

## Queer Devotion Across Centuries: Mirabai's Bhakti Longing and Hoshang Merchant's Homoerotic Mysticism

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### Abstract

This paper examines the complex intersections of queer devotion in Indian literary traditions, bringing together the Sixteenth-century Bhakti poet-saint Mirabai and the modern queer poet Hoshang Merchant. Though separated by centuries, both writers depict longing as a transformative force that resists social hierarchies and heteronormative constraints. Mirabai reconfigures devotion by rejecting patriarchal expectations of wifhood and caste, embracing an uncompromising love for Krishna that subverts familial and political authority. Merchant extends this radical inheritance into modernity, foregrounding homoerotic desire and reframing mysticism through the prism of same-sex intimacy. Drawing on queer theoretical perspectives—particularly Judith Butler's notion of performativity and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's critique of sexual binaries—alongside insights from postcolonial queer studies, the paper demonstrates how both poets destabilize fixed identities of gender, sexuality, and spirituality. Close readings of their work suggest that Mirabai and Merchant embody a continuous lineage of queer devotion, in which desire becomes an act of resistance, self-sovereignty, and liberation.

**Keywords:** Bhakti poetry, queer devotion, gender performativity, homoerotic mysticism.

### Introduction

The intersection of devotion and desire has long animated Indian cultural and literary traditions, from the Bhakti movement's radical reimagining of spiritual intimacy to contemporary queer poetics. This study situates itself within that continuum, drawing upon theoretical frameworks from Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's critique of sexual binaries, and postcolonial queer studies that interrogate the colonial erasure of non-normative sexualities in South Asia. While these Western frameworks provide critical tools, the paper also emphasizes the necessity of engaging indigenous categories such as *rasa* and the performative traditions of Bhakti, which open alternative pathways for understanding devotion and desire beyond Euro-American paradigms. The significance of this inquiry lies in its attempt to bring into dialogue two figures rarely examined together: Mirabai, the sixteenth-century Rajput princess whose Bhakti poetry challenged patriarchal and caste-based structures, and Hoshang Merchant, one of India's first openly gay poets, who reclaimed devotional language to articulate homoerotic desire in postcolonial India. By juxtaposing these voices, the study seeks to trace a lineage of queer

devotion that destabilizes rigid binaries of sacred/profane, masculine/feminine, and heterosexual/homosexual.

Three guiding questions shape this research: How does Mirabai's poetry subvert conventional notions of devotion by resisting patriarchal and caste hierarchies? In what ways does Merchant's homoerotic mysticism reclaim devotional idioms to affirm queer identity in a postcolonial context? And how can examining these figures together illuminate a broader genealogy of queer devotion across history? Methodologically, the paper combines close textual analysis with comparative theoretical framing, situating both poets within their respective cultural contexts while highlighting resonances across time. This study argues that devotion, when read as both performance and resistance, becomes a powerful mode of articulating desire that transcends normative boundaries. By connecting Mirabai and Merchant in a shared heritage of longing, the paper underscores how desire has functioned as a liberating force within India's cultural landscape, offering new ways to understand the intersections of spirituality, sexuality, and resistance.

### **LGBTQ+ and Bhakti Movement: A Short Review**

The LGBTQ+ community encompasses a wide coalition of groups diverse in terms of gender identities and sexual orientations. The acronym itself represents *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender*, and *Queer or Questioning*, while the "+" symbol gestures toward an ever-expanding spectrum of identities such as Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, Non-binary, Gender-fluid, Gender-neutral, Demisexual, Transsexual, and Polysexual, among others. Because these categories resist cisgender and heteronormative distinctions, the list remains dynamic and difficult to delimit, though ongoing efforts seek to acknowledge as many identities as possible. The notion of *Queer* functions simultaneously as a personal identity and a political stance. It challenges the heterosexual family as the foundational unit of society and instead imagines alternative modes of intimacy through friendships and affective bonds. Although many in India continue to regard homosexuality as a Western import, literary and historical archives reveal longstanding discourses around queer desire. Sculptures and textual accounts across the subcontinent attest to the presence of same-sex relations in ancient times—while not always celebrated, they were often treated as minor deviations rather than grave transgressions.

The Bhakti Movement was a major religious and cultural phenomenon in medieval India, beginning in South India around the seventh-ninth centuries CE with the Alvars (devotees of Vishnu) and Nayanars (devotees of Shiva). As an organized movement, it reached its zenith between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. The movement, embracing almost all sections of Indian society, aimed at both mitigating the social evils and doing away with social differentiation. In medieval Indian history, the Bhakti movement represents a revolutionary epoch that challenged the whole idea of orthodox Brahmanical orthodoxy and feudalism, rejected social hierarchies by popularizing devotional surrender or bhakti to a personally conceived supreme God, and focused instead on an intimate bond with the divine. It was subversive for its time because, as the Bhakti saints and poets radically philosophized, the idea of bhakti rests on the core belief that a devotee does not need the means of an organized religion like temples, priests, rites, and rituals to achieve moksha. The path to salvation, according to them, was, thus, a personal quest that was based entirely on one's deeds in this world or karma and not, as was monopolized by the feudal lords.

In fact, it was a movement of radical social protest against an oppressive social structure. The bhakti saints and poets were primarily for the uplift and amelioration of the masses. Their contributions have been, in a large measure, instrumental in shaping the cultural ethos and thought of India and influencing the minds and lives of the people. All these saints have been champions of a casteless and classless society and have stood for harmony, peace, and unity.

Besides being a time of immense social change, the Bhakti movement also represents an age of tremendous literary output with poetic giants like Kabir, Tulsidas, Andal, Akkamahadevi, Surdas, Nanak, and Mirabai writing ecstatic poetry to give vent to their progressive philosophies. The movement held the view that “everyone is equal in the eyes of God, the movement brought religion and spirituality to the marginalized classes, specifically women, whose religious expression was restricted in many ways. It was a movement that not only aimed at individual salvation and a mystical union with God but also towards socio-religious egalitarianism. It liberated both God and man from the shackles of Brahminical monopoly. The movement created a space where one could have a personal relationship with God and removed all intermediaries, rendering all Brahminical traditions and the role of Brahmin priests futile.” (Thaosen, para.2) In the present study, the constraints of Brahminical monopoly can be interpreted through the lens of patriarchy, and the revitalized interest in the movement facilitates the establishment of a personal connection with God, thereby rendering all intermediaries and prevailing male-dominated traditions ineffective.

### **Devotion Beyond Heteronormativity: LGBTQ+ in Bhakti Traditions**

The Bhakti poets frequently dismissed traditional rituals and social hierarchies, instead prioritizing a close relationship with the divine. In this process, they occasionally challenged the existing norms surrounding gender and sexuality. Recent academic research indicates that “the works of the early bhakti poets reveal multiple instances of queer identity that both history and contemporary Indian homophobia aim to erase” (Bhattacharya 152). In essence, evidence of non-normative gender expression and same-sex affection can be discovered within Bhakti literature, despite subsequent interpretations attempting to conform those narratives to conventional standards. One example is Akkamahadevi, a twelfth-century Bhakti saint renowned for her uncompromising devotion to Lord Shiva, whom she addressed as Chenna Mallikarjuna, “the beautiful Lord.” Defying conventional gender roles, she rejected marriage to a king, renounced clothing, and embraced life as a naked ascetic, with only her long hair as a covering. This radical act of nudity functioned simultaneously as a spiritual proclamation and a gesture of social resistance. As she declared: “People, male and female, blush when a cloth covering their shame comes loose. ...When the Lord of lives drowned without a face in the world, how can you be modest? When all the world is the eye of the Lord, what can you cover and conceal?” (Ramanujan 115). In *Vachana*, Akkamahadevi rejects the very notion of bodily shame, suggesting both a vision of gender equality—since men and women alike experience embarrassment in nakedness—and a form of spiritual androgyny. By perceiving the entire cosmos as suffused with divine presence (“the world is the eye of the Lord”), she dismisses the idea that her female body must be hidden or disciplined by social codes of modesty. Akka envisioned Shiva as her husband and lover, claiming union with the divine that left no space for a mortal spouse or the

conventional roles of wife and mother. Scholars often read her poetry as a passionate fusion of the sacred and the sensual, collapsing the boundaries between the two. In directing all her desires toward God, Akkamahadevi refused the expectation that a woman's longing should be oriented toward a male partner. Within her historical context, her life can be understood as gender-queer: she transcended the labels of "wife" or "daughter" to become "God's bride," thereby challenging entrenched gender hierarchies and the institution of compulsory heterosexual marriage.

The Radha–Krishna paradigm within the Bhakti tradition illustrates themes of gender fluidity and homoerotic undertones. In Bhagavata lore, Radha—Krishna's consort—emerges as the emblem of the soul's yearning for union with the divine. Devotees, irrespective of their own gender, were encouraged to inhabit the role of Radha or the *gopis* in their devotional practice. This convention led many male Bhakti poets to articulate their longing through a female persona. The sixteenth-century blind poet Surdas, a contemporary of Mirabai, composed hundreds of verses in which he speaks as Radha's *sakhi* (female companion) or even as Radha herself, aching for Krishna's embrace. In one such poem, Surdas exhorts Radha to yield to Krishna's desire. This practice of cross-gender expression, while accepted as a poetic convention, also opened space for what may be described as a "transgendered voice" centuries before the term existed. As Rima Bhattacharya observes, when a male poet "sings in a female voice," he unsettles fixed notions of gender identity and creates imaginative possibilities for desire beyond the boundaries of his own gender. Thus, Bhakti devotion enabled a fluid identification in which a man could legitimately proclaim, "I am Radha," in the intensity of spiritual longing.

### **Queer as Method: Rethinking Frameworks of Desire and Identity**

Queer theorists such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick question the fixed nature of gender and sexuality classifications, highlighting that these categories are socially constructed and performative. Butler's notion of the heterosexual matrix serves as a reminder of how society normalizes specific pairings (man-woman) as "normal", while categorizing others as deviant. Judith Butler, a post-structuralist feminist who advances the view of gender as non-binary, provides through her theory of gender performativity a critical historical framework for interpreting both devotional and queer poetry. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler posits that "identity is performatively constituted." With this, they countered essentially the essentialist perception of gender as a fixed category founded biogenetically, instead asserting that gender is socially constructed and that its social meaning is created through successive acts of performance. Unlike essentially acting as fixed identity, for Butler gender is something that is done: "a stylized repetition of acts... which are internally discontinuous...so that the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief." (Butler 179). Butler further emphasizes that performative acts acquire force because they can be repeated and cited in different contexts. Every single act of "doing" gender is both reiterative and transformative: while it sustains a given norm, it counters the possibility that the norm might really dissolve. As she puts it in *Bodies That Matter*, "every act is itself a recitation" (Butler 187); they imply that identities are never fixed but always formed in the interstitial gap of cultural performance. In devotional and queer writing, this theory is especially useful to employ. Mirabai's

bhakti poetry becomes a performative scene of feminine longing and a surrender to Krishna. The poetry cannot be constructed as the expression of an innate gendered identity but rather as a performative construction of subjectivity within the devotional tradition. Likewise, Hoshang Merchant's homoerotic mysticism performs acts of masculinity through acts of same-sex longing, thereby re-signifying traditional devotional tropes to craft a queer subjectivity that stands against heteronormative expectations.

This paper also employs the critical lens of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), a foundational work in queer theory that distinguishes gender from sexuality and destabilizes the modern homo/hetero binary. This framework is effective in analyzing texts that articulate longing, devotion, and eroticism in ways that trouble and go beyond rigid sexual and gender categories. According to Sedgwick, the cultural conception of homosexuality is riddled with two contradictions, one of which places it in opposition with another paradox. The first contradiction consists in the tension between the "minoritizing view" - believing that homosexuality pertains only to a small and distinct minority and its opposite, the "universalizing view", which suggests that same-sex desire is a potential structure of feeling available to everyone's experience, including that of heterosexuals. The second contradiction concerns the gendering of homosexual desire: it can be understood on a transitive basis, as originating in a fluid threshold space between masculinity and femininity, or on a separatist basis as categorically dividing desire as either masculinity or femininity. These contradictions are of particular importance in the devotional and mystical aspects of these texts. Mirabai's Bhakti songs express a longing for Krishna that one can view as an extremely individualized experience (minoritizing), but on the other hand, her devotional voice is open to universal utilization by devotees of all genders and caste distinctions (universalizing). In contrast, as she assumes a feminine subject-position, i.e., that of Krishna's bride, the actual voice is often adopted by male singers, allowing desire to transition across gender categories. Meanwhile, Hoshang Merchant's poetry keeps switching between affirming queer male separatist identity, interesting homosexuality as a whole in a different mode of being, and muddying gender categories with mystical eroticism as love takes pride in being the most complete spiritual force.

While Butler's theory emphasizes identity as being constituted through performance, the postcolonial queer studies position those performances in the specific historical moment and cultural context of South Asia. In colonial India, political and social structures in turn deeply shaped conceptions of desire, sexuality, and intimacy. With British colonialism came Victorian morality, which redefined Indian sexual mores by legally codifying desire into restrictive categories, most saliently Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which prohibited acts of same-sex intimacy. Such constructions essentially "unnaturalized" and alienated queerness in the heyday of colonialism and thus stigmatized or erased indigenous traditions of desire. Scholars like Anjali Arondekar (2009) and Gayatri Gopinath (2005) have contended that colonial archives had actively silenced non-normative sexualities in South Asia, making it a necessity to look for what Gopinath contends that queer identities in the Global South can rarely be mapped neatly onto Western categories of identity. Instead, they are, rather, expressed through cultural practices, modes of affective ties, and devotional or mystical traditions, all of which existed before colonial intervention. Arondekar similarly underlines the erasures engendered by

colonial archives and issues a call to re-engage with precolonial, textual-affective histories that preserved alternative understandings of desire. Within this view, Mirabai's bhakti poetry might be deemed an indigenous queer expression archive. The ardent yearning for Krishna described by the poet cannot be simply re-modelled into a socially acceptable heterosexuality because it implies a queer desire, which is antagonistic to patriarchal and caste impositions. Writing in postcolonial India, still grappling with the legacies of Section 377 and Victorian morality, Hoshang Merchant reclaimed the ideals of mystical and devotional longing to express homoerotic desire. His poetry not only resisted colonial constructions of sexuality but also tied the queer identity strongly to older modes of mystical intimacy.

The notion of affective sovereignty interlinks these frameworks. We characterize affective sovereignty as the declaration of autonomy and identity through one's emotions, connections, and ability to love. In essence, even when political or social systems restrict certain rights, individuals can assert a form of sovereignty over their feelings and the individuals to whom they commit themselves. This idea is particularly resonant in Bhakti: adherents frequently expressed unwavering loyalty to their beloved (whether divine or human), challenging the authority of kings, families, or religious leaders. For example, we will observe how Mirabai exclusively acknowledges Giridhara (Krishna) as her true lord- a demonstration of emotional sovereignty in opposition to patriarchal dominance. This sovereignty of love can be interpreted as a precursor to contemporary assertions that individuals possess the right to select their partners irrespective of gender. Together, these frameworks highlight devotion as a performance and a site of resistance: performative in that it constitutes gender and sexuality through repetition, and resistant in that it contests colonial and heteronormative narratives that try to fix identity. Butler urges that identity is never before the act; instead, it subjects itself to the act of doing. Sedgwick, applying a different approach, points out how these hetero/homo binaries are themselves contradictorily under scrutiny, and how postcolonial queer studies uncover issues of longer histories of suppression and recovery into which these performances are embedded.

Reading Mirabai and Merchant through this combined view creates an opening for a genealogical study into historical, cultural, and performative aspects of queer devotion. Mirabai's bhakti songs show feminine performance and devotion that destabilized patriarchal norms of widowhood and caste, whereas Merchant's poetry showcases the ways homoerotic mysticism resuscitates those repressed desires in a postcolonial setting where obsolescent colonial laws and moral codes continue to garner an echoing stigma. Both poets enact how desire itself could transform the practice of gender and sexuality. This integrated framework enables us to read queer devotion across centuries not as isolated or exceptional, but as part of an ongoing continuum of cultural practices that destabilize essentialism, contest binaries, and preserve suppressed histories of desire. Conceived as such, the method of devotion finds a place both in the realm of spirituality and in acts of identity reconstruction with both pre-modern bhakti expression and contemporary queer rumblings acting as a restive canvas. Methodologically, the paper employs narrative and textual analysis of poetry and songs, closely reading translated verses and hagiographic accounts of saints to uncover themes of gender fluidity, homoerotic longing, and spiritualized intimacy. Primary sources—poems and songs attributed to Bhakti saint Mirabai and contemporary queer writer Hoshang Merchant. This interdisciplinary approach allows

us to bridge ‘then’ and ‘now’, bringing insights from saints and poets long past into conversation with today’s struggle for queer rights and recognition.

### Queer Bhakti: Mirabai’s *Viraha* Reimagined

Mirabai, born into Rajput nobility in the sixteenth century, holds a unique status in the Bhakti canon as she rejected both the privileges and the constraints of her class life, particularly the role of a dutiful wife. She was among the most well-known and loved of the Hindu women saints devoted to Krishna. Her devotion to her Lord is absolute, as her life and songs attest. Her story is a romantic tale of star-crossed lovers – one human, the other divine, marked by perseverance and triumph in the midst of great suffering. Mirabai was the daughter of the Rathor Rajput royal house of Metra within the feudal kingdom of Marwar. Even as a child, she already showed signs of great devotion to God. She was married into the Sisodiya Rajput royal family of the kingdom of Mewar against her will. As a young bride, she angered her marital family in the fortress city of Chittor by her refusal to fulfill her conjugal duties or to follow the rules of behavior for a woman of a royal household and of a Rajput or warrior caste. She should have remained secluded in the women’s apartments of the palace, but she sang and danced in the public space of the temple and associated freely with holy men and with people of every caste and class, caring little for the material and social privileges that her royal status afforded her. After efforts to dissuade her and then to confine and isolate her failed, attempts were made to kill her with poison as the most commonly recounted method. In the face of such persecution, Mira chooses to leave the great city of Chittor. Declaring herself married to Krishna, she walked the earth singing his praise. Mirabai’s unshakable love, her total dedication, and her suffering and triumph over adversity find expression in the songs sung in her name as well as in her story. Mirabai’s name is very often tied to Krishna with the phrase “Mira’s Lord is *Ghirdhar nagar*.” Her poetry remains perpetually powerful because they not just speak the intensity of the anguish but also does so in a way that disrupts conventional social categories of marriage, gender, and belonging.

Mirabai’s devotion is not a subdued one or subordinated one; it is radical resistance against that, in itself, which makes her an ideal spirit through whose image intersections of Bhakti and queer affect can be contemplated. Longing in separation, *viraha* is at the very center of Mirabai’s work. (Hillgardner 2016) Her verses speak repeatedly of pain, pain that arises from the absence of Krishna. She claims herself poisoned, wounded, or being set aflame by the very thought of being denied his presence. Yet, paradoxically, the absence is productive; that is, the very act of longing becomes a kind of meeting. Desire then turns into worship; that is, desire turns into standing outside of oneself in consummation. Krishna is not simply a god to be worshipped; he is a lover to be desired with corporeal passion. Such desire is inseparable from resistance. Mirabai openly defied her royal family, who tried to force her to give up her devotion and perform social duties. In some verses, she taunts her in-laws, saying that they may have control over her physical form, but they have no control over her soul, which belongs to Krishna. This resistance to familial or patriarchal control queers her social location, refusing heteronormative marriage, refusing to be silenced, and walking the world as a singing devotee. Her poetry carries a love that transgresses caste and gender categories in articulating an avenue for desire as socially disruptive and spiritually freeing. Furthermore, Mirabai’s assumption of the roles of Krishna’s bride complicates conventional gender roles. By

demanding a mystic marriage to the divine woman, she simultaneously fulfills her role as wife while refusing her husband on earth and accepting divine marriage as her own reality. This spiritual flight path queers the very notion of marriage and gives precedence to devotion over patriarchal obligation as the grounds for intimacy. So, in this respect, Mirabai's poetry provides yet an early expression of love as a queer practice: resisting, living through the body, and oriented toward a beloved who is simultaneously inaccessible and closely present.

### **Queer Mystical Longings: The Life of Hoshang Merchant**

If Mirabai queers devotion through her yearning for Krishna, Hoshang Merchant queers mysticism by celebrating homoerotic desire. Hoshang Merchant, Indian poet, teacher, and writer, was born in 1946 to a Parsi Zoroastrian business family in Bombay, India. He studied Surrealism at Occidental College, Buddhism in Dharamshala, and Islam in Iran and Palestine. Merchant has been one of India's first openly gay poets writing at a time when queer identities were normally denied or erased from public discourse. In *Yaarana: Gay Writings from South Asia* (2010), which is India's first gay anthology, he emerges as a distinguished voice in gay liberation in India. Born Parsi, Sufi of heart and Christianity in suffering, Buddhist in his detachment, and Hindu in his sensuality, Hoshang Merchant's life and poetry weave together faith, exile, and longing into a rich mosaic of devotion and defiance. He has often called himself an exile, not just geographically but within his own culture. His poetry is at once intimate and expansive, capturing the contradictions of a life lived across geographies, histories, and desires. He helped in establishing the Gay Liberation Movement at Purdue while corresponding with Anais Nin, the French erotic writer. Merchant also played an important role in introducing Queer Indian Literature courses in Indian Universities. His poetry is erotically frank but draws upon mystical and devotional idioms that give same-sex love a spiritual framework. Merchant's work shows that homoerotic desire is not merely an act of bodily passion but one of transcendence.

Hoshang Merchant's poetry frequently elevates the male beloved into a sacred presence. In collections such as *Flower to Flame*, the imagery of lips, skin, and physical intimacy approaches the register of religious revelation. The beloved is simultaneously human and divine, his touch equated with mystical experience. By sacralizing the erotic body, Merchant dismantles the conventional boundary between the sacred and the profane. For him, the temple is not a distant shrine, but the body itself, and the embrace becomes an act of worship. Like Mirabai, his work is marked by yearning: many poems recount the absent lover—sometimes ambiguously absent, sometimes irrevocably lost—yet always remembered with mystical intensity. This absence is not emptiness but a generative force, producing poetic energy and spiritual insight. For Merchant, desire—even when unfulfilled—becomes revelation, with longing itself serving as proof of love's truth and depth. Merchant's poetics collapse the binary between sensuality and spirituality, transforming erotic desire into a mode of devotion. His sacralization of the body challenges heteronormative and patriarchal divisions of sacred/profane space, positioning intimacy as worship. The motif of absence parallels Bhakti traditions of *viraha* (longing in separation), but here it acquires a queer inflection: desire for the male beloved becomes both mystical and resistant. In this way, Merchant extends Bhakti's legacy of yearning into a modern

queer framework, where longing itself is not lack but a radical affirmation of love and truth.

Hoshang Merchant's poetry stands as a form of political resistance. To write openly about gay love in late twentieth-century India—particularly before the decriminalization of homosexuality—was an act of radical defiance. His verses articulate desire directly, refusing euphemism or silence, and thereby resist both cultural and judicial erasure of queer existence. Much like Mirabai's rejection of patriarchal silencing, Merchant confronts heteronormative suppression, proclaiming queer desire not only as legitimate but as sacred. His queering of mysticism destabilizes binary categories of gender, sexuality, and identity. By weaving homoerotic imagery into Bhakti, Sufi, and Christian mystical traditions, he creates a deliberately hybrid and fluid poetics. This hybridity mirrors the queerness of his subject matter—desire that cannot be contained within fixed boundaries. Merchant's homoerotic mysticism thus extends the logic of Bhakti into a modern queer framework, where devotion becomes a living language for articulating forbidden love. His work fuses eroticism and spirituality to challenge both heteronormativity and the sacred/profane divide. His refusal to veil queer desire transforms poetry into resistance, positioning longing as revelation and intimacy as worship. By hybridizing mystical traditions, he destabilizes rigid identity categories and affirms queerness as fluid, excessive, and uncontainable. In this way, Merchant reclaims devotion as a radical mode of queer self-expression, extending Bhakti's legacy of yearning into a contemporary politics of desire.

### **Queer Bhakti, Queer Modernity: Comparative Devotions of Mirabai and Hoshang Merchant**

The journey of devotional poetry in India shows us that the love for the divine has not always danced around the strict lines of what we consider sacred versus profane, or spiritual versus erotic. Poets have a knack for blurring these distinctions, crafting a realm where desire can be both an act of worship and a form of rebellion. Take Mirabai, the sixteenth-century Bhakti poet-saint, and Hoshang Merchant, one of India's pioneering openly gay poets. Despite being centuries apart, they both share a bold vision: using devotion as a queer practice that challenges societal, gender, and sexual norms. Mirabai's verses express an ecstatic yearning for Krishna that defies patriarchal expectations, while Merchant transforms homoerotic desire into a mystical experience. Together, they create a lineage of queer devotion that transcends time, showing us that longing, whether for a deity or a beloved man, can serve as a powerful act of resistance and liberation. In one of Mirabai's most famous poems, "All I was doing was Breathing", translated by Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield, she expresses:

Something has reached out and taken in the beams of my eyes.  
There is a longing, it is for his body, for every hair of that dark body.  
...  
My family says, 'Don't ever see him again!'  
But my eyes have their own life; they laugh at rules.

This excerpt dramatizes desire as both irresistible and defiant. The speaker's gaze is portrayed as autonomous—"my eyes have their own life"—suggesting that longing transcends familial and social prohibitions. The erotic focus on "every hair of that

dark body” sacralizes physical intimacy, echoing mystical devotion while simultaneously challenging normative boundaries. The tension between external authority (family’s command) and inner compulsion (the eyes’ refusal to obey) highlights desire as a force of resistance, undermining imposed rules and affirming the sovereignty of queer longing. In this way, the poem collapses the divide between body and spirit, turning vision and yearning into acts of liberation. Her eyes become independent beings, playfully disregarding family expectations. In this context, devotion takes on a uniquely queer tone: her yearning for Krishna is not approved by her family or community; it transcends their control. The poem reveals how devotion can challenge traditional notions of belonging, allowing Mirabai to assert her own identity by stepping away from the path laid out for her as a wife and daughter-in-law.

Mira addressed Krishna—often in the aspect of *Giridhara Gopal* as her prabhu and beloved husband. “Mere to *Giridhar Gopal, dusaro na koi*,” one famous bhajan says- “*Giridhara Gopal* is mine, and no one else.” In asserting this exclusive spiritual love, Mirabai effectively abandoned the expected duties to her human husband. Mira queered the notion of marital fidelity by rejecting her earthly marriage, remaining celibate, and devoting herself wholly to a higher divine love. While her love is for a male God, what makes it “queer” is that it subverts patriarchal control and gender roles. She roamed the country as a female ascetic (an unusual role usually reserved for men), joining sadhus and singing in public acts deeply transgressive for a high-caste woman of her time. Mirabai’s refusal to be a dutiful wife in a heterosexual marriage, coupled with her portrayal as Krishna’s bride, presents a complex gender dynamic: some literary analyses suggest Mira inhabited a quasi- androgynous space, being wedded yet virginal, female yet liberated from female domestication. Her very popularity in devotional circles shows an alternative model of femininity that celebrates passionate love for one’s chosen beloved over social conventions. The second poem, translated by A.J. Alston, sharpens her rebellion even more:

I will not bow my head  
To your false Gods,  
I will not follow  
The customs of this world.  
Mira has given herself to the Dark One alone.

These lines signal a radical refusal of conformity. Mirabai rejects the authority of socially sanctioned deities and rituals, positioning herself against the dominant religious and cultural order. It underscores her rejection of worldly expectations—particularly those tied to caste, gender, and marital fidelity. For a woman in her time, this refusal was profoundly transgressive, queering the normative structures of devotion and domesticity. It affirms her singular, mystical allegiance to Krishna (often called the “Dark One” for his complexion). This devotion is not merely spiritual but totalizing—she redefines fidelity as celibate, divine union rather than earthly marriage. The lines assert her agency in choosing devotion over social obligation. She refuses to be coerced into patriarchal structures, instead claiming her own spiritual path. Mirabai contrasts external ritual (“customs of this world”) with inner authenticity. Her bhakti is personal, intimate, and resistant to institutionalized religion. These lines resonate with broader bhakti traditions where saints often rejected orthodoxy, but Mirabai’s gendered position makes her defiance sharper. Her

refusal to bow to “false Gods” can be read as both a theological critique and a feminist act of resistance against imposed authority. This bold voice of defiance echoes what queer theorist Judith Butler might call performative resistance: Mirabai’s declaration is more than just words; it is an act that shakes up the status quo. Here, devotion transforms into a clear refusal, a queer gesture that prioritizes love over obligation.

The third poem brings this defiance to life in a public setting. In John Stratton Hawley’s translation, Mirabai asks:

Why should I fear anyone?  
My heart belongs to Giridhara.  
Kings and nobles may threaten,  
But I will dance with joy in the streets, singing His name.

Devotion is not just an inner feeling anymore; it bursts forth into a fearless display. A Rajput princess, who was expected to remain silent at home, instead takes to the streets, singing and dancing for her God. This is not just about religious ecstasy; it is a political statement: she defies kings and nobles by openly declaring her ecstatic loyalty to Krishna. In doing so, Mirabai challenges both gender roles and political structures, showing that devotion can be a rebellious act.

Hoshang Merchant, a voice from the twentieth and twenty-first century India, embraces the tradition of rebellious longing but adds a bold twist with his openly homoerotic themes. In his poem “Scent of Love,” he expresses:

Play go play though your scent drives me wild  
And I have myself become wild in my love for a wild thing  
...  
The pain the pain of love is everywhere.  
And the scent of this musk cannot be washed even in a rain.

The vision of wildness evokes Mirabai’s blazing eyes and her untamed, fearless dance. Merchant’s yearning, much like hers, is intense, uncontrollable, and challenges societal norms. Male speaker, male beloved: Read as a man addressing a male lover, it frames same-sex desire through sensory compulsion (scent) and ecstatic loss of control (wildness). The diction refuses apology or concealment; it revels in the intensity of male–male longing, where love exceeds social norms and reconfigures identity. Animality as truth-telling: “Wild” rejects domestication—of bodies, desires, and language. By embracing animal imagery, the speaker claims a pre-social, embodied truth of desire that resists moral regulation. Scent is not chosen; it acts upon the body and suggests desire’s sovereignty over the self. Love is not a decision but a force that reconstitutes the lover’s identity. The last two lines bring in the concept of *viraha*, which is a devotional and erotic longing. The lover suffers because the divine or human beloved is not physically there, yet traces—like scent—remain and saturate the world. The repetition of “*the pain the pain*” dramatizes how longing is inescapable; it permeates every space, every breath. This is the hallmark of *viraha*: pain is not localized but totalizing. In *viraha* poetics, scent functions as a mnemonic of intimacy—a reminder that the beloved was once near, and that absence cannot

erase the embodied memory. Even rain, symbol of cleansing and renewal, cannot wash away this musk. This suggests that longing is indelible, beyond natural cycles of purification. Wildness here is ambivalent: it brings ecstatic joy (the intoxication of scent, the thrill of love) and insurmountable pain (the torment of absence). In *viraha*, this ambivalence is central: longing is both wound and gift. The lover is undone by pain, yet that very pain is the proof of devotion and the path to union. This aligns with bhakti traditions where separation is not a failure but a mode of union: longing itself becomes the medium of intimacy. This verse exemplifies *viraha*'s paradox: love's pain is everywhere, yet joy persists in the trace of scent. Wildness embodies the lover's state—caught between ecstasy and anguish, unable to cleanse himself of desire. The absent beloved is more present than ever, inscribed in the body and the world through musk that no rain can wash away.

Similarly, in *Love's Rite*, Merchant honours queer intimacy by portraying same-sex love as a sacred ritual. He expresses:

I have taken your body as my temple,  
and worshipped you in secret rites  
...  
The world condemns my prayers,  
But the gods smile upon us.

This perspective flips the traditional religious views; rather than seeking worship in established temples, the act of queer love transforms into its own form of ritual, prayer, and sacrament. The lover's body becomes a temple, a symbol of devotion, and a divine presence all rolled into one. Merchant's poem feels like a fresh take on the theme of refusal. Mirabai stands firm against the false gods and patriarchal traditions, while Merchant challenges the heteronormative norms that condemn queer love. Both poets tap into the language of devotion to question the established religious and social systems, emphasizing that genuine spirituality is found in the depth of longing and connection. Moreover, "Love's Rite" highlights how homoerotic mysticism blurs the lines between the sacred and the everyday. By viewing the beloved's body as a temple, Merchant resonates with Mirabai's assertion that her body, heart, and voice are solely for Krishna. For both poets, true devotion transcends institutional approval and channels worship into the immediacy of physical love.

A powerful resonance comes through in Merchant's mythic re-imaginings, particularly in works like *My Sunset Marriage*. He reflects on the tale of Krishna and Sudama, exploring the idea of asymmetrical intimacy— one king and one poor Brahmin and reinterprets it as a queer connection. In another moment, he boldly states:

The world says I sin,  
but in your arms I am saved.  
What temple do I need,  
when your body is my shrine?

These lines echo Mirabai's defiance against her in-laws' household. Just as she claims her body and life belong solely to Krishna, Merchant finds salvation in the loving embrace of a partner. They open up a radical reconfiguration of devotion and desire.

Sin as Salvation: Merchant often reclaims what society calls “sin” as a site of truth and liberation. Here, Mirabai’s voice resonates with his insistence that queer desire, condemned by orthodoxy, is precisely where salvation and authenticity are found. The stigma of “sin” becomes inverted into a sacred affirmation of love. Body as Temple: Merchant’s poetry frequently sanctifies the erotic body, refusing the split between sacred and profane. Mirabai’s declaration that the beloved’s body is her shrine parallels Merchant’s insistence that queer intimacy itself is holy, collapsing institutional religion into embodied desire. Both Mirabai and Merchant reject the authority of temples, priests, and social custom. For Merchant, this is a queer refusal of heteronormative and patriarchal structures; for Mirabai, it is a bhakti-inflected defiance. Together, they articulate devotion as resistance—faith expressed through desire rather than ritual. Merchant’s perspective highlights how longing and intimacy destabilize fixed categories. His shrine is not stone but flesh, not external but relational. This queering of devotion transforms love into a dynamic practice of resistance, belonging, and self-assertion. Merchant’s lines are not simply mystical but radically political as they sanctify desire, reclaim “sin” as salvation, and reimagine devotion as embodied intimacy. In this way, both poets converge on a vision of love that resists orthodoxy and opens space for marginalized voices to claim the sacred through their own bodies and desires.

Reading Mirabai alongside Hoshang Merchant reveals a continuous thread of queer devotion. Both poets take longing, often viewed as a sign of weakness, and turn it into a form of resistance. For Mirabai, this means rejecting the patriarchal norms of kinship and caste, boldly expressing her love for Krishna that challenges kings and nobles alike. For Merchant, it is about breaking the silence surrounding queer desire, transforming homoerotic intimacy into a mystical union. They both find devotion in the body- eyes that laugh at societal rules, dancing freely in the streets, embracing the wildness of love, and seeing the beloved’s body as a sacred space. They blur the lines between the sacred and the profane, asserting that love, in all its passionate and untamed forms, is highly sacred. Bringing Mirabai and Merchant into conversation highlights a fascinating truth: devotion has always had a queer essence. It transcends boundaries, shakes up norms, and forges new ways of belonging. Mirabai redefines devotion by choosing to be a bride of Krishna outside the confines of marriage, while Merchant elevates queer love to a divine status. Their poems, spanning centuries, reveal that longing- whether for the divine or for a beloved man is not a sign of weakness; rather, it is a powerful revolutionary force. It boldly asserts that love surpasses law, tradition, and societal expectations.

### Conclusion

Devotion, when interpreted through the intertwined lenses of longing and desire, emerges as a potent mode of resistance to established norms of gender, sexuality, and authority. By placing the works of Mirabai and Hoshang Merchant in dialogue, it reveals a continuous lineage of queer devotion that bridges medieval Bhakti poetry with modern Indian literary expression. Mirabai transformed the act of devotion by rejecting the patriarchal expectations placed upon her, choosing instead to embrace Krishna as her one true love. Meanwhile, Merchant elevated homoerotic desire through mystical expressions, turning queer intimacy into a spiritual journey. Their writings reveal how devotion and desire can challenge the rigid boundaries of sacred versus profane, masculine versus feminine, and heterosexual versus homosexual,

creating room for diverse identities and emotional freedoms. Both Bhakti studies and queer literary criticism place Mirabai and Merchant within a common lineage of devotion. This comparative analysis highlights that queer expressions are not just recent imports but are deeply rooted in India's literary and cultural perspectives. Devotion opens pathways to forms of intimacy that lie outside normative social structures. Queer devotion emerges as a dynamic category that invites scholarship into how faith, longing, and desire continually reshape intimacy, belonging, and resistance within Indian cultural history. In this light, Mirabai and Merchant transcend their historical contexts to become pivotal voices in an ongoing dialogue about the radical possibilities of love across time, language, and identity.

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