revelations, and the books that taught by them. (Periyanayagam, 2023)

In the East, especially in India, the *Sati* (the rite in which the widow sacrifices herself in the funeral pyre of her husband) was practiced. In those days the widows were confined to their house and most of them worshiped their family deity. But Meera on the contrary, after her husband's death refused to seclude herself as a widow and to worship her family deity, rather, she went around the streets of *Mewar* region singing the praises of her lord Krishna.

Thus, these two women mystics, with their love - filled devotion for their beloved Lords, underwent many kinds of persecutions. They ignored the taunt of the society and were bold enough to break the boundaries to reach great heights of ecstasy.

WORKS OF TERESA AND MEERA BAI

Teresa completed her autobiography "Book of Life" by the end of 1565. "Way of Perfection", her Spiritual classic of all time was written in 1566. It is a practical book of advice and counsel destined to initiate the Carmelite nun into the life of prayer (Kieran Kavanaugh, 1982). This is also known as Teresian Gospel. 'Interior Castle', 1577, is a fruit of her own spiritual experience. It explains how meditation on the grace God transforms one to grow and mature in Christ. Her other minor works like Book of foundations, The constitutions, On Making the Visitations, Spiritual Testimonies, Soliloquies, Meditations on the Song of Songs, her 32 poems, 450 letters and other small writings inflated her to the

¹Due to the religious confusion of the time, those who spoke about mental prayer, spiritual revelations, and the books that taught them were investigated by a certain group. This group is called Inquisition.

status of “Patroness of Spanish Literature”. These achievements of her elevated her and she was attributed the honour as Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI on 27th September 1970.

Meera Bai is famous for her *bhajan* compositions. She composed many devotional songs and dedicated them to Lord Krishna, whom she portrayed as her husband and lover. All her songs express her deep sense of devotion to Krishna and her longing to be in continual communion with Him. In her poems, she addresses Lord Krishna as *Hari*, *Giridhara*, *Prabhu* and *Gopala*. All her poems are transmitted to us by oral tradition. It is said that she wrote nearly 1300 prayer songs in the praise of Lord Krishna.

LOVE DEVOTION OF TERESA AND MEERABAI

One of the most commonly used, deep-seated themes in the context of both the mystics is their longing to be united with the Lord. They feel that they are completely captivated by God. Both of them show their love towards their Divine Beloved by renouncing all the worldly pleasures and dedicating their lives for a Divine purpose. Teresa in her first poem “Aspirations toward Eternal life” says,

Within this Divine prison Of love in which I live,

My God my captive is. (Kieran Kavanaugh, 1982)

Similarly, Meera expresses of herself being captivated by her ‘The Dark Dweller’ in Braj language,

My Beloved dwells in my heart

I have actually seen that Abode of Joy.

Mira’s Lord is Hari, the Indestructible,

My Lord, I have taken refuge with Thee,

Thy Slave (Alston, 1998)

This sentiment of love can be very well expressed in Carnatic Music by using the ragas like Surati, Kamas and Useni.

This love relationship of these two mystics with their Lord is not always joyful, playful and amorous, but serious, for the separation from the Lord caused great grief in the lives of these saints. St Teresa of Avila expresses of her separation from the lord thus: “While love is sweet, Long awaiting is not” (Kieran Kavanaugh, 1982).

Meera’s helplessness to live her life without her Lord is expressed in the following verses:

Without shyam, I have gone crazy

My mind is like wood attacked by weevils.

The pain of love is devouring me

And no medicine avails (Alston, 1998)

This separation and longingness can be very well expressed through the ragas like Asaaveri, Bhairavi, Useni, Kanada, Kalyani, Kamas, Sahana and Suruti.

‘STRUCK AND SOLD’ IMAGES OF TERESA AND MEERA BAI

The Western mystic, Teresa imagines herself being struck and sold for the sake of her Divine Beloved Jesus Christ. In her poem, ‘On those Words’ she writes,

Myself surrendered and given

The exchange is this

My beloved is for me,

And I am for my beloved.

When the gentle hunter
Wounded and subdued me,

In love’s arms,

My soul fallen;

New life receiving,

Thus did I exchange

My beloved is for me,

And I am for my beloved.

The arrows he drew

Full of love,

My soul was oned

With her Creator.

Other love I want not

Surrendered not to my God,

That my beloved is for me,

And I am for my beloved. (Kieran Kavanaugh, 1982)

Raga Charukesi in Carnatic music is used to express the feelings of love, piety and pleading. It blends well with the Sringara and Bhakti rasas.

Likewise, in the Eastern mystic, Meera Bai too feels that she is struck and sold to the love arrows of her Beloved Krishna, as composed by her in her poem, “in the arrow of His Glance”.

The Arrow of His Glance

Friend, the arrow of his glance struck

my eyes;
Its point pierced my heart (and) his
sweet image entered my soul.
For a long time I have been staying
(here) watching the road, standing
at my house.
My life clings to (my) dark beloved,
(he is) a life-giving herb.
Mira says I am sold into the hands of
Giridhar, but people say I am loose. (Alston, 1998)

Whether in Greek epics or Indian myth the cupids/*Manmadha*' arrow is the cause of the love and romance. The final end of this romance is to be one with the Beloved, to be concealed in the Lord. Thus a person chosen and favored by God himself, cannot separate herself or herself from His all-encompassing love.

CONCLUSION

All of us are created in the image and likeness of God and our natural tendency is to be united with Him. Through prayer, meditation and renunciation these mystics, experienced the love of God individually, in their very unique way and expressed their intimacy with the Lord according to the particular religious tradition to which they belonged. Their intimate union with the lord and their intense longing for union is remarkable. This "Deifying Union" (being one with the Lord) of the mystics is not temporary but everlasting. Thus the *Madhura Bhakti* - Divine Intimacy is a common element in all the lives of mystics irrespective of religion and culture. This Divine experience did not keep them indifferent to the anarchy in society or religion rather these two women mystics shattered the boundaries of caste, class and transcended their specific socio-cultural and religious contexts, which were extremely patriarchal and hierarchical. Thus they stand out as an extraordinary women icon of all times. When this Divine love is expressed through Divine Music it will easily reach to the masses. The Bhakti compositions of these mystics with the suitable ragas could be popularized among people. Though Teresa and Meera lived in different cultural situations both were striving for Deifying Union. The road they took might be different ones but their goal was an everlasting union with the lord.

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