



# Mirabai in Popular Imagination: Reading *Bhakti* Canon in Contemporary Context

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## Abstract

The immense popularity of Mirabai, the sixteenth-century *bhakti* poet-saint, transcends time and space. Beliefs have it that she renounced her *kshatriya* and royal identity for spiritual pursuits in the public domain. She was challenged, critiqued, ostracised, and castigated within her community and was labelled as a woman of questionable character. Mirabai wandered to various places, singing and dancing to *bhajans* negotiating the public and the private while becoming both virtuous and promiscuous in multiple narratives. Mirabai has been accommodated within the marginalised and subaltern communities and gradually, a community of destitute women has formed around her. With the revival of Mirabai during the Indian 'nationalist' period by popular spokespersons such as Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi as an 'ideal' and 'chaste' historical character in their public speeches and private letters, the promiscuous image of Mirabai, perpetuated through centuries, witnessed transgressions and she was eventually elevated to the status of a saint. This paper with literary, biographical and hagiographical representations explores the mechanism of the paradoxical plane that allowed the promiscuous image of Mirabai to achieve sainthood and become a cult name in the *bhakti* tradition.

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*A Queen, indeed, to reject her veil – and go  
Begging in the street and hobnobbing with mendicants  
And dancing from dawn to dusk in public temples!  
And what dances! what songs! – as puerile  
As deficient in decency!”*

*Chaitanya and Mira*

## 1. Introduction

The life and legend of Mirabai—the sixteenth-century *bhakti* poet-saint—is integral to map the spiritual tradition of Indian women. She was a Rajput princess, married to the heir apparent of the powerful princely state of Mewar in Rajputana (present-day Rajasthan). She discarded her social status, religious and patriarchal traditions for her spiritual pursuits. She wandered to various places, lived on public charity as a mendicant on the streets at a time when Rajput-Mughal conflict was the norm of the day. She was brave. She did not conform to the social conventions that challenged her to compromise her personal devotion. She sang and danced on the streets, inviting the ire of her household and community at large. She was labelled as a woman of questionable character for her interactions with men of similar spiritual affiliations. While she was denied any recognition within her household and clan, she was accommodated by the marginalised communities and became a popular venerable figure within their folklores, art, and culture. Further, with the Indian liberation movement flourishing in the late nineteenth-century, Mirabai was revived, reconstructed, and canonised as a poet-saint and an icon of the liberation of women by popular spokespersons of the liberation movement such as Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghose and M. K. Gandhi. Literary reconstructions of the life and legend of Mirabai have also significantly contributed to the scholarship of Mirabai in the contemporary scenario.

There is a severe dearth of textual sources that can locate Mirabai within a specific time frame, but modern scholars are of the view that she lived between the late fifteenth-century and the first half of the sixteenth-century. Existing sources indicate that neither did Mira identify with any particular sect nor encouraged to form any, and this can be considered as one of the reasons why her life and her story have been silenced in many cultural narratives. Only a few cultural texts—of which hagiographies are the most widely read and discussed—record Mira’s life, but usually in brief narratives. What has popularised Mira over the ages is the memory of Mira perpetuated through the folk history of the marginalised populace of Gujarat and Rajasthan in particular (Mukta, 1994). The marginalised populace have identified their struggles and life experiences with the legend of Mirabai. A common ground of suffering was established, and her *bhajans* became a potent mode of the expression of that suffering and communities were formed around Mira’s narrative. Her personal devotion metamorphosed into the devotion of a community, transcending time, space and traditions and becomes a transgressive site of moral and social rebellion. This transgressive devotion has been rooted in the daily experiences of struggles of communities that seek emancipation from moral and social oppression. John Stratton Hawley in the *Afterword to Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems* (2017) shed some light on the radical nature of *bhakti* when it comes to Mirabai and her adoration of Krishna hailed by the name ‘Giridhar Gopal’, which also appears in her *bhajans* time and again. He stated:

So the Govardhan story celebrates the power of inner, personal religion—what today we might call spirituality—as against the random tyrannies and caprices of externalized, “organized” religion. When Mira devotes herself to Giridhar, the hero who lifts (*dhar*) the mountain (*giri*), and arrays him against her husband and in-laws, she extends the story of the struggle between intimate religion and its lifeless exterior counterpart a step further (p. 59).

The story of Mira narrated in hagiographies traveled through popular folk narratives in multiple times and spaces and reached the contemporary world as a radical female icon of the *bhakti*

canon. Her image transgressed social and cultural norms and was appropriated within different contexts serving multiple purposes, the most prominent of which was evident in the narratives of the Indian freedom struggle movement by popular spokespersons such as Swami Vivekananda, M. K. Gandhi, Sister Nivedita and Aurobindo Ghose among others. Mirabai—once a *Kshatriya* woman accused of promiscuity—became the saviour-figure in religio-political narratives. For instance, Mira was hailed as a *Satyagrahi* by Gandhi and was elevated to the status of a saint during multiple public and private conversations. Versions of Mira encounter changed with every powerful literary or political representation and the end product was a female icon, all-encompassing, all-enduring poet-saint, equally attached and simultaneously detached to the Mira existing in cultural narratives. The paper explores the journey of Mirabai—from a *Kshatriya* woman accused of promiscuity to a mendicant hailed as a saint—which is crucial to map the current narrative of Mira's life and the legend embedded within Indian cultural discourse.

## 2. Taming Mirabai in Indian Letters

Five plays composed during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been read with reference to the evolving image of Mirabai circulating in contemporary public spheres. James H. Cousins' play *The King Wife* (1919) opens with the Mughal emperor Akbar, and his poet, Tansen, disguised as Hindus, setting out to meet Mirabai, who has recently gained immense popularity for her melodious songs and devotion to the Hindu deity Krishna. Locating Mira and Akbar within a common temporal frame suggests the playwright's idea of peaceful cultural coexistence of two figures of historical significance. But what was intriguing was the question if Akbar and Mira were actually contemporaries, given the ambiguity related to the actual period in which Mira lived. Texts mention Akbar meeting Mira. Hagiographies are the earliest known sources of Mirabai. Two early hagiographical manuscripts—Nabhadas' *Bhaktamal*, believed to have been composed around 1600 CE, and Priyadas' *Bhaktirasabodhini Tika* (1712 CE)—document the events of Mira's life. Cousins' version portrays Akbar's personal pilgrimage to find the real meaning of

Truth. His encounter with Mira and her songs opened new horizons of knowledge to him. Akbar was lost in the overwhelming ecstasy of Mira's worship and was moved to comment, "Those who look shall never see/ Beyond the eye's horizon. Those who see/ Have no more need for looking" (Cousins, 1919, p. 27). The playwright seemed aware of the loose ends regarding narratives of Mira's life and cautions the audience of the same at the beginning itself. One of such misinformation is the idea that Mirabai was the wife of Rana Kumbha—the source of which has been associated with Lt Col James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829)—is mentioned in the play. Historical sources point that Kumbha was the great-grandfather of Bhojraj, the heir apparent to the throne of Mewar, and the husband of Mirabai in multiple narratives. Kumbha became furious when he learnt that a rumour was surrounding Mira that two Muslim men, identified as Akbar and Tansen have disguised themselves to see her. He summoned Mira and questions her. He was reminiscent how both of them had shared similar spiritual interests in the past and that how Mira had become negligent towards her duties as a wife and a queen. Two citizens confirmed the rumour that the Muslim men had touched the feet of Mira and had offered a necklace of precious jewels to her. Rana accused Mira of defiling Rajput honour by letting a man of another faith touch her and decreed a death warrant against her. When Mira learnt of her doomed fate, she set out to fulfill what her husband had commanded. She was stubborn in her decision and was not to be held back by anyone. She stepped forward to obey her husband and embraced her fate. What was intriguing about this portrayal of Mira was her character. She was devoted to Krishna, yet also to her husband to the extent that she accepted his punishment against his accusations. She was meek yet she showcased courage when she was at the verge of doom. She announced her liberation when the decree was issued, "I am a woman...For the first time in my life/ Solely and utterly I am myself, / And go on my own way" (Cousins, 1919, p. 84).

Eleanor Lucia Turnbull's *Little Plays from Indian History* (1931) constitutes events from historical characters. The narrative follows Rana Sanga's summon to Mira when he learnt that she had been constantly avoiding her duties as a wife and a daughter-in-law. The rage was fuelled when Sanga's wife, the queen complained of her

disregard of her duties. Even Bhojaraj, her husband, confirmed the same. Sanga sent a cup of poison which she was forced to drink but was miraculously saved. The play ended with Mira's reclamation of her *bhakti* towards Krishna. The play, although divided into two scenes, shed light on the most popular event of Mira's legend. She was portrayed as a meek, yet confident character, justifying her heroism in the face of turbulence described in multiple narratives.

Dilip Kumar Roy's plays *The Beggar Princess* (1955) and *Chaitanya and Mira* (2012) dealt with Mira legends in two different narratives. *The Beggar Princess* opened with an invocation to the Muses, similar in the case of classical epics. The Muse addressed was Mira. She identified herself as: "I, Mira, am no modern messenger, / Nor a lover of what is wafted on the surge / Of circumstance: ephemeras of foam / Glittering on the phantom strands of Time / And leaving a legacy of broken bubbles" (Roy & Devi, 1955, p. 14). The play began with the child Mira, who was seven and playing with her friends. Yogi Sanatan, a revered sage, paid her a visit and gifted her an idol of Krishna. Sanatan warned Mira's parents not to get her married, or she will be unhappy. Time passed, and Prince Bhojaraj once visited Mira and asks for her hand in marriage from her father. She was stubborn not to marry anyone, but her father, out of his concern, tricked her into agreeing to marry Bhojaraj. The next scene laid the picture when eleven years have passed after their marriage. Bhojaraj seemed supportive of Mira, but was criticised by his sister, Udaibai and his brother Vikram Singh. Both accused Mira of ill behavior for not complying with the duties of a Rajput wife and portrayed her as a woman of questionable character. Udaibai's constant questioning of Mira's character and the rumours that she spread reflected the oppression of a woman within her own family. Over time, Bhojaraj dies but Mira was adamant not to forsake her bride's apparel for the sake of widowhood, upholding the notion that she is spiritually married to Krishna and can never be a widow. Meanwhile, Akbar paid her a visit in disguise and offered her a diamond chaplet, which complicated the matter. She was severely tortured and was forced to drink poison, which miraculously did not affect her. She had a vision of Krishna asking her to go to Brindavan and find *guru* Sanatan. Two years passed by and Mira had become a mendicant by now. She had no visions of Krishna and felt dejected. At another juncture, she is even mocked

by some women at the banks of Yamuna. Moreover, a robber tried to rob her idol and hurt her. Exhausted, she decided to end her life. Dramatically, that same moment Krishna appeared and saved her. Her father, Ratan Singh found her in her 'beggar-like' state and implored her to accompany him to Merta, which she refused. She found guru Sanatan and requested him to be her guru, which he gladly accepted and the narrative comes to an end.

*Chaitanya and Mira* (2012) was more representative of a Mira who retorted and stood up to what she believed to be the true meaning of knowledge. She was challenged by four Brahmins, who tried to discourage and insult her for being a woman and questioning men. She was accused of having a loose moral character by an aristocrat, Ajit. The Brahmins, after realising Mira's knowledge that surpassed worldly notions of wisdom, apologised and addressed her as 'mother.' The characters who defied and labelled her as one of a loose character eventually became her devotee. The *bhajans* added to the beauty of the lyrics. Gurcharan Das's *Mira* (2011) was a comparatively modern rendition of Mira's life. The setting is historical though. The Mira in the play exhibited relentless devotion to her husband and expected him to reciprocate the affection. She was discouraged and subsequently turned to Krishna for reconciliation. She became immensely involved in *bhakti* and was critiqued for not complying with the norms of Rajput tradition and was forced to drink poison. She remained unaffected and sang *bhajans*.

Each portrayal of Mira in these narratives added to the evolving image of the historical princess-turned-mendicant. While there was a Mira who meekly followed what was told to her, there was also a Mira who retorted. This Mira resisted the patriarchal norms that limit a woman to her role as a domesticated woman, a silent woman. The Mira, who spoke, became the collective voice of the marginalised after she was popularised through literary renditions like these.

### **2.1 The 'Pure' and the 'Promiscuous': The Canonisation of irabai**

Multiple narratives suggest that owing to Mira's association with men of similar spiritual interests, and her defiance of traditional notions of a *pativrata*, as well as going against her *Kshatriya* roots,

she has been labelled as a woman of questionable character. The revival of Mira became crucial during the Indian freedom struggle movement when she was elevated as a poet-saint chiefly to political ends. The role of M.K. Gandhi in bringing Mirabai to the forefront of political activism was integral to understand the shift in the representation of Mirabai from a woman accused of having a questionable character to a *bhakti* poet-saint and an icon of women emancipation in Indian freedom struggle movement. Gandhi, in his public and private conversations, invoked Mira and her *bhajans*, and equated *bhakti* with service for the nation. He relentlessly emphasised the employment of *Swadeshi*. He exhorted women – the marginalised lot – to transcend their limiting private spaces and actively take part in the movement to make India economically independent, for which he employed the instances of female figures from Indian scriptures such as Mirabai, Sita, Draupadi and Radha among others. He equated their suffering and perseverance to that of the marginalised populace and encouraged them to produce their own goods. By bringing Mirabai and other significant figures from history, he propelled a cultural renaissance that encouraged women emancipation in colonial Indian society. Service became an essential tool for the liberation of the marginalised, especially women, and it was through them, that Gandhi envisioned a liberated nation.

Hanuman is one such mythological character that becomes synonymous to selfless service and hence, *bhakti* in Gandhian discourse. In a letter to Kasturba Gandhi (13-14 March 1934), he narrated a fictional story, made popular through time, about Hanuman and his exemplary *bhakti* towards Rama: “There was no need for Hanuman to tear open his chest in order to show his *bhakti*...His *bhakti* was not for show. Nor did it require expression in words. Service itself constituted *bhakti* for him” (CWMG, Vol. 63, p. 276). Gandhi equated *bhakti* with service/ *karma*. For instance, during a speech on *Swadeshi* at a woman’s meeting in Nadiad (6<sup>th</sup> July 1919), he stated, “Telling the beads in temple is dharma, but at the present time real *bhakti* consists in this work of cloth” (CWMG, Vol. 18, p. 191). His ideology of *Swadeshi* was achievable only through one’s undivided attention to his *karma yoga*, and through that *bhakti*. In a letter to Ramdas Gandhi (7<sup>th</sup> November 1932), he admitted that “*Bhakti* means selfless service of every living



creature" (CWMG, Vol. 57, p. 357) and in another letter to Kasturba Gandhi (1<sup>st</sup> January 1934) he wrote, "There could be no *bhakti* without service" (CWMG, Vol.62, p. 364). There was an interplay of action (*karma*) and devotion (*bhakti*) in Gandhi's dialogues and he skilfully infused both to suggest a redemption, which was equated with the liberation of the nation, attainable only if one follows his/her duty (*dharma*). Gandhi derived instances from Hindu scriptures, altered them and appropriated them. History itself became a suspect, and in Mirabai's case, it was Gandhi who became the embodiment of this paradox.

The Mira in Gandhi's imagination was an ideal woman, wife and devotee, all-enduring and docile: "I do believe it as literally true that Mirabai never felt the pains inflicted upon her at the instance of her husband. Her love of God and conscious repetition of that precious name kept her cheerful for ever" (CWMG, 1999, Vol.25, p. 376). The qualities of an ideal wife that Gandhi propagated was paradoxical when he promoted qualities of non-cooperation with submissiveness to patriarchal norms. He wrote, "Mirabai has shown the way. The wife has a perfect right to take her own course and meekly brave the consequences when she knows herself to be in the right and when her resistance is for a nobler purpose" (CWMG, 1999, Vol. 36, p. 416). Such contradictory notions of an ideal feminine character was problematic owing to the inherent patriarchal codes of conduct it aimed to restore, and Gandhi seemed to be an advocate of such a social order. It can be argued that it was Gandhi, who, in his public speeches and private conversations publicised Mira as a 'saint' challenging her promiscuous image and taking this saint to Indian home front for the emancipation of women.

By transgressing the 'promiscuous' to create the 'pure', Gandhi entered the homefront of political activism, but his views remained ambiguous. Debali Mookerjea-Leonard in the essay "to be pure or not to be: Gandhi, women and the Partition of India" (2010) wrote in this regard:

Gandhi's nationalism, however, represents a partial democratisation of the earlier patriarchal fixation with women's chastity...The virtue of chastity is complemented by the Gandhian virtue of labour,

though, again, of quasi-domestic variety (he censured wage labour for women fearing their loss of chastity)...The interlacing of nationalism, religion, chastity and economics together with their shades of the sentimental provided a formula whose mass appeal was guaranteed. Thus using a virtue-discourse as an alibi to promote an economic programme, Gandhi simultaneously policed the publicness of women (pp. 44–45).

Parita Mukta (1994) wrote in a similar vein where she differentiated between the 'people's Mira' and the Mira of Gandhi's imagination, and how Gandhi appropriated her image. Mukta's work primarily dealt with the community formation around the life and legend of Mirabai and factors responsible for it. She wrote:

Mira's challenge to the princes, her sharp rejection of patriarchal political authority was deeply threatening to Gandhism, as it sought to negate existing unequal relations not through entering into a process of negotiation and change with them, but through repudiating these and embarking upon a radical restructuring of relationships. Mira's challenge and her subversion of the social order were contained by Gandhi, and her life and message were given a different twist by him (p. 188).

The debate of the pure and the promiscuous persists. The need to liberate Mira from the accusations and ostracism entails the need to introduce her to a larger socio-political realm for Gandhi and other popular spokespersons reorganised a social order where women, from within the thresholds of their home-fronts rooted in patriarchal codes of conduct would contribute to the making of a moral nation. Akshaya Kumar (2007) sums up the Mira popularised by Gandhi when he states:

Gandhi's 'Mira' then performs so many cultural functions. She becomes an appropriate embodiment of non-masculine effeminate (yet very much patriarchal) nationalism, championed and practiced by Gandhi. It is through the enabling metaphor of

Meera that Gandhi bridges the civilizational differences between the East and the West. With Meera being the locus of both the self and the other within the same tradition, the whole postcolonial polemics of a civilizational Other is done away with (p. 180).

## 2.2 Popular Reception of Mirabai

The contemporary image of Mirabai revived and experimented in popular art, culture, and literature is quite distinctive. There are movies on Mirabai like the Tamil rendition of her life titled *Meera* (1945) starring M.S. Subbulakshmi, a Hindi version of which was released in 1947. The movie established M.S. Subbulakshmi as a national celebrity, and her association with Gandhi had propelled a cultural renaissance in India. Gulzar's version of the same came in 1979 starring Hema Malini and was also titled *Meera*. Both the movies have Akbar as one of the central characters, which is a topic of debate among scholars to date. There are temples dedicated to Mirabai at Chittor, Rajasthan and Mathura, Uttar Pradesh. There are also websites named after her legacy that deal with yoga, meditation, self and spiritual development, paintings, and sculptures that have become cult art in many cultures and places, especially in north-India. There is a substantial body of literature attributed to her.

Modern versions of Mira are created in works such as Kiran Nagarkar's novel *Cuckold* (1997), told from the point of view of the husband of Mirabai, which is also indicative of how the story of Mirabai thrives through the ages. Contemporary novelists such as K. R. Meera and Parul Mehta Patel have based their novels on the theme of love and separation derived from the life and legend of Mirabai. The popular movie director Mira Nair has named her production house, *Mirabai Films*, which chiefly focuses on the question of women in society. Besides, there are also *bhajans* of Mirabai sung by M. S. Subbulakshmi and others which have been popularised in recent times. However, one of the most engaging and appropriated pictures of Mirabai appears in the comic version of the poet-saint's life in *Amar Chitra Katha* that appeared in 1972. The movie version of Mirabai's life has its own share of

manipulations, targeting an audience undergoing some sort of political or socio-economic unrest. Texts like these have become the object of the politics of representation.

A major turning point in the representation of Mirabai comes with Gandhi and other popular spokespersons of the Indian freedom struggle movement when they employ the religious symbolism of Mira to achieve political ends. Sister Nivedita (1867-1911), one of the leading female icons of the Indian freedom struggle movement wrote of Mira's influence on Swami Vivekananda:

On Tuesday he [Vivekananda] came once more to our little camp to the midday meal. Towards the end, it began to rain heavily enough to prevent his return, and he took up Tod's *History of Rajasthan* which was lying near, and drifted into talk of Mira Bai. "Two-thirds of the national ideas now in Bengal," he said, "have been gathered from this book." But the episode of Mira Bai, the queen who would not be queen, but would wander the world with the lovers of Krishna, was always his favourite, even in Tod" (Nivedita, 1967, pp. 356-357).

Moreover, the Mirabai in Vivekananda's conversations became a site of rebellion and emancipation against atrocities and authoritarianism, which he equated with British colonialism. The non-conformist self of Mirabai reflected in her intense *bhakti* towards Krishna was used and projected time and again as a metaphor of freedom struggle encouraging non-compliance among the general populace against the British imperialism by political leaders.

Critical works on Mirabai done by scholars, both Indian and otherwise, act as a turning point in the scholarship of Mirabai and *bhakti* studies. Parita Mukta's *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai*(1994) documents the mechanism of how the legend of Mirabai has been perpetuated through her *bhajans* and the ones composed in her name by people who relate with her story, devotion, and sufferings within the north-Indian social and cultural context. These people are the marginalised communities consisting of people belonging to the lower castes, widows,

artisans, and peasants. John Stratton Hawley's *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas and Kabir in Their Times and Ours* (2005) is another seminal text in the reading of Mirabai in which Hawley provides a detailed analysis of Mirabai in four contexts: the history of Mirabai in "Mirabai in Manuscript", Mirabai as a wife within the institution of marriage and an ascetic in yogic context in "Mirabai as Wife and Yogi", the appropriation of Mirabai in "The Saints Subdued in *Amar Chitra Katha*" and Mirabai, devotion and the question of gender within *bhakti* canon in "Krishna and the Gender of longing." He also provides a deep analysis of how the image of Mirabai was appropriated to suit a readership in a crucial time of national integration, the same way Gandhi appropriated her figure to satisfy a nation at distress. The text also reproduces translated poems of Mirabai in English by Hawley himself. The anthologies of Mira's poetry have been an integral source of her popularity within the global spiritual canon. Parshuram Chaturvedi's *Miranbai Ki Padavali* (1966) is one of the seminal texts taken up by authors such as J. S. Hawley and Mark Jeurgensmeyer for translation of Mira's verses into English, which also lays the ground in Mirabai scholarship. Mirabai, in popular culture therefore becomes an ever-evolving force of dissent through which hegemonic tendencies and oppressive social orders are critiqued and questioned.

### 3. Conclusion

Mira thrives, she lives through folk art, popular culture, songs of the oppressed, and becomes evident in the contemporary literary and social discourse. Her name transcends time and space and is employed to challenge hierarchical architectures of caste, class, religion, gender, and patriarchy. By labelling Mira as an exemplary woman, Gandhi brought in, the question of Indian women in general. His heroines were deftly picked from the ghettos, from the peripheries of the social structure where there were people who needed representation, people who needed a 'representative'. It was at this juncture that Gandhi reflected the kind of women he thought the Indian nation needed: meek, docile, perseverant, patient, noble, and forgiving. This 'ideal, emblematic woman' was everything but real. Ironically, this idiosyncrasy only fueled patriarchy. The class conflict also remained unresolved. The

shifting, rather evolving image of Mira finds reconciliation in the struggles of the marginalised, and their expression of dissent through *bhajans* attributed to her memory becomes a working device of non-conformity and personal devotion of a community.

Memory becomes an integral aspect of Mira worship in contemporary Indian society. It is through the memory of this princess-turned-mendicant that her legacy and compositions are kept alive and is perpetuated in public spheres transgressing time and space. The universality of Mira and her *bhakti* flourish in the realm of cultural discourse where the appropriated image of her persona is placed at a pedestal for the public. As in the hagiographies where she is hailed as a woman renouncing the pleasures of worldly life, or in 'nationalist' discourse, where she is elevated to the status of a 'saint'. The image of Mirabai fed to the contemporary audience is indicative of how the image of a woman and her being is perceived and looked at in the Indian patriarchal society. The Mira, thus obtained is a hybrid-product of multiple narratives intersecting at a point where human suffering is sought as a path to personal salvation, through *bhakti* and the challenges it entails and the social order it disintegrates.

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