**Philosophy Family Series** 

# PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS

Editor Associate Editors

K. Om Narayana Rao
Kailash Chandra Moharana Pramod Kumar Dash



PHILOSOPHY FAMILY PUBLICATION

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### PHILOSOPHY FAMILY, PURI

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#### **EDITORIAL PREFACE**

The COVID-19 Pandemic has brought a lot of hardship, uncertainty, confusion, anxiety, fear, etc. in the lives of nearly all people throughout the world. During this tough time, the educational institutions being closed, the academic activities of the students and teachers were badly affected. At this juncture, a novel thought came to the mind of Mr. Pramod Kumar Dash, Assistant Professor in Logic & Philosophy, Navagarh Autonomous College, Navagarh, Odisha to create a WhatsApp group of teachers and students in Philosophy that can serve as a platform for mutual learning. A WhatsApp group was accordingly created as PHILOSOPHY FAMILY. But with more and more teachers and students expressing their desire to join the group, two more groups of Philosophy Family were created. There is also a Philosophy Family Group in Telegram. These groups carry on philosophical discussions on various issues of importance involving the teachers, students and scholars. But the real journey of Philosophy Family began when some of its core members decided to hold monthly webinars regularly inviting senior professors and intellectuals of the country. The first Webinar of Philosophy Family was held on 28/7/2020 wherein Prof. P.K. Mohapatra, Former Professor of Philosophy. Utkal University, Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar delivered his lecture on Applied Ethics and Indian Theories of Morals. The transition from that date till now was so smooth that Philosophy Family independently and in collaboration with Wisdom Intellectual Forum, Puri and Chinmaya Mission, Puri could successfully conduct 186 webinars by inviting around 50 speakers across the country. This is a record in itself and this could be possible due to the active involvement of some of its members. Nearly 150 webinars of Philosophy Family are uploaded in the YouTube.

Another novel thought stuck to the minds of some members to publish an edited book comprising of the lectures delivered in Philosophy Family. Accordingly, all those who delivered their lecture(s) in Philosophy Family were requested to submit an article on their respective topic(s) by 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2021. A total of 25 articles were received. These articles are put together in the form of this edited book under the title *Philosophical*. *Reflections*.

Though some effort has been made to arrange the articles chronologically, yet due to the diverse range of topics, maintaining a strict chronology somehow has turned to be difficult. Hope the authors and readers understand this.

The objective behind this edited book is to reach the teachers and students across the country with a message that some good things can be done even during the tough times.

The members of Philosophy Family hope that the philosophical reflections of the authors in the book would benefit the readers in a great way. The members express sincere thanks to all the teachers, students, scholars and well-wishers for their support and co-operation in shaping out this book. The members also feel thankful to the staff members of Abhijit Graphics, Bhubaneswar for their involvement and care in bringing out this book in a quick time.

All suggestions for the improvement of the book are welcome.

Dr. K. Om Narayan Rao

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# MYSTICISM AND FEMINISM

#### Dr. Amita Valmiki

"She is so bright and glorious that you cannot look at her face or her garments for the splendour with which she shines. For she is terrible with the terror of the avenging lightning, and gentle with the goodness of the bright sun; and both her terror and her gentleness are incomprehensible to humans.... But she is with everyone and in everyone, and so beautiful is her secret that no person can know the sweetness with which she sustains people, and spares them in inscrutable mercy."

#### - Hildegard von Bingen<sup>1</sup>

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.....Only the mediation of another can constitute an individual as an Other.....For girls and boys, the body is first the radiation of a subjectivity, the instrument that brings about the comprehension of the world: they apprehend the universe through their eyes and hands, and not through their sexual parts.

Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex<sup>2</sup>

"The modern-day priestess is a woman who is deeply spiritual, yet her beliefs and practices are typically not rooted in a particular religion. Instead, they are informed by practices that resonated with her spiritual truths."

- Jalaja Bonheim<sup>3</sup>

Time immemorial women mystics/saints have contributed extensively in uplifting the standard of female-hood; and the existential crisis is confronted in open by these women mystics/saints. Feminism as described in Websters II, New Riverside University Dictionary is, "A doctrine advocating for women the same rights granted to men, as in political and economic status." Kindred to this definition, female mystics/saints may not have catechized explicitly the rights that belong to women but in their writings, the echo of feminism is reflected and emulated. This is a platitude that women saints have been the torch bearers of womanhood, not just locally but universally. Their language, culture and way of life may differ but their feministic content has a global appeal. This paper is all about women theistic mystics/saints, who offered the world the path of devotion in their unique way, upholding women rights and dignity.

The followers of the 'path of devotion' (*bhakti*) made no distinction of any kind, be it caste, class, race, religion or gender. On the contrary, they disdained orthodoxy, pedagogery rituals and dogmatism. Their aim was 'divine love', the Being and all the more, the process of 'becoming', the path that had/has many thorns on the way; but they outdistanced all to walk on the path they desired the most, 'the divine love'.

Various faiths, directly or indirectly has ventured towards reconciling thereiversity and incorporating 'the others' without any discrimination. For instance, in Valuava theisin, the

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#### Mysticism and Feminism

In fact, the bhakti in Shaivism had amazing simplicity, reachable and transparent to all. The mystics/saints in Shaiva tradition were deified which nobody found objectionable. To say that nation, race, faith, caste, language or gender, nothing came as a hurdle or stoppage to anyone to imprison God in one's heart. One finds a synonym to Shaivism in Sufism, the ascetic life is a way towards infinite love and bliss. These mystics spoke of intense love and unity as their core philosophy. This also is beamed in the mystical philosophy of Christianity; for instance, Catherine of Genoa said, 'My Me is God, nor do I recognize any other me except my God Himself.' (Hugel, 1925). This kind of equity and unified phenomenal experience has occurred throughout the globe.

The Pre-Aryan Dravidian civilization believed in Shiva as Absolute and His worldmanifesting power is Shakti. De facto this ideology is reflected in almost all civilizations, be it Mesopotamian, Babylonian, Greek or Aryan or any other. The Father-God, the pure consciousness is called by many names in different civilizations, namely, An, El Tem, Path, Ra, Brahman, Tao, Vishnu, Purusha, Yahweh, etc. While His inseparable consort is the Mother-Goddess or Mother Nature considered to be the His manifestory Power is called by many names, Isis, Inanna, Athena, Chokmah, Durga, Ishtar, Prithvi, Prakrti, Semele, Juno, Mylitta, Astarte, Tara, etc. It is fascinating to know that the Father-God cannot be severed or conceived without her and vice-versa. Can there be a gender bias in the realm of such kind of ecstatic trance? Indeed, there is no discrimination of any kind. So, Inanna, the Sumerian Mother-Goddess states: 'Begetting Mother am I. Within the Spirit I abide, and no one sees me. In the word of An (the Spirit) I abide, and no one sees me.' The two seems to be different from each other but are inevitably 'one'. As noted by S. Abhyananda, "So difficult is this two-in-One to speak of since it cannot be spoken of without differentiating the two aspects, and making it appear to be two when it is always One - that the ancient seers tended to characterize the two aspects as male and female complements, using the familiar forms of Father and Mother as symbols to represent them."5 Reportedly, Swami Nikhilananda talking about Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa states in relation to the Father-God and the Mother-Goddess, "He is indeed a real man who has harmonized everything. Most people are one-sided. But I find that all opinions point to the One. All views - the Shakta, the Vaishnava, the Vedantist have that One for their centre. He who is formless is, again, endowed with form. It is He who appears in different forms. The attributeless Brahman is my Father. God with attributes is my Mother. Whom shall I blame? Whom shall I praise? The two sides of the scale are equally balanced."6

In India, the bhakti movement brought about a wave that shattered the orthodoxy prevailing in society and challenged the rigid and fanatic fundamentalism in its time. The women mystics/saints came from all walks of life and sung aloud their love for the Divine which has never been a usual norm in Indian society. But along with this, some strong feminist streaks are

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seen. For example, Lal Ded (1320–1392)'s Vakhs are unique mystic verses in Kashmiri, the colloquial language spoken by ordinary lay-people. She expresses in full vigour her disapproval of this mundane empirical life with its materialistic bent of mind. She denounced the social evils practiced in her times (equally present in contemporary times) and emphasized on right conduct and purity of mind. She is averse to divisions in society. Her poetries called Vakhs are based on Shaivite tradition. She says,

"Shiva is all-pervading and present in each particle, Never differentiate between a Hindu and a Muslim, If you are shrewd and intelligent, know THYSELF, There lies acquaintance with God."<sup>7</sup>

One of the disciples of Lal Ded was Rupa Bhavani (c.1621 – 1721), also known as Alakeshwari. In her devotional poems, she tries to build harmony between various fractions of society through love of God. Her point was that since all religions are the different means leading to one Absolute, how can one religion be superior to the other? The unique aspect of her poems is that there lies a clear influence of Kashmiri Shaivism and Islamic Sufism on them. In one of her poems she sings,

"Selflessness is the sign of selfless, Bow down at the door of the selfless, The selfless are of the highest authority, The kings of the time and wearers of the crest and the crown."<sup>8</sup>

Mirabai (ca.1498-1565) fearlessly disregarded the then prevailing social and family conventions and norms being practised in her husband's home and openly expressed her love and devotion to Sri Krishna. A feminist approach can be seen in Mirabai as she was bold enough to renounce the worldly chores and then comes in open to sing,

"I am true to my Lord. O my companions, there is nothing to be ashamed of now Since I have been seen dancing openly. In the day I have no hunger At night I am restless and cannot sleep. Leaving these troubles behind, I go to the other side; A hidden knowledge has taken hold of me. My relations surround me like bees. But Mira is the servant of her beloved Giridhar, And she cares nothing that people mock her". (Translated from Hindi by F.E Keay) (2002)

Akkamahadevi (12<sup>th</sup> century) and many other saints from India and from other parts of the world had to struggle a lot to create a niche for themselves. These women bhakti mārgins had a tough time to find acceptance and it was not without test with major male leaders that they could make their place for themselves. Akkamahadevi had to leave her home and join the wanderer saints Basava and Allama at their monastery at Kalyana. She wandered large tracts of the states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. She is one of the boldest female mystics/saints who expressed in non-conventional fashion her love and devotion for the Lord. In one of her poems she sings,

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#### Mysticism and Feminism

'Not one, not two, not three or four, but through eighty-four hundred thousand vaginas have I come. I have come through unlikely worlds, guzzled on pleasure and pain. Whatever be all previous lives, show me mercy this one day, OLord white as jasmine'. (Translated by A.K Ramanujan). (2002)

The Varkari tradition in India has seen some powerful women mystics/saints, who paved the wave for other women to come out in open ask for their rights. Indeed, this was not the intentional act of these saints, but implicitly in their writings it is reflected. Women mystics/saints like Janabai, Kanopatra, Muktabai, Bahinabai, Soyrabai and many others raised their voices against the then existing suppressive social norms. For instance, the great Maharashtrian Vārkarī saint-poet need special mention - Janabai (ca. 1298-1350) who wrote,

'Let me not be sad because I am born a woman In this world, many saints suffer in the way.' (2002)

She claims Vithoba, (the deity at Pandharpur) as her friend, a support, a constant helpmate in her arduous domestic work. She found freedom and power in her life through bhakti. Her poems show her rebelliousness towards existing rules and restrictions that tabooed women to leave the house threshold. She says,

'Cast off all shame, and sell yourself in the market place: then alone can you hope to reach the Lord. Cymbals in hand. A veena upon my shoulder, I go about: who dares to stop me? The pallav of my sari falls away (A scandal!); yet will I enter the crowded marketplace without a thought. Jani says, My Lord I have become a slut

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to reach Your home.'

[Translated by Vilas Sarang.] (2002)

The Buddhists nuns' writings too are amazingly powerful. Their verses show the inclination for an egalitarian society. Again, it was not the conscious effort on their part, but in *Therigathas* (Songs of the Nuns, 6<sup>th</sup> C.B.C), we find an outstanding feminist philosophy. Though 'eighty-weighty laws' were imposed on women who baptized into becoming a nun, nobody could stop them from becoming a nun and join the Sangha, leaving their family life. Mutta, one of the *theris* sung as jotted down below,

'So free am I, so gloriously free, Free from three petty things -From mortar, from pestle and from my twisted lord, Freed from rebirth and death I am. And all that has held me down Is hurled away'. (Translated by Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy) (2002) So, Sumangalamata (a Theri, mother of a Thera, Sumangala) says beautifully, 'A woman well set free! How free I am, How wonderfully free, from kitchen drudgery Free from the harsh grip of hunger, And from empty cooking pots, Free too of that unscrupulous man, The weaver of sunshades. Calm now, and serene I am. All lust and hatred purged. To the shade of the spreading trees I go And contemplate my happiness'. [Translated by Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy] (2002)

Christianity has the mention of great women saints, like St. Helena (c.250-c.330 A.D.) who was very religiously devout, excavated beneath the rubble of a pagan temple, found pieces of wood that she claimed were remnants of the true cross on which Jesus Christ had been crucified three centuries before; another saint from France, Joan of Arc (1412-1431) was not only having heard the voice of God, but also was a great warrior, who very boldly proclaimed to King Charles, 'I am God's messenger, sent to tell you that you are the true heir to France and the King's son. She was burnt alive as found guilty of many things, but in 1456, the Church annulled the judgment that had sentenced her to die. In 1920, Joan was canonized by Pope Benedict XV. Today she is honoured as the patron saint of France; Mother Teresa (1910-1997) one of the hard-core workers who devoted her life and found her prayer in missionary social work. St. Benedict got disgusted with the meaninglessness of Roman Society, and retried into a cave. St. Teresa and St. Catharine wooed misery. The list is endless and this can go on of great women saints who proved their being mystic by giving up the inhibitions imposed on them by society. To take rebellious steps required tremendous guts and immense physical, mental and spiritual strength. It may have not happened consciously by them, but undoubtedly, they moved upward on the spiritual ladder with firmness and tremendous determination.

In conclusion it can be pointed out that many of the women bhakti mārgins revealed the truth that gender is not an obstacle in spiritual endeavours. They fell into the protective orb of

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#### Mysticism and Feminism

the Lord. Hardships did not deter them from their pursuit. These bhakti mārgins re-established the fact that purity of heart and mind alone are the requisites in order to be the recipient of divine grace.

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