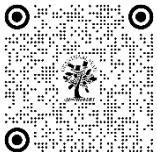


MIRABAI AND TULSIDAS: MYSTICAL VOICES OF THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the mystical themes in the poetry of Mirabai and Tulsidas, two of the most powerful voices of the Indian Bhakti movement. It studies how each poet expresses devotion, longing, and union with the divine in their own way. Mirabai's poetry is emotional and fearless. She speaks of Krishna as a lover, a friend, and the only one who matters (One who is infinite: a cosmic energy). Her poetry often rejects social rules and express spiritual freedom. Tulsidas, on the other hand, writes with humility. He turns to Rama (a supreme manifestation of Cosmic Energy) with deep faith, following the path of service, discipline, and remembrance. The paper offers a close reading of their mystical ideas using selected poems. It shows how Mirabai's devotion is yoked by dance, song, and submission, while Tulsidas finds grace through prayer, repentance, and service. Both poets use simple language and rich symbols to describe what cannot be fully explained. Their poetry is not just about belief—it is a lived experience of the divine. By comparing their voices, this study reveals the wide range of Bhakti spirituality. It shows that mysticism is not limited to silence or solitude. It can also be found in music, longing, protest, and poetry.

Keywords: Bhakti, Mirabai, Tulsidas, Poetry, Spirituality, Mysticism, Devotion

1. INTRODUCTION

Bhakti is a moment that demands everything, a moment that is eternal - grace enshrines within from beyond. This is not an act to woo gods in havens but to live for dissolving in the divine no matter what happens. A Bhakta who practices Bhakti has no navigation as to where he is headed, yet he feels fulfilled. "Experientially, the condition is as old as time. Historically, the movement had its identifiable moment of emergence on the Indian subcontinent – an exuberant birthing that assumed the proportions of a tidal wave that crashed across the great barrier reefs of region and language, caste and class." (A. Subramaniam et al.)

The Bhakti movement emerged in the Indian subcontinent between the 6th and 9th centuries and was at its peak around the 15th century. The movement's influence was so powerful that it took over and around the entire subcontinent. The widespread was such that devotees were across various regions speaking different languages. Devotees sprung in from various castes without any hesitation about differences in class. The movement is known to

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have originated in the Hindu religion, yet it is felt that the essence of Bhakti goes beyond religion and towards liberation through spirituality. Those days practising spirituality and religious practices were far-fetched for the masses as the language of religious texts and scriptures was in the Sanskrit language. Sanskrit was considered the language of scholars and pundits and was not used in day-to-day life. When thirst grew among the ordinary people to seek spiritual refuge, they turned to their native languages instead of Sanskrit to voice their devotion. The movement began when these commoners dared to give their voices to their longings. These people were less interested in what ancient wisdom had to impart. They were about expressing their outpour, clamouring within them of their devotion to their gods. This was how the bhakta was born. 'When people experience something beautiful within themselves, the first urge is to burst forth into poetry.' (Sadhguru) It is natural that when something bigger and more beautiful experience happens within people, they tend to sing and write melodious poems to praise and document such beautiful experiences. Similarly, those bhaktas poured their emotions into poems and songs. Poetry became a powerful medium for expressing their mystical experiences and personal devotion. The poems had a variety of personal emotions, all towards their gods. They sang joyfully for finding refuge in their gods and lamented the sorrow of being far away from him. They even cursed for not being fulfilled and celebrated their God's grace. Bhaktas praised their devotion in many ways through composing poetry. At times, poems were loud for complaining and cursing. Compositions were even written in lust for their gods. Moreover, sometimes they sang in embarrassment of what they felt and did in devotion. Experiences and devotion being of whatever nature, a bhakta always voiced his Bhakti through poetry and many more means.

Two such icons of the Bhakti movement were Mirabai and Tulsidas. Both these figures are truly significant for their contribution to the Bhakti movement. They were a part of Vaishnava culture, devotees of Lord Vishnu and his incarnations. Specifically, Mirabai composed and sang Bhajans (devotional hymns) as devotion to her Girdhar Gopal (Lord Krishna). However, Tulsidas wrote ardently in devotion to Lord Rama. Their prominence as Bhakti poets is well-known and admired all around the world. Both these mystics existed around the same time in history and sang in praise of Lord Vishnu's incarnations, yet they had distinctive voices. Mirabai's bhajans were of despair and ecstatic union with her beloved 'Dark One,' and Tulsidas wrote Ramcharitmanas, a retelling of the Ramayana in the Avadhi dialect of medieval Hindi, and the Vinaya Patrika in Brajbhasha. Her unwavering devotion to Krishna characterises Mirabai's poetry. In her poems, she is often portrayed as Krishna's bride; for him, she has left everything – her husband, family, and society. Her poems seldom challenge societal norms, particularly regarding gender roles, by emphasising personal spiritual experience over traditional authority. When she was denied her Lord's devotion by her in-laws and society, she defied everything and everyone in her way of Bhakti towards her Lord. She resisted through her passionate devotion, as seen in her poetry. Tulsidas used the word Das in his name – meaning 'a servant.' His devotion was like a servant for his Lord Rama. He always praised and celebrated the life and deeds of Lord Rama in his verses. His poetry is characterised by its rich use of metaphors and similes. The poems seek to inculcate moral and spiritual values by depicting Rama's life and teachings. Tulsidas' compositions were narrative-driven and depicted structured devotion.

The devotional poetry of Meerabai and Tulsidas significantly enriched Indian literature. Their poetry promotes Bhakti ideals of love, devotion, and social justice. The study underscores their poetry's enduring impact on shaping India's spiritual and cultural fabric. It is, therefore, valuable to explore the mystical voices of these iconic figures of the medieval era side by side. Even though having contrasting approaches in their paths of Bhakti, they both portrayed immense levels of intensity while voicing their passionate devotion. This quality demands a study to explore themes of mysticism and Bhakti in their works. Since the study is exploratory, the paper does not aim to test a hypothesis. The paper focuses on deepening the understanding of how mystical experience is conveyed in their poetry. Analysing their devotionally profound verses through the lens of mysticism can showcase how those saint poets used their minds and energies. This can help us understand how their mystical approach placed them on the path of intense Bhakti and integrity towards their pursuit. Until now, we have understood that Bhakti is not a simple path to walk on; it is an intricately complex path. Being in Bhakti requires integrity and willingness to go up to any level, which these mystics showed through their poetry. Moreover, the paper attempts to contribute to broader discussions on mysticism and the cultural legacy of the Bhakti movement. Numerous saint poets and mystics have existed throughout the Indian subcontinents during the Bhakti movement, and we show gratitude for their contributions. Their legacy has enriched the culture of being nearer to God. The movement helped many Bhaktas to voice their devotion through such icons. This paper attempts to promote and glorify that achievement and explore it in more depth.

We have classified the approach to analyse the poetry and conduct the research through a strategic pathway. The researchers performed a thorough close reading of the selected texts. Reading has helped identify the necessary texts and understand their significance for the study. Literary and Thematic analyses are the cornerstones while discussing

literary material and conducting qualitative research. Literary analysis will help translate the authors' use of literary devices, structure, language, and other techniques to convey their ideas. Similarly, employing thematic analysis will yield the recurring themes and emotions embedded within the text. Since we have dared to analyse the legendary works of icons, we have even tried a comparative analysis of the selected works of Mirabai and Tulsidas. It is true that they belonged to the same movement and even existed approximately during similar periods; their goals were on the same lines to attain their gods through Bhakti, but their way seems different. So, to understand their paths and style of devotion, we also undertook a comparative analysis. The scope of this study focuses mainly on the selected works of the authors. While analysing their content-rich work, we do not shift our primary focus to analysing their personal lives. It may refer to some significant events of their lives at some junctures just for understanding and explanation. The paper focuses on close reading of two poetic verses from each of Mirabai and Tulsidas' works. The verses selected from Mirabai's poetic collections are 'I dance wearing ankle-bells' and 'Only Girdhar is mine.' The verses selected from Tulsidas' poetic collections are 'I have wasted much' and 'Raghuvir grants the tilak bright.'

This paper is structured to guide the reader through a layered exploration of mysticism in the poetry of Mirabai and Tulsidas. Following this introduction, the literature review will map existing scholarly perspectives on their poetic contributions and mystical expressions. The theoretical framework section will establish key mysticism and Bhakti poetics concepts. Subsequent sections will provide a detailed analysis of Mirabai's and Tulsidas's selected poems, focusing on themes, imagery, and devotional intensity. A comparative discussion will then highlight their shared spiritual ethos and individual nuances, leading to a reflective conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

From the 7th to the 17th centuries, the Bhakti movement marked a significant transformation in Indian religious and literary landscapes. It emphasised personal devotion (Bhakti) over ritualistic practices and challenged established social hierarchies. John Stratton Hawley, in *Three Bhakti Voices*, underscores the movement's role in democratising spiritual expression, noting that "Bhakti poets like Mirabai and Tulsidas articulated a deeply personal connection with the divine, transcending social and religious boundaries" (Hawley 15). Karen Pechilis further elaborates on the movement's inclusivity, highlighting how it provided a platform for marginalised voices, especially women, to express their spiritual experiences (Pechilis 22).

Understanding the mystical elements in Bhakti poetry necessitates engaging with foundational theories of mysticism. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James identifies key characteristics of mystical experiences, such as ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity (James 380). These attributes resonate with the intense spiritual experiences depicted in Bhakti literature. Evelyn Underhill, in her seminal work *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, outlines a five-stage process of the mystical journey: awakening, purification, illumination, the dark night of the soul, and union with the divine (Underhill 81). These stages provide a lens through which the spiritual trajectories of Mirabai and Tulsidas can be examined.

However, applying Western frameworks to Indian mysticism requires caution. R.C. Zaehner, in *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*, emphasises the distinctiveness of Indian mystical traditions, arguing that "the Indian approach to mysticism is deeply intertwined with its metaphysical and philosophical doctrines" (Zaehner 45). Similarly, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, in *Indian Philosophy*, asserts that Indian mysticism is characterised by its emphasis on self-realisation and the unity of the individual soul with the universal spirit (Radhakrishnan 112).

Mirabai, a 16th-century Rajput princess, defied societal norms through her unwavering devotion to Lord Krishna. Her poetry reflects a deep yearning for union with the divine, often employing metaphors of romantic love to convey spiritual longing. Nancy M. Martin, in her book *Mirabai: The Making of a Saint*, discusses how Mirabai's songs "transform personal suffering into a source of spiritual strength, challenging patriarchal structures" (Martin 67). Vidya Dehejia, in *Slaves of the Lord*, highlights Mirabai's use of the feminine voice to assert spiritual autonomy, noting that "her verses subvert traditional gender roles by portraying a woman who chooses divine love over worldly obligations" (Dehejia 89).

Mirabai's poetry is replete with mystical elements. In the poem "O Friends," she writes, "I have found the only being who can console me—my Lord Krishna" (Mirabai, qtd. in Hirshfield). This line exemplifies the intimate relationship she seeks with the divine, transcending the boundaries of the material world.

Tulsidas, a contemporary of Mirabai, is renowned for his epic poem *Ramcharitmanas*, which retells the story of Lord Rama in the vernacular Awadhi language. Its devotional fervour and philosophical depth characterise his work. Philip

Lutgendorf, in *The Life of a Text*, explores how Tulsidas's composition "serves not only as a religious text but also as a cultural artefact that shapes and reflects the values of its audience" (Lutgendorf 102). Ramchandra Gandhi, in *Sita's Kitchen*, interprets Tulsidas's portrayal of Rama as an embodiment of dharma (righteousness), emphasising the moral and ethical dimensions of his devotion (Gandhi 58).

While Tulsidas's approach to mysticism is more structured than Mirabai's emotive expressions, his work still encapsulates profound spiritual insights. In *Ramcharitmanas*, he writes, "The name of Rama is the bridge to cross the ocean of worldly existence" (Tulsidas, *Ramcharitmanas* 1.45). This metaphor underscores the transformative power of devotion in achieving spiritual liberation.

Despite the rich corpus of literature on Mirabai and Tulsidas individually, comparative studies examining their mystical expressions are limited. Most existing research tends to analyse their works in isolation, often focusing on specific themes such as gender in Mirabai's poetry or moral philosophy in Tulsidas's writings. This paper aims to bridge this gap by exploring the convergences and divergences in their mystical voices, offering a nuanced understanding of their contributions to the Bhakti movement.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The poetic expression of mysticism in Indian literature, particularly in the works of Mirabai and Tulsidas, invites an interdisciplinary reading. It is not enough to approach these poems as religious or literary texts. Instead, they must be studied at the intersection of theology, literary criticism, gender studies, and spiritual philosophy. This theoretical framework aims to outline the key concepts and scholarly perspectives that shape the analysis of the selected devotional poems in this research.

3.1. UNDERSTANDING MYSTICISM: A JOURNEY BEYOND WORDS

Mysticism refers to a deeply personal experience of the Divine or Absolute Reality—an experience that often defies rational explanation or conventional language. In his classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James identifies four central features of mystical states: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. He writes, "They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect" (James 371). The mystical experience, he suggests, feels more like a revelation than a thought, and it comes with a sense of authority and clarity that cannot be fully communicated to others.

In Indian spiritual traditions, such experiences are not limited to silent meditation or abstract contemplation. Instead, they are embodied through poetic utterance and emotional devotion. Particularly within the Bhakti movement, mysticism is not an escape from the world but a deeply engaged, emotional connection with a personal God. Here, the Divine is not abstract or formless but intimately present, approached with love, longing, and surrender. Edwin Bryant explains that Bhakti Yoga is "the cultivation of an intense, intimate, and often emotionally charged relationship with the personal God" (Bryant 23). This relationship—whether expressed as friend, lover, child, or servant—becomes the central axis of a mystic's life and poetry.

3.2. BHAKTI MYSTICISM: EMOTION, SURRENDER, AND DIVINE RELATIONALITY

The Bhakti tradition offers a distinct form of mysticism grounded in personal devotion. It represents a spiritual path where love and surrender are valued and seen as transformative. In contrast to the impersonal liberation sought in many strands of Indian philosophy, Bhakti emphasises emotional engagement and relational proximity with the Divine.

This tradition is rich in metaphorical language, using everyday relationships—between spouses, friends, parents, or servants—to describe the bond between the devotee and God. Bryant notes that "the emotional texture of these relationships creates a dynamic framework for the devotee's longing, joy, suffering, and fulfilment" (Bryant 36). Mirabai's songs, for instance, present Krishna as her divine husband, lover, and even her only faithful companion. Tulsidas, meanwhile, often depicts himself as the humble servant of Rama, yearning for the grace of his Lord.

A helpful framework within Bhakti is the *Navadha Bhakti* model, derived from the *Bhagavata Purana*. It describes nine forms of devotion: listening to stories about God (*śravaṇa*), singing His name (*kīrtana*), remembering Him (*smarana*), serving Him (*dāsyā*), and relating to Him as a friend (*sakhya*), among others. These forms of devotion are not

theoretical constructs but lived spiritual practices that manifest vividly in the poetry of both Mirabai and Tulsidas. For example, Tulsidas's declaration—"There is no refuge but in Rama's name,"—echoes the depth of smarana, while Mirabai's lines—"I have found the Lord; I will never let Him go"—reveal the intensity of complete surrender.

3.3. COMPARATIVE MYSTICISM: EVELYN UNDERHILL'S FIVE-STAGE MODEL

This study draws from Evelyn Underhill's comparative mystical model to further understand the spiritual progression within the poetry. In *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, Underhill outlines five stages: awakening, purification, illumination, the dark night of the soul, and union. She argues, "Mysticism is the art of union with Reality" (Underhill 81), emphasising that a profound inner transformation often marks this union.

This five-stage model proves particularly useful in mapping the emotional and spiritual development of the poet-speakers in Mirabai and Tulsidas's works. For example, in Tulsidas's verse, "I have wasted my life in futile desires," one can sense the awakening—a realisation of worldly illusion. His subsequent immersion in Rama's name reflects the stage of purification. Likewise, Mirabai's poetry often moves through these stages. Her deep yearning, as in "The world sleeps; I alone remain awake, remembering Him," reflects the pain of separation and the dark night of the soul. However, the same longing becomes a joyful union: "My pain has turned into eternal joy. I have merged into Krishna's name." Though not always linear, the stages offer a compelling framework for interpreting the mystical depth of their poetry.

3.4. FEMININE MYSTICISM: MIRABAI'S DEFIANCE AND DEVOTION

Mirabai's mysticism is also inherently gendered. As a female saint-poet living in a patriarchal society, her devotion was not only a spiritual path but also a form of resistance. Her choice to renounce royal life, reject marital obligations, and publicly sing of her love for Krishna was radical for her time. Karen Pechilis explains that "female bhakti saints expressed their devotion through embodied practices—singing, dancing, composing poems—which disrupted the dominant male religious discourse" (Pechilis 14).

In one poem, Mirabai boldly declares, "I will not listen to the elders; I will sing of my Lord." This line encapsulates her rejection of social constraints and the assertion of her spiritual agency. According to June McDaniel, female mystics like Mirabai often navigated a complex terrain where their inner experiences of divine love gave them the strength to confront societal expectations: "Their spirituality was at once a form of surrender and a declaration of autonomy" (McDaniel 112). In this sense, Mirabai's mysticism is not a private emotional journey alone but a public spiritual stance, a radical act of choosing divine love over worldly obedience.

3.5. SACRED LANGUAGE AND POETIC EXPRESSION: THE INEFFABLE MADE IMAGINABLE

Mystical experience often exceeds the boundaries of language. However, paradoxically, many mystics choose poetry as their medium of expression. With its rich use of metaphor, paradox, and symbolism, poetry becomes the most fitting form to communicate what cannot be said directly. Denis Donoghue points out, "Mystical poetry is a language that suggests a silence deeper than itself" (Donoghue 57). In other words, the mystic words do not aim to explain but to evoke the experience of the sacred.

In Bhakti poetry, specific images carry a spiritual charge. The lotus feet symbolise the object of surrender. The flute becomes a call of divine attraction. The bee, hovering around a flower, becomes a metaphor for the soul drawn to divine nectar. Mirabai's line—"I am the bee and Krishna the lotus"—is a perfect example. These images do more than beautify the verse; they embody mystical states and convey spiritual truths through the imagination. Tulsidas, too, uses layered poetic devices to convey the rasalila, or divine play, where devotion is simultaneously playful, intense, and sacred.

In this way, the poetic process becomes an act of devotion itself. Language is transformed into prayer. Through metaphor, the ineffable is made imaginable. Moreover, the poet, whether Mirabai or Tulsidas, becomes both a lover and a seer.

4. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

4.1. DIVINE LONGING AND SPIRITUAL YEARNING

An intense longing for divine union lies at the heart of Mirabai and Tulsidas's poetry. This yearning is not abstract but emotional, sensory, and deeply personal. Mirabai's verse, "I dance wearing ankle-bells," reveals a love so consuming that the speaker becomes oblivious to worldly constraints: "The darkness of the night, the barking of dogs—I do not care. My only concern is to meet my Beloved" (qtd. in Hawley and Juergensmeyer 115). Her longing is saturated with *viraha bhakti*—the devotion born of separation, a hallmark of *Saguna Bhakti* mysticism, where the absence of God intensifies the experience of love (Hawley and Wulff 36).

This theme is not limited to Mirabai's emotional effusions. In his poem "I Have Wasted Much," Tulsidas expresses a quieter but equally profound regret: "Much of my life has gone to waste, O Ram, while I remained in illusion." This mirrors the initial phase in Evelyn Underhill's mystic journey—the awakening when the soul becomes aware of its spiritual negligence and is stirred to action (Underhill 169). Tulsidas's lamentation expresses that moment of turning inward, where spiritual yearning begins to displace worldly desire.

As William James observed, mystical experience often includes a sense of "objective truth" and *noetic* quality—"states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect" (James 371). Both poets exhibit this quality through their lyrical declarations, where spiritual longing takes the form of wisdom.

4.2. RENUNCIATION OF WORLDLY TIES

Another powerful theme in both poets' work is the conscious rejection of worldly attachments. In the poem "Only Girdhar is Mine," Mirabai declares: "I have no need of family or caste. Girdhar is my husband; he is all I need." This direct renunciation of marital, social, and caste obligations was a radical statement for a woman of her time. As Karen Pechilis argues, Mirabai redefined *Bhakti* as a "devotional autonomy" that refused to bow to the domestic roles imposed on women (Pechilis 107). Her mysticism becomes both spiritual practice and social defiance.

Tulsidas, too, turns away from material distractions, though his renunciation is more devotional than rebellious. In the couplet, "Tulsidas grinds the sandalwood—Raghuvir grants the tilak bright," the image of grinding sandalwood at Chitrakoot's ghats is symbolic. It represents the humility of service, where ego is ground down through devotion. Ramchandra Gandhi explains, "This grinding is not mechanical; it is sacramental. It marks the transformation of the self through divine labour" (Gandhi 111).

Both poets exhibit a movement from the outer world to the inner realm. Their works show that renunciation in the *Bhakti* tradition is not about withdrawal but re-orienting love toward God.

4.3. INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DIVINE

Mirabai and Tulsidas depict a profoundly personal relationship with God that transcends ritual and doctrine. For Mirabai, Krishna is more than a deity—he is a friend, husband, and beloved. Her love for Krishna is possessive and exclusive, as seen in "Only Girdhar is Mine," where she says, "Others may say what they want—I belong only to Him." This reflects the *Bhakti* model of *sakhya* (friendship) and *madhura* (romantic) devotion described in the *Bhagavata Purana*, where the soul relates to God through intimate emotional roles (Rao 57).

Tulsidas's devotion is equally personal, though expressed through *dāsyā bhava*, the sentiment of servitude. In "I Have Wasted Much," he addresses Rama with reverence and vulnerability, seeking forgiveness and acceptance. His couplet about Chitrakoot reflects the moment where service culminates in grace: the Lord marks him with tilak, a sacred sign of recognition. Hawley notes that Tulsidas's Rama is not an abstract icon but "a loving sovereign who responds to every tear, every utterance" (Hawley 72).

These relationships are central to *Bhakti* mysticism—they humanise the divine and sanctify the personal. God is no longer remote or formless but is brought close through emotion, memory, and intimate dialogue.

4.4. POETRY AS MYSTICAL PRACTICE

For both poets, poetry becomes an act of devotion—a way of touching the divine. Their verses are not mere reflections but vehicles for spiritual experience. Mirabai's songs often employ musical rhythms, metaphor, and repetition—stylistic choices that turn language into liturgy. For instance, when she sings, "I dance wearing ankle-bells," the physical act of dance becomes inseparable from the spiritual ecstasy of being in divine presence. As June McDaniel notes, "For female mystics, the body often became the site of devotion—the dancing, weeping, singing body enacted the soul's journey" (McDaniel 136).

Tulsidas's poetry serves a similar function. Though composed in the vernacular, his language carries the weight of scripture. His deliberate choice to write in Awadhi (instead of Sanskrit) was part of a mystical mission—to democratise spiritual access. "He brought the divine to the doorsteps of the common folk," writes Gandhi, "not through sermons, but through syllables soaked in love" (Gandhi 94). Chanting his verses is a spiritual practice of remembering and invoking Rama's name.

Thus, for both poets, poetry is not merely expression but participation in the divine. Through words, they weep, love, rebel, and ultimately merge with the sacred.

5. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS ON MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

Mirabai and Tulsidas both lived in deeply devotional eras, but their mystical experiences and how they expressed them show unique differences. What connects them is their unwavering love and longing for God. However, how they talk about that love—their tone, the images they use, and their spiritual path—differs in deep and meaningful ways.

5.1. PERSONAL VS. SCRIPTURAL MYSTICISM

Mirabai's poetry is rooted in personal experience. Her relationship with Krishna is emotional, direct, and deeply intimate. She rarely refers to sacred texts or scriptures. Instead, she speaks straight from her heart. For her, Krishna is not an abstract god but her closest companion, lover, and reason for living. In her poem "I dance wearing ankle-bells," she writes:

"My veil is off, I've torn my sari to pieces" (Mirabai qtd. in Hawley and Juergensmeyer 140).

This one line tells us a lot. She is not afraid to go against norms. She leaves behind modesty and tradition to dance freely for her beloved Krishna. Her mysticism is physical, emotional, and honest. She experiences the divine in her very body.

In contrast, Tulsidas' mysticism is more rooted in scripture, especially in the Ramcharitmanas, his retelling of the Ramayana. His poems often echo traditional teachings and moral values. He invokes the name of Rama as a path to salvation. In his poem "I Have Wasted Much," he laments:

"O foolish mind, you clung to the world, forgot the Name. Rama is the only boat to cross this dark ocean."

This shows his reliance on divine memory (smarana) and repetition of the holy name (nāma japa) as tools for spiritual progress. Tulsidas believes that discipline and devotion, grounded in dharma and sacred text, lead to liberation (Lutgendorf 223).

5.2. TONE AND VOICE

Mirabai's tone is bold and passionate. Her poems are filled with emotional outbursts. She weeps, she sings, she laughs, and she complains. She talks to Krishna like a friend or husband who sometimes ignores her. In "Only Girdhar Is Mine," she writes:

"My family abandoned me, but Girdhar did not. I drank the pain and called it love" (Mirabai qtd. in Hawley 128).

The line is powerful. It shows how she turned her suffering into something sacred. Her faith is tested, but she clings to it. Her voice is not just that of a devotee but also that of a woman fighting for her right to love.

Tulsidas' tone, in comparison, is calm and composed. He often writes in a reflective and humble voice. He scolds himself for being too attached to the world and always seeks forgiveness. He positions himself as a servant (dāsa), not a lover. His goal is to serve Rama and live a life of devotion. He writes:

"Tulsidas grinds the sandalwood – Raghuvir grants the tilak bright."

This couplet tells us about his humility. He does the work; God blesses. He never claims direct union with Rama. He serves silently and hopes for divine grace (Lutgendorf 241).

5.3. FEMININE VS. MASCULINE MYSTICISM

Mirabai's mysticism carries a strong feminine energy. She uses metaphors of the body, longing, and love. Her relationship with Krishna is often like that of a woman waiting for her husband. She uses emotional and physical metaphors to talk about union with God. As Karen Pechilis writes, Mirabai's poetry reveals "a woman's embodied yearning for the divine beloved" (Pechilis 112).

Tulsidas, on the other hand, represents a more masculine model of mysticism. His poems reflect structure, discipline, and moral order. He sees Rama not as a lover but as an ideal king, teacher, and protector. His spiritual path involves following duties, reading scriptures, and serving others.

5.4. DEVOTION AS PROTEST VS. DEVOTION AS ORDER

Mirabai's devotion can be seen as a form of rebellion. She left behind her palace, rejected her in-laws, and sang in public places. In a society where women were expected to be quiet and obedient, she chose the divine over domestic life. Her songs are full of pain, but they are also full of courage. As June McDaniel writes, "devotion for women mystics is not submission but liberation" (McDaniel 184).

Tulsidas, in contrast, seeks to restore order through his devotion. He believes in social harmony, ethical living, and obedience to dharma. His mysticism is not about breaking away from society but improving it. He wants people to find peace through faith in Rama.

5.5. INNER UNION VS. ETHICAL DEVOTION

Mirabai aims for emotional and spiritual union with Krishna. She wants to lose herself in him. Her poems describe states of ecstasy, longing, and bliss. For her, love is the path and the goal. In many of her verses, she speaks of dancing with Krishna, laughing with him, or feeling his absence so deeply it becomes a spiritual madness.

Tulsidas, on the other hand, finds union through ethics and action. He believes that the constant remembrance of Rama's name purifies the soul. He does not speak of divine madness or personal intimacy. He speaks of discipline, humility, and surrender. His devotion is about following a path, step by step, toward the divine (Lutgendorf 245).

Together, Mirabai and Tulsidas show us two powerful paths of mystical devotion. One is raw, personal, and emotional. The other is calm, disciplined, and rooted in tradition. One speaks from the heart, the other from the scriptures. However, both paths lead to the same truth: love for the divine.

Their poetry continues to shape how people experience Bhakti today. It reminds us that faith can be wild, wise, rebellious, and humble.

6. CONCLUSION

This study explored the mystical dimensions in the poetry of two towering figures of the Bhakti movement—Mirabai and Tulsidas. As we closely examined their selected poems, it became clear that while their approaches differ in tone, style, and theological emphasis, both are rooted in the same spiritual yearning: a longing to connect with the divine in a deeply personal and transformative way.

Mirabai's mysticism is marked by intense emotional devotion, rebellious love, and a relentless pursuit of Krishna. Her poetry is more than just devotional—it is an act of defiance and self-assertion. In a patriarchal society where women were confined to strict roles, Mirabai's refusal to remain bound to her royal marriage and her public expression of divine love was a spiritual and social statement. In "Only Giridhar is Mine," she openly disowns all worldly relationships—

husband, family, even kingship—and declares her sole allegiance to Krishna. Her words, "People say I am crazy, I am mad with love," reveal how her mystical state is both ecstasy and marginalisation (Pechilis 122). Her love is not metaphorical—it is lived, physical, and painful. She dances wearing ankle-bells, sings through tears, and speaks of Krishna as if he were a physical presence she sees and feels. Her poetry captures what William James describes as the "noetic quality" of mystical experience—the sense of gaining an insight or truth that cannot be expressed in ordinary rational terms (James 371).

Tulsidas, by contrast, brings a different tone to mystical devotion. His poems are less about passion and more about surrender. In "I Have Wasted Much," he reflects on a life filled with distractions and missed opportunities for spiritual growth. There is sorrow but also a turning inward—a moment of awakening. His admission of guilt and plea for grace aligns with Evelyn Underhill's stages of the mystic path, especially the stage of purification, where the soul seeks to cleanse itself before the divine union (Underhill 204). Unlike Mirabai, who often demands Krishna's attention like a lover, Tulsidas approaches Rama as a humble servant—full of awe and repentance. In the brief yet profound couplet "Tulsidas grinds the sandalwood—Raghuvir grants the tilak bright," the poet captures the whole essence of Bhakti: the devotee offers service, and the deity responds not through command but silent grace. This gesture encapsulates the Saguna Bhakti model, where the divine is imagined in human form, allowing for tangible intimacy (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 76).

Though Mirabai and Tulsidas seem different—one being fiercely emotional, the other deeply reverent—what binds them is their shared experience of mystical longing. Their poems show how Bhakti is not limited to ritual or theology; it is a living, breathing relationship between the seeker and the divine. Their verses are filled with love, service, longing, and surrender metaphors. Mirabai calls herself a cow herded by Krishna, a bee drunk on the nectar of his name. Tulsidas calls himself dust, a servant, a penitent. Each metaphor is a doorway into the inner landscape of the soul.

Furthermore, their mysticism is not abstract. It is embodied. Mirabai sings and dances. Tulsidas bows and writes. Their spiritual path is walked through the body, suffering, speech, and silence. This highlights how Bhakti mysticism, unlike other mystical traditions that seek transcendence through the negation of the world, embraces life fully and seeks the divine within it.

The analysis also shows how poetry becomes a sacred space for both poets. Their words are not just lyrical—they are revelatory. The act of writing itself is a form of prayer. As Underhill suggests, the mystic often turns to symbolic language, not to obscure the experience but because the experience itself resists plain speech (Underhill 85). Hence, when Mirabai describes her soul as a parrot crying Krishna's name, or when Tulsidas uses the image of sandalwood and tilak, they are doing more than writing poetry—they are embodying their vision.

To be precise, the poems of Mirabai and Tulsidas reveal the rich tapestry of Indian mystical thought as expressed through Bhakti. Mirabai's feminine mysticism, radical voice, and Tulsidas' devotional humility and moral insight offer two distinct but harmonious paths to the same divine centre. Through longing, suffering, song, and service, they both show that the heart of mysticism lies in the soul's capacity to love deeply, surrender fully, and see the divine not as distant but as intimately near. Their poetry remains timeless because it speaks not only of God but of the human soul's most vulnerable and powerful truths.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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