



***Mysticism and Margins:
Saint Poetry as a Vehicle for Social Equality in India***

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Abstract

The mysticism embedded in Indian saint poetry served not merely as a spiritual expression but also as a profound medium of social reform and egalitarian resistance in medieval India. Saint poets such as Kabir, Ravidas, Tukaram, Lal Ded, and the Sufi mystics like Bulleh Shah redefined religious devotion by intertwining it with radical critiques of caste, gender, and hierarchical orthodoxy. Writing in vernacular languages and performing their poetry through song, chant, and community gathering, these poets bypassed elite religious institutions and created accessible platforms for the disenfranchised. Kabir's dohas questioned the necessity of religious identity in favor of experiential wisdom, while Ravidas's utopian vision of Begampura offered a spiritual homeland devoid of suffering and caste prejudice. Tukaram democratized bhakti through Marathi abhangas that uplifted rural and artisan life, and Lal Ded's mystical vakhs represented one of the earliest feminine articulations of spiritual autonomy. Sufi saints, meanwhile, dissolved rigid

boundaries of self and religion, emphasizing unity through divine love.

This study argues that saint poetry constituted an alternative epistemology—one that resisted institutionalized power through inward spirituality and collective expression. The use of oral performance and folk traditions created inclusive, emotionally resonant spaces that empowered the marginalized to assert their dignity. Far from being escapist, mysticism in these traditions functioned as an insurgent force against social inequality. The legacy of saint poets continues to influence modern anti-caste movements, feminist thought, and protest cultures, making them foundational figures in India's journey toward social justice. Drawing from historical, literary, and sociocultural sources, this paper positions saint poetry as a dynamic site of intersection between devotion and dissent, where mystical insight becomes a catalyst for structural change.

Keywords: Saint poetry- mysticism-social equality- Bhakti movement- anti-caste resistance, vernacular spirituality



Introduction

India's spiritual canvas is intricate and profound as well. Alongside its towering temples, sacred scriptures, and philosophical schools lies another equally potent force: saint poetry. Emerging from the margins—both social and linguistic—this body of work blended mysticism with radical social commentary. Saint poets challenged the rigid caste system, gender norms and religious orthodoxy through accessible and emotionally resonant poetry. This paper examines how saint poetry operated as a vehicle of social equality, with mysticism as its unifying core.

In the vast and complex spiritual landscape of India, saint poetry has long served as a potent instrument for both mystical exploration and social critique. Emerging from the Bhakti and Sufi traditions between the 12th and 18th centuries, saint poets such as Kabir, Ravidas, Tukaram, Lal Ded, and Bulleh Shah articulated a deeply personal connection with the divine that simultaneously challenged rigid societal norms. Their verses, composed in regional vernaculars and shared through oral traditions, bypassed the exclusivity of Sanskrit and Persian, democratizing spiritual discourse and reaching the most marginalized sectors of society. These poets spoke from the social peripheries—many were artisans, women, or members of oppressed castes—yet their voices carried immense spiritual and cultural authority.

Mysticism, in their work, was not an escape from material reality but a means of transforming it. Through devotional intensity, metaphor, and spiritual autonomy, these poets rejected caste hierarchies, gender inequality, and the mediation of religious elites. Kabir's denunciation of religious orthodoxy, Ravidas's vision of a casteless utopia, Lal Ded's challenge to patriarchal norms, and Bulleh Shah's Sufi egalitarianism all demonstrate the subversive potential of mystical experience. Their poetry fostered communal spaces where the divine could be accessed by all, regardless of social status.



The saint poetry became a vehicle for social equality in India by using mysticism as a framework for dissent. Through close readings and historical contextualization, it argues that the saint poets' integration of spirituality and social justice created a unique literary tradition—one that continues to inspire movements for equity and dignity across the subcontinent. By examining their contributions, this study sheds light on the intersection of inner transformation and external reform as envisioned through poetic mysticism.

Saint Poetry and the Context of Social Hierarchy

The caste system, solidified by ancient texts like the *Manusmriti*, categorized individuals into hierarchical groups based on birth. This stratification relegated Dalits and Shudras to the lowest rungs, often subjecting them to dehumanizing conditions. Within this structure, saint poets rose as unexpected yet transformative figures. Writing in vernacular languages, they reached the illiterate and excluded, subverting the exclusivity of Sanskrit and elite theological discourse.

Their spiritual insights, far from being esoteric, became accessible affirmations of human dignity. Mysticism was not retreat—it was revolution cloaked in prayer.

The emergence of saint poetry in India must be understood against the backdrop of deeply entrenched social hierarchies, most notably the caste system. Codified in ancient texts like the *Manusmriti*, the caste order divided society into rigid, birth-based categories—Brahmins at the top, followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, with Dalits (then called "untouchables") positioned outside the caste system altogether. This stratification not only dictated occupational roles and social interactions but also controlled access to religious knowledge and sacred spaces. Sanskrit, the liturgical language, remained the preserve of the upper castes, further excluding marginalized communities from theological discourse.

In this exclusionary landscape, saint poets emerged as radical disruptors. Many of them belonged to the very groups that were deemed unworthy of spiritual pursuit. By composing in vernacular languages—Hindi, Marathi, Punjabi, Kashmiri, and others—they made mystical



thought accessible to the masses. Their poetry was not merely devotional; it was declarative, asserting the spiritual worth of every individual regardless of caste or class. Through bhajans, dohas, vakhs, and abhangas, they challenged religious orthodoxy, critiqued ritualism, and advocated a direct, egalitarian relationship with the divine. In doing so, they laid the foundation for a counter-cultural spiritual movement rooted in both mysticism and social justice.

Kabir: The Weaver of Universal Truths

Kabir (15th century), born to a family of weavers, infused his dohas with piercing social insight and spiritual wisdom. His disdain for religious hypocrisy—both Hindu and Muslim—was matched by his critique of caste divisions.

*"Jat na puchho sadhu ki, puchh lijiye gyan,
Mol karo talwar ka, pada rehne do mian."
("Do not ask the caste of a saint; ask about their wisdom.
Value the sword, not its sheath.")*

This aphorism highlights Kabir's subversion of social labels in favor of inner enlightenment. By equating caste with the sheath of a sword—external and ultimately irrelevant—he gave voice to those silenced by their social status. His identity as a weaver bolstered his message, reinforcing that spiritual insight is not the preserve of the upper castes.

Kabir's poetry created a sacred discourse rooted in lived experience rather than religious dogma. He spoke in the idiom of common people, using metaphors drawn from spinning, dyeing, and loom work—daily practices of his artisan class—to convey profound truths. This grounded mysticism allowed his messages to resonate with the masses, particularly the marginalized, who found in his words not just spiritual affirmation but social dignity.



Ravidas: The Voice of the Oppressed

Ravidas, a leatherworker deemed "untouchable," constructed a poetic theology centered on divine justice and human equality. His most famous vision is "Begampura"—a city without sorrow, symbolic of an egalitarian utopia.

"Begampura shehar ka nao,

Dukh andohu nahi tihi thao..."

("Begampura is the name of the city,

Where there is no suffering, no sorrow...")

Begampura was both a spiritual and political vision. It offered Dalits a sacred narrative of belonging and hope in an otherwise hostile world. Ravidas's poetry laid an early foundation for anti-caste thought and continues to resonate in contemporary Dalit activism.

Unlike traditional heaven, which was mediated through priestly sanction, Ravidas's utopia was accessible to all—especially the downtrodden. His poetic world dismantled the logic of pollution and purity that justified caste discrimination, replacing it with a radically inclusive divine order.

Ravidas's assertion of spiritual equality was revolutionary in a society where Dalits were barred from temples and scriptures. He declared, "*Man changa to kathoti mein Ganga*" ("If the mind is pure, the Ganges flows in your bowl"), subverting ritual purity with moral clarity. His teachings inspired later Dalit leaders and movements, and continue to resonate in contemporary struggles for social justice and religious dignity.

Tukaram: Devotion in the Vernacular

Tukaram (17th century), composing in Marathi, transformed the experience of bhakti into a public and inclusive practice. His Abhangas, devotional verses, emphasized internal purity over ritualistic correctness.



*"Pandharichi wat konala disli,
Tyane jiv dala."
("Whoever sees the path to Pandharpur,
Offers their life to it.")*

Pandharpur symbolized a spiritual homeland accessible to all. Tukaram's poetry rejected the monopolization of the divine by the priestly class. By rooting his spiritual imagery in agrarian and artisan life, he uplifted those traditionally excluded from sacred discourse.

His verses described everyday life—plowing fields, grinding grain, caring for livestock—and fused them with divine presence, validating the labor and devotion of ordinary people. Tukaram frequently criticized hollow ritualism and religious arrogance, declaring that sincerity of heart mattered more than temple offerings or scriptural learning. His gatherings, part of the Warkari movement, became mass celebrations of collective devotion, where caste boundaries were temporarily dissolved through shared singing and pilgrimage. By using the Marathi vernacular and invoking Vithoba as a compassionate and personal god, Tukaram created a devotional culture grounded in humility, equality, and social harmony—one that still thrives in Maharashtra today.

Lal Ded: A Feminine Mysticism of Resistance

Lal Ded, or Lalleshwari, a 14th-century Kashmiri mystic, wrote vakhs that broke with the patriarchal and religious norms of her time. She left her marital home and immersed herself in spiritual seeking, becoming a revered voice of mystical empowerment.

*"Shiva resides in everything—
Why search elsewhere?"*

This simple yet profound statement deconstructs both gender and ritualistic confines. Her body of work provides an early template for feminine resistance through spiritual autonomy, challenging both religious dogma and gender roles.



Lal Ded walked barefoot, draped in minimal clothing, defying social expectations of modesty and domesticity. Her *vakhs* were not composed in elite Sanskrit but in the Kashmiri vernacular, giving voice to women's spiritual experience in a male-dominated theological landscape. She rejected idol worship, caste divisions, and external rituals, advocating direct communion with the divine through inner realization. Her verses often critiqued the hollow piety of priests and the constraints of patriarchal marriage. In reclaiming spiritual space as a woman mystic, Lal Ded became a cultural icon whose influence persists in Sufi, Shaivite, and feminist spiritual traditions across Kashmir and beyond.

Sufi Poets and the Spirit of Unity

Sufi mystics like Bulleh Shah and Shah Abdul Latif used poetry to advocate unity, love, and social justice. Their works often blurred the lines between religious identities and social categories.

"Bulleh ki jaana main kaun"
(*"Bulleh, to me, I know not who I am"*)

Bulleh Shah's poetry dissolved rigid identities in favor of a mystical self rooted in love. His challenge to both religious and social orthodoxy made him a beloved figure among common people, particularly those alienated by rigid norms.

Bulleh Shah openly defied both clerics and caste leaders by dancing with marginalized communities, singing in public spaces, and embracing a humanist theology. He emphasized that divine truth transcends scriptures, rituals, and sectarian boundaries. Similarly, Shah Abdul Latif celebrated the spiritual potential of women and outcasts, using folk tales and local idioms to convey deep mystical insights. Both poets resisted exclusivist ideologies by making love, humility, and inner awakening the foundations of faith. Their verses, sung in shrines and Sufi gatherings even today, continue to inspire interfaith harmony and social inclusion across South Asia.



Language, Performance, and Accessibility

A critical vehicle for the power of saint poetry was its use of the vernacular. By avoiding elite languages like Sanskrit or Persian, saint poets democratized knowledge. Their works were often performed as bhajans (devotional songs), kirtans (communal chants), or sung in local gatherings. This oral, musical transmission created inclusive spaces where people of all castes and classes could participate.

These performances often involved call-and-response, dancing, and collective singing—rituals that temporarily suspended social boundaries and fostered collective identity.

Mysticism as a Mode of Resistance

The mysticism of saint poets was experiential, inward, and universal. This approach challenged caste ideology by: Rejecting priestly intermediation, asserting the divine within all beings, Promoting compassion and humility as spiritual ideals

Mysticism became resistance when it insisted that everyone—regardless of caste, gender, or occupation—had direct access to the divine. Saint poetry turned spiritual realization into social awakening.

Enduring Legacy and Contemporary Resonance

The influence of saint poets extends into modern political and cultural movements. B.R. Ambedkar drew inspiration from their anti-caste ethos. Contemporary Dalit literature echoes their themes. Their verses are sung in protests, featured in social justice campaigns, and continue to offer solace and strength to marginalized communities.

Communities like the Kabir Panth, Ravidasia sects, and the Warkari movement carry forward their legacies through festivals, music, and oral traditions. Academic institutions and progressive movements now study these poets not just as spiritual figures, but as early champions of human rights.



Conclusion

Saint poets in India represent a unique confluence of mysticism and social consciousness. They stood at the margins—socially and linguistically—yet voiced some of the most profound critiques of inequality and injustice. Their spirituality was not divorced from life; it was rooted in the everyday struggles of weavers, cobblers, farmers, and women. By sanctifying the ordinary and challenging the orthodox, they transformed poetry into a platform for social transformation. Their legacy remains a testament to the power of mystical devotion to ignite collective conscience.

What makes these poets enduring is not only the richness of their spiritual insights but their unwavering commitment to human dignity. Their verses were not confined to temples or mosques; they echoed in marketplaces, homes, and village squares, creating a democratized spiritual discourse. The Bhakti and Sufi traditions offered both refuge and resistance—refuge for the soul and resistance to oppressive systems. Today, in an era still grappling with casteism, religious division, and gender inequality, the words of Kabir, Ravidas, Lal Ded, and others remain strikingly relevant. Their poetry transcends time, offering blueprints for compassion, coexistence, and justice. In remembering and studying them, we do not just honor the past—we renew a moral vision for the future.



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