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# The Ontology of Religious Ardour: A Philosophical Reading of Mirabai and Kabir's Bhakti Poetry

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### ABSTRACT

This research explores the ontological dimensions of religious ardour in the Bhakti poetry of Mirabai and Kabir, focusing on how their works reflect the nature of self, devotion, and union with the divine. Both poets redefine Bhakti not as a ritualistic act but as an existential state of being, where surrender to the divine becomes a transformative process. Mirabai's poetry presents Krishna as both a personal lover and a metaphysical ideal, highlighting the emotional and mystical dimensions of Bhakti. Her complete surrender signifies the dissolution of ego and the transcendence of worldly attachments. Kabir's poetry, influenced by the Nirguna and Sufi traditions, challenges the illusion of self and emphasizes the formless nature of the divine. His rejection of religious formalism and social hierarchies reflects an ontological shift toward inward devotion and self-realization. This study synthesizes the philosophical undercurrents shaping their Bhakti poetry, contributing to the broader understanding of Indian philosophy and the transformative nature of Bhakti as a path to spiritual liberation.

### INTRODUCTION:

Religious philosophy in dominant Indian traditions—Buddhism, Jainism, Vedic Brahmanism, and Hinduism—have one thing in common: moksha (salvation). Moksha is the liberation of the soul from the birth-rebirth cycle trap (samsara) and its unity with the divine. The faith is that each human being has a soul (atman) that is a part of the ultimate reality (Brahman or God), and when a person dies, the soul wants to unite with its divine source instead of remaining trapped in the birth and rebirth cycle. Seizing moksha has been the ultimate religious pursuit in Indian religious philosophy but the methods of acquiring moksha vary across traditions and schools of thought, e.g., Yoga, Sankhya, Mimamsa, and Vedanta. Until the 7th century CE, the common method of acquiring moksha in Hinduism was through religious middlemen, i.e., priests, in temples. The religious followers pursued religious merit (punya) through temple-based rituals and sacrifices performed under the control of priests, which would result in moksha. Devotion (bhakti) was thus closely connected with temple-centered rituals and sacrifices. But in the 7th century CE, the Bhakti movement burst forth in South India against this institutionalized, exclusionary framework. The Bhakti movement focused on individual devotion to God, independent of temples and priests. K.S. Narayanachar defines it: "Bhakti, according to the highest traditions of philosophical and religious thought in India, is living for God, and living in God, in thought, feeling and deed..." (qtd. in Rajagopalachary and Rao 2). In other words, bhakti implies total surrender to God — living for and with God in mind, heart, and action. Bhakti was regarded as an immediate and personal union with God, achievable through inner surrender instead of external rituals. This personal devotion discredited the grip of the priestly class and temple-based religious establishment. Bhakti saints rejected elaborate rituals performed by brahmins under Hinduism. In addition, the Bhakti movement occurred in the backdrop of rising conflicts between Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism in South India. The Bhakti movement was argued by its proponents to believe that the divine is omnipresent and can be accessed through individual devotion instead of depending on mediation provided by temples. Thus, Bhakti reformed religious practice by allowing individuals from all social segments, including lower castes and women, to achieve spiritual emancipation. As per bhakti saints' salvation could be achieved through bhakti. It gave the oppressed classes a way to fight for their right to religious expression and form a closer relationship with God by focusing on individual devotion in contrast to institutionalized religion.

Ramanujan opines about the Bhakti movement stating: 'A great many-sided shift occurred in Hindu culture and sensibility between the sixth and ninth century ... Bhakti is one name for that shift' (1983: 103). He asserts, its main contribution lies in 'bringing the high to the low, esoteric paradox to the man in the street, transmuting ancient and abstruse ideas into live contemporary experiences; at the same time, finding everyday symbols for the timeless' (1973: 39). The Nayanars (Shaivite) and Alvars (Vaishnavite) were among the earliest proponents of the Bhakti tradition in South India during the reigns of the Pallava, Pandya, and Chola dynasties. The Nayanars, a group of 63 Tamil saints devoted to Lord Shiva, played a crucial role in the Bhakti movement during the medieval period. Sundarar was the first to compile the original list of Nayanar names, which was later expanded by Nambi when he compiled the saints' works into the *Tirumurai* collection. Nambi's list also included Sundarar himself and his parents. Among the Nayanars, four saints—Appar, Sundarar, Sambandar, and Manikkavasagar—are collectively known as the *Nalvar*, meaning "the four." Similar to the Nayanars, the Alvars were a group of Tamil saints and poets devoted to Lord Vishnu. Their hymns, filled with longing, ecstasy, and devotion, praised Vishnu as the supreme power and the ultimate source of *moksha* (liberation). While some sources state that there were ten Alvars, others include Andal and Madhurakavi Alvar, bringing the

total to twelve. Andal was the only female Alvar among them. Both the Nayanars and the Alvars were instrumental in shaping the Bhakti movement, which originated in Tamil Nadu and gradually spread across India. Through their devotional poetry and hymns, the Alvars played a particularly significant role in advancing this movement. They also honored the 108 sacred Vaishnavite shrines, known as *Divya Desams*, in their writings and songs. Their love and dedication to God Vishnu were reflected in the thousands of songs they created and performed. Alvar's bhakti literature contributes to the establishment of a culture, which is deviated from the Vedic practices and the Vedic religion basically, and which resorts to devotion as the only path to salvation. They propagated ideals of religious equality and extensive social inclusion against the exclusiveness of temple-based rituals. This Bhakti ideology diffused into North India from the 12th to the 15th century, greatly influenced by the trailblazing efforts of Marathi Bhakti saints like Namdev and Tukaram, who skillfully synthesized both Tamil and Sanskrit cultural traditions. The spread of Bhakti ideas laid the foundation for the North Indian Bhakti movement, which was led by the rise of influential figures like Kabir, Mirabai, Tulsidas, and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Bhakti movement then got divided in two streams. The first stream worshipped "Nirguna Ishwar". Among Nirguna Bhakti saints, the most important were Kabir and Nanak. Nirguna Bhakti Saints saw God as formless, devoid of qualities and attributes. The other stream was Saguna who believed in Saguna Brahman, a personal god with form. Therefore, the Bhakti movement essentially revolutionized the dynamics of the relationship between the individual and the divine by shifting focus from institutionalized rituals to personal, unmediated devotion, thus promoting social equality and spiritual inclusivity. Bhakti literature was marked by a note of ecstasy, and hence it produced a rich body of poetry born of the heart. This new genre 'was enriched by the Nayanmars, the Alvars, the Virasaivas and the bhasha poets from different castes, regions, religions, and genders (qtd. in Rajagopalachary and Rao 6).

The main objective of this research paper is to investigate the ontological dimensions of Bhakti (being and existence) as depicted in the devotional poems of Mirabai and Kabir. Bhakti, as a religious mode of devotion, is also a critical state of being where the self yearns for a meeting with the divine. The current study will seek to examine how Mirabai's Saguna Bhakti is a profoundly affective and subjective bond with Krishna, where devotion becomes a part of existence. Kabir's Nirguna Bhakti presents a philosophical approach, where devotion towards an abstract divine is sought, imagining a separation from worldly being and the negation of self. The paper will examine how both poets depict Bhakti as an ontological state of transformation that goes beyond conventional religious rules and rituals. Through a critical examination of their poetry, the study will evaluate how metaphors, symbolism, and poetic imagery define Bhakti as a religious practice as well as a state of being where existence achieves its absolute meaning in the divine. The main research questions guiding this study are: How do Mirabai and Kabir's poems reflect the ontology of religious ardour? What philosophical schools—e.g., those deriving from Vedantic, Sufi, or Nirguna schools of thought—influence their Bhakti poetry? How does their literary output reflect the perception of the self, devotion, and union with the divine?

The research will utilize a blend of literary critique, philosophical study, and comparative analysis to discuss the poetic language, metaphors and symbols, and philosophical subject matter in their poetry. Through close reading of selected poems, this research seeks to clarify Bhakti as an existential condition wherein religious realization and human self are defined through love and relationship with the divine. This comparative reading will elicit the shared ontological ground of Bhakti in Mirabai's and Kabir's poems while at the same time uncovering the unique philosophical and emotional undertones that define their paths of devotion.

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## Theoretical Framework

Ontology, a branch of metaphysics, is the examination of being, existence, and reality. It explores fundamental questions of the nature of reality, the self-divine relationship, and the existential condition that is precipitated by acts of devotion. The ontology of Bhakti poetry is articulated by the dialogue of imagination and the subject's own experience of divinity. Bhakti itself, as delineated in the poetry of Kabir and Mirabai, places Bhakti not only as a spiritual practice of adoration but also as an existence where devotion not only influences what being is like but actually conditions being. The conversation between the self and the divine becomes central to grasping the ontological condition of Bhakti. Mirabai's Saguna Bhakti is an ontological condition in which the self-pursues realization and fulfillment through an affective identification with Krishna, a personal deity. Kabir's Nirguna Bhakti is an ontological condition where the personal self-coalesces with the formless God, locating existence as a sphere of transcendence and differentiation from the worldly. The phrase "religious ardour" is a redemptive and passionate devotion that alters the state of being of the believer. It is not an emotional passion, but an utter self-giving over to the divine. Religious ardour in Bhakti poetry is beyond ritual practice and an ontological condition of being. Mirabai's poetry is an expression of religious ardour in a deep, emotional longing for Krishna, in which her identity and self-become indistinguishable from her devotion. Her poetry portrays themes of love, separation (viraha), and union (samyoga) as ontological states where devotion is the foundation of being. The longing for Krishna is both a source of suffering and a path of spiritual wholeness, an expression of the existential tension between human finitude and divine unity. Kabir's poetry reflects a fierce religious passion by way of a philosophical vision wherein the fervor for the absolute is articulated in terms of abandoning the cares of the world and embracing the shapeless absolute. His poems also challenge conventional religious orthodoxy and espouse the virtues of individual and direct intimacy with the divine without the encumbrances of institutional rituals and the aid of priests. Kabir's fervent religiosity is by nature transformative and erodes ego and unifies the self in the universal ground. In both Mirabai's and Kabir's poems, religious passion is elevated to an ontic status wherein selfhood is conceived not in worldly terms but through the intensity and purity of one's devotion. This transformative quality of devotion reduces Bhakti to a status of being in which human subjectivity and religious attainment are construed by the interactions of surrender and unity with the divine.

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## Philosophical Framework:

Mirabai's and Kabir's poetry of devotion draws heavily on the philosophies of Vedanta, Advaita, and theistic thought, yet simultaneously harbors residues of Sufi mysticism. These philosophies shape the ontological character of their religiosity, as well as intrude into conceptual and experiential knowledge of the self and the divine, in their works. Vedanta provides a metaphysical structure in which Bhakti can be interpreted as an ontological condition. Adhering to the Upanishadic tenets, Vedanta focuses on the concept of Brahman (the ultimate reality) as the basis of reality, where the self (atman) is regarded as part of this divine reality. The concept of Bhakti in Vedanta is based on the realization of the self's unity with Brahman, where the ego must be destroyed in order to achieve moksha (liberation). Mirabai's Saguna Bhakti is in accordance with theistic Vedanta, where her love for Krishna as a personal deity exemplifies the belief that the divine is embodied in a concrete and tangible form. Her poetry is a perfect reflection of the emotional intensity of longing and union with Krishna, demonstrating the Vedantic tenet of the self's identification with the divine through acts of devotion and surrender. Additionally, Advaita Vedanta, as propounded by Adi Shankaracharya, asserts the non-duality of the self and Brahman. In it, it is said that the ultimate reality is formless, and hence, it is all an illusion or maya by which the perception of distinction between the self and the divine occurs. It is Nirguna Bhakti that Kabir proclaims in this Advaitic thought by directing his devotion to a formless God, that is, to the concept of a Nirguna Brahman. This rejection by Kabir of temple rituals and priestly mediation fits into Advaitic philosophy whereby true spiritual realization occurs when one realizes the unity with the absolute. He depicts, in his poetry, the dissolution of the self in the divine, which is the very concept of non-duality, or Dwaitism. The Sufi presence is also seen in Bhakti poetry in its concern with union with the deity on a most personal level, annihilation (fana), and love of the divine (ishq). The metaphors of love and desire used by Kabir carry echoes of Sufi perception that the divine exists within. In the same vein, the longings for Krishna expressed by Mirabai also echo Sufi stages of spiritual ecstasy (haal), where there is self-loss and divine exaltation.

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## MIRABAI:

Born in the early 15th century, Mira Bai was a Krishna devotee of the highest order. She was born a princess but gave up the pleasures of the palace for begging on the streets of Vrindavan. Mira Bai was a Rajput princess and the only child of Ratan Singh who was the younger brother to the ruler of Merta, one of the prosperous kingdoms of Rajasthan. Mira was only 3 years old when a wandering saint came to her house. As per the Hindu tradition, the saint was welcomed and treated with a lot of respect by the royals. On his arrival, he placed a statue of Lord Krishna in the room that was given to him by his Guru. When Mira arrived into the room with her grandmother, the first thing that caught her attention was the statue of Lord Krishna. Nobody noticed when she walked past her grandmother and sat in front of the statue of Krishna, seemingly attracted to Krishna. The saint was impressed by the welcome and the treatment he had received and asked Mira's grandmother what would she like in return. While his intention was to give her the blessing she wanted, Mira jumped into the conversation and said that she wanted the statue of Krishna. In a matter of minutes when Mira realized that the saint was not in favor of giving her the statue, she broke down to tears. No number of tantrums or tears could convince the sage to give away the statue of his God gifted to him by his Guru. He blessed the family, picked up the statue and began to walk away. Suddenly, the sage had a change of heart, as if he was told by Krishna himself that this is where the statue belonged — to Mira. He turned and gave the statue to little Mira and left the palace. From that day everything in little Mira's life revolved around her Krishna. She would speak with the statue for hours, wouldn't eat until she fed her Krishna, and dressed her idol all day long. A well-documented incident from her childhood highlights this devotion: upon witnessing a wedding procession, she inquired about her own future husband. In response, her mother, without serious intent, remarked that Sri Krishna was already her husband. This casual statement had a profound impact on Mira Bai, shaping her spiritual inclinations. However, her mother passed away when Mira was only ten years old. Despite her deep devotion to Krishna, Mira Bai's father arranged her marriage to Prince Bhoj Raj, the eldest son of Rana Sanga of Chittor, a decision that significantly elevated her social standing. Though reluctant, Mira Bai acquiesced to the marriage under familial and societal pressures. While she dutifully fulfilled her responsibilities as a wife, her evenings were dedicated to devotional singing and worship of Krishna. Her deep spiritual practices often led her into ecstatic states, which were met with disapproval from her marital family. Moreover, her refusal to worship their family deity, Durga, intensified their resentment. Mira Bai's growing spiritual influence and her interactions with ascetics and devotees further alienated her from her in-laws. Her sister-in-law, Udabai, sought to defame her by spreading false allegations, insinuating that Mira Bai entertained men under the guise of worship. Believing these rumors, Bhoj Raj once stormed into her quarters with a sword, only to find her in deep devotion before an idol of Krishna. Such incidents, however, did not deter Mira Bai, who remained steadfast in her spiritual convictions. The fame of Mira Bai's devotional bhajans spread widely, even reaching the Mughal Emperor Akbar. Fascinated by her reputation, Akbar, despite the enmity between the Rajputs and Mughals, resolved to witness her devotion firsthand. Disguised as a beggar, he visited Mira Bai alongside the celebrated musician Tansen. Deeply moved by her singing, Akbar left a valuable necklace at her feet as an offering before departing. When this act came to light, Bhoj Raj, infuriated that his wife had been seen by a Muslim ruler, commanded her to end her life by drowning. Mira Bai, prepared to comply, entered the river but was divinely instructed by Krishna to seek refuge in Vrindavan. Consequently, she fled to Vrindavan, where she found solace in devotional practices. With time, Bhoj Raj came to regret his actions, recognizing Mira Bai's sanctity. He traveled to Vrindavan to persuade her to return, and she reluctantly agreed. However, soon after, Bhoj Raj died in battle against the Mughals, exacerbating Mira Bai's predicament. Her father-in-law, Rana Sanga, sought to enforce the practice of Sati upon her, demanding that she immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Mira Bai, drawing strength from her unwavering faith, refused, asserting that her true husband, Krishna, was eternal. The persecution she faced did not cease. Her in-laws confined her movements and allegedly made multiple attempts on her life, including offering her a venomous snake and a poisoned drink. However, it is said that divine intervention protected her from harm. Ultimately, on the counsel of sages, she escaped to Vrindavan, where she continued her devotion uninhibited. Her spiritual insight attracted numerous followers, including scholars and ascetics. On one occasion, a prominent spiritual leader initially refused to engage with her due to her gender. In response, Mira Bai asserted that Krishna was the only true male in Vrindavan, while all others were his devotees, akin to the Gopis of Vrindavan. Her wisdom compelled

the leader to acknowledge her spiritual stature, and he accepted her as a disciple. Mira Bai's life culminated in a mystical event that further solidified her legendary status. It is believed that while singing in a temple, she experienced a divine vision of Krishna. In this transcendent moment, she merged with the idol of Krishna, achieving spiritual liberation. Her legacy endures through her devotional compositions, which continue to inspire devotees and scholars alike, reflecting the profound impact of Bhakti poetry in Indian spiritual and literary traditions.

Mirabai's poetry, known as padas and regarded as musical love poems or bhajans, was originally composed in Rajasthani and Braj languages and later translated into Hindi and Gujarati. Unavailability of means to preserve manuscripts, persistent hostility and persecution by the families, or lack of interest in poetic fame can be the reasons for the non-availability of any original manuscript for the 1300 songs ascribed to her, but as Nancy Martin explains in the Encyclopedia of Women, her songs are 'kept alive in the fluid domain of oral tradition. Mirabai's Bhakti poems are authentic expressions of her personal experiences, reflecting her feelings, thoughts, and ideologies. The train of thought in these poems allows them to be redefined as social critique, as well as romantic, philosophical, and mystical reflections. This effort seeks to explore these variations within her poems to highlight their enduring significance today, both as a form of social distinction and as an object of aesthetic appreciation.

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### **Role of Krishna in her poetry – the personal and metaphysical union**

Krishna occupies a central and multivalent position within Mirabai's poetry as both a metaphysical abstraction and a personal beloved. For Mirabai, Krishna is more than a god; he is the embodiment of divine love and spiritual awareness. Her poetry is characterized by an extreme intimacy with Krishna, and lines are blurring between distinctions between the divine and the human, and between the lover and the beloved, into a condition of metaphysical union. The dualistic positioning of Krishna as both a personal beloved and the embodiment of spiritual realization gives ontological structure to Mirabai's Bhakti. At the individual level, Mirabai's love for Krishna is characterized by intense emotional depth and yearning (viraha). Her poems tend to portray Krishna as her husband, lover, and friend for all eternity. This romantic relationship is expressed in terms of romantic and erotic love, wherein separation from Krishna is cause of extreme sorrow and union with him is spiritual accomplishment. Her poetry has the same ring as that of the Rasa Lila tradition, where Krishna's games and familiarity with the Gopis are interpreted as a metaphor of the devotee's longing to be united with God. The identification of Krishna as a lover goes beyond physicality and becomes a metaphor for the soul's yearning for spiritual oneness. Mirabai's pain of separation (viraha) portrays the existential crisis inherent in human existence, where the soul yearns to become complete through divine union. At a metaphysical level, Krishna represents the supreme reality and the path to liberation (moksha). Mirabai's poem summarizes the Vedantic notion that the individual self (atman) is an integral part of the supreme reality (Brahman), contending that supreme fulfillment is realized through the union with the divine being. Her complete abandonment to Krishna symbolizes the Advaitic concept of melting into the absolute. In Mirabai's devotion to Krishna, she is a believer in the duality of human finitude and infinitude of the divine—her love goes beyond ritualistic orthodoxy and is an existential condition in which her existence is characterized in terms of Krishna's existence. The metaphysical union with Krishna, as seen in Mirabai's poetry, therefore becomes a feeling of self-realization, where the ego dissolves so that the soul can attain liberation through love and devotion. Mirabai's poetry thus frames Krishna as both an intimate personal figure and a transcendent metaphysical ideal. Her Bhakti is not a naive idea of devotion but a condition of existence where human self and spiritual consciousness find their ground in a perpetual quest for union with Krishna. This dualism—personal love and metaphysical unity—embraces the very essence of Saguna Bhakti, where devotion is both emotional and existential movement toward the divine.

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### **Themes of Mirabai's Poetry:**

Mirabai's poetry is closely rooted in the Bhakti tradition, with her devotional expressions and her own intimate relationship with the divine taking center stage. Her poems, referred to as padas, explore deep themes such as divine love, surrender, and transcendence, reflecting not only her own spiritual journey but also the more general metaphysical and philosophical concepts of Bhakti. Important aspects of Mira's poetry are themes of love, devotion, and surrender, going beyond social conventions, and the use of metaphors. An all-encompassing love for God, climaxing in devotional rapture, makes her cut loose from domestic bonds, abandon worldly interests, and undergo a metaphorical death of self for the sake of salvation or moksha. Many of her poems convey her deep affection for Giridhara (another name for Lord Krishna), characterized by passion that blurs the lines between physical and spiritual love, utilizing metaphors of merging with the divine. Love serves as the central theme, regardless of whether it is physical or spiritual. A profound yearning for the beloved is essential for union to occur. This love demands sacrifice and surrender. Her verses are rich with expressions of physical desire, romance, and a deep, intimate bond with her beloved. "Her songs came into existence not for the attainment of higher post or dignity or emolument, nor fame or any other ephemeral object or attribute of worldly gain or honor, but her heart was full of the thrill of God's love and God's adoration, and of that her songs were but a natural consequence. The speech translated the heart, and the heart slept over the tongue to sing the glory of God." (Mehta 107) Her poetry reflects the ontological tension between human imperfection and divine perfection, where union with Krishna becomes the ultimate resolution of this existential conflict.

At the core of Mirabai's poetry is the theme of divine love, where Krishna is not only worshipped as a god but embraced as a lover and companion. Her devotion transcends the conventional boundaries of religious practice and enters the realm of personal and emotional intimacy. Krishna, in Mirabai's poetry, is both the object of her love and the source of her spiritual identity.

In one of her poems, she writes:

"I have given up everything for Krishna –

My family, my honor, my pride.

He alone is my life and my soul."

This reflects the intensity of Mirabai's devotion, where her love for Krishna overrides social norms and personal attachments. The metaphoric language of romantic and physical love symbolizes the soul's yearning for divine union. Her identification of Krishna as the beloved transforms Bhakti into a deeply personal relationship, where love becomes the path to spiritual liberation. The idea of Krishna as the beloved reflects the ontological condition that human existence is incomplete without the divine, and true fulfillment comes only through unity with Krishna.

Surrender (samarpan) is another key theme in Mirabai's poetry, where the act of giving herself to Krishna symbolizes the dissolution of the ego. For Mirabai, surrender is not a passive act but an existential transformation where her identity is redefined through Krishna's presence.

She writes:

jogī mata jā mata jā mata jāpāṁi

parūṁ mainṁ terī cerī haun

Yogi, do not go, do not go, do not go

I fall at your feet; I am your slave. (Mirabai, 1924, pp. 49, pad 12)

Here, Mirabai expresses a complete renunciation of worldly desires and personal will. The act of surrender reflects the Advaitic notion of non-duality (Advaita), where the individual self (jīva) merges into the supreme self (Brahman). Mirabai's poetry suggests that true liberation (moksha) is not attained through ritualistic devotion but through the complete dissolution of self into the divine. The voluntary abandonment of ego becomes a transformative act where human limitations are transcended, and existence is redefined through spiritual unity with Krishna.

Additionally,

I saw the dark clouds burst,

dark Lord

Saw the clouds and tumbling down

In black and yellow streams

they thicken,

Rain and rain two hours long

my eyes

See—

only rain and water

watering the thirsty earth green

Me—

my love's in a distant land

and wet, I stubbornly stand at the door,

For Hari is indelibly green,

Mira's Lord,

And he has invited a standing,

stubborn love. (Caturvedi, no.42)

In this poem, Mirabai expresses divine love through her longing for Krishna (Hari), symbolized by the imagery of rain nourishing the earth. The "dark Lord" and "clouds bursting" reflect the emotional intensity of her yearning, where Krishna's presence is both elusive and transformative. Her surrender is evident in her willingness to stand stubbornly at the door despite the rain, representing unwavering devotion and spiritual faith. The ontological implication lies in Krishna's "indelibly green" nature, symbolizing eternal life and divine essence. Through longing and surrender, Mirabai transcends human suffering, seeking unity with Krishna, where love becomes the path to spiritual fulfillment.

Theme of Transcendence – Longing and Union with the Divine is also crucial to Mirabai's poems. The theme of transcendence in Mirabai's poetry is articulated through the tension between longing (viraha) and fulfillment. The absence of Krishna creates a state of existential suffering, where Mirabai's

identity becomes defined by the void left by Krishna's absence. This longing reflects the Bhakti notion that human existence is inherently incomplete without divine union.

She writes:

"The night is long, and I wait for you,

Why do you not come, my dark one?"

The pain of separation symbolizes the existential gap between the self and the divine. However, this state of incompleteness is resolved through union with Krishna, where the lover and the beloved merge into a single ontological reality. When union is achieved, Mirabai's poetry reflects a state of spiritual ecstasy where human limitations are overcome, and existence becomes aligned with the divine order. Mirabai's poetry, therefore, frames Bhakti as a journey from longing and separation to union and transcendence, where devotion becomes both a personal and metaphysical act.

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## KABIRDAS:

Saint Kabir is the most highly respected name in Indian spirituality, revered for his great philosophy that transcends religion. His teachings and philosophy still echo among millions worldwide. He lived in the 15th century, and this period saw him become a central figure in the spiritual fabric of India, promoting an individualized experience with the divine and love and humanity over ritual. Saint Kabir remains a very celebrated poet of the Indian vernacular languages. Also referred to as Kabir Das, "servant of the Great (God)," he was a member of the weaver (jula) caste in Varanasi, the ancient city in the current Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The writings of Kabir are famous for their nirgun bhakti, individual devotion to the formless, impersonal God. Common themes present in his poetry are a concern with the name of God, criticism of religious tradition, mortality, and spiritual desire for a genuine teacher or guru. He greatly influenced the Bhakti movement as well as the Sufi movement which was there in India. He was raised a Muslim and he was one of the main Bhakti saints in North India. While growing up he used to think about religion and God a lot. The Bhakti saint Ramananda was also there in Varanasi where Kabir was and he was greatly inspired by Ramananda's teachings. He was also inspired by Sufi saints and the Mahayana sect of Buddhism. He went on to be one of the main Bhakti saints in North India. He influenced the Bhakti movement in Hinduism and in Sikhism. His teachings can be even found in Guru Granth Sahib. He was very influential. His followers were called Kabirpanthis and they were both Hindus and Muslims. Kabir's teachings brought the Hindus and the Muslims closer as he asked people to live peacefully. He believed there is only one God who is named differently by different religious groups. Other than that God is Nirguna or formless. He was against idol worshipping because according to him we cannot understand how God looks because he is formless. He wanted equality. There was no discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, and wealth. He was against this discrimination that was there in India at that point of time and he preached about equality. He spread the message of devotion through his poetry and composed different types of poems which were called dohas, Vishnu pads, and Sakhis. He used Bhojpuri language along with a mix of Urdu. These were the two languages in which he used to write his dohas and his vishnupads along with other devotional songs. Now some of his verses are even included in the Adi Granth, the sacred book of the Sikhs. Kabir's verses or dohas are compiled in a famous book called *Bijak*. It forms an important literary source as it talks about the crux of the Bhakti movement, that is, devotion. Kabir utilizes his language to suggest the wordless divine which exists outside the confines of language. Nirgun (which is literally "without attributes") denotes the perception that God cannot be positively imagined and ought to not be worshiped with images or in other forms perceived by the sight (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 2004: p. 230). This means that God could be understood to be "the One," "the All," and "duality-free knowledge," which is the aspect of the Divine indicated by Kabir in the ensuing couplet:

The One is one with the All,

the All is one with the One.

Kabir is one

with the knowledge without duality. (sakhi 272 / Dharwadker 2003: p. 184)

Here Kabir declares that the One, meaning nirgun God, is the substance that pervades the All of the world of externals. In his oblique and concise manner, he insists that it is human beings who must become aware of this oneness just as Kabir did. The concept of "knowledge without duality" reflects 8th Adi Shankara's nondualist (Advaita) school of thought where Brahman (universal being) and atman (individual soul) are equated as a single entity. It is one of those situations where parallel thoughts which were hitherto restricted to Sanskrit thought are now being made accessible to masses at large through universally readable languages. It is a hallmark of Indian vernacular poet-saints' bhajans. According to Kabir God does not reside in mosques or temples, but in one's own mind, body, and soul. This notion is reflected in his doha:

"पाथर पूजे हरि मिलै, तो मैं पूजूं पहाड़.

घर का चकिया कोई न पूजै, जाके पीसा खाय।

It reads: "If praying to a stone leads me to God, then I shall pray to a mountain. But nobody prays to the grinding stone at home, though it grinds grain they eat." Here, Kabir condemns blind ritualism by pointing out that devotion from within is important rather than devotions done outside in the form of symbols.

Furthermore, one of the themes that run through Kabir's poetry is the dismissal of the ego and the concept of an individual self. Kabir maintains that the self (jiva) is an illusion, a transitory phenomenon born of human attachment to the world. Real spiritual enlightenment, Kabir says, occurs when the ego disappears and the self merges with the formless divine (Nirguna). Illusion that there is separation between the self and the divine arises due to ignorance (maya), and liberation (moksha) occurs by realizing that the self is not distinct from the supreme reality (Brahman). Kabir's refusal of ego is extended to both religious and social hierarchies, which are considered to be artificial divisions from ultimate unity. He prefers inner devotion to outward rituals in that union with the divine is not achieved through religious mediators but is actualized by self-knowledge and interior contemplation. The destruction of the ego, then, becomes an existential and spiritual imperative, where human self is reconfigured through the acknowledgment of divine unity. Paradox is another key feature of Kabir's Bhakti. His poetry tends to convey spiritual realities in contradictory images, a feature that speaks to the inexpressible nature of divine reality. By canceling out the difference between life and death, presence and absence, Kabir defies human perception and gestures toward a higher, unified state of existence. This philosophical tension serves to highlight the ontological richness of his Bhakti, where union with the divine is both the annihilation of self and the realization of absolute reality.

Overall, Kabir's Bhakti poetry demonstrates a deep philosophical inquiry into the self and the divine, based on the theory of non-duality (Advaita) and the Nirguna school of thought. Kabir critiques the illusion of the self and the ego, presenting them as obstructions to spiritual oneness. Kabir's dismissal of religious formalism and social stratification highlights his perception that genuine devotion stems from inward realization and not from outward rituals. Through paradoxical utterance and symbolic imagery, Kabir expresses the tension between human experience and the unnamable quality of the divine. His verse shows that moksha (liberation) is gained not through religious intermediation but through the dissolving of ego and the recognition of the formless divine within. By going beyond the round of birth and death, Kabir introduces Bhakti as a state of existence in which the human self becomes one with the eternal reality and hence realizes spiritual wholeness.

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## CONCLUSION:

This study ventured into the ontological aspects of religious ardour in Mirabai and Kabir's Bhakti poetry, attempting to provide answers to fundamental questions regarding the nature of self, devotion, and union with the divine in their poetry. The overarching questions informing this research were: How do Mirabai and Kabir's poems represent the ontology of religious ardour? What philosophical currents, such as Vedantic, Sufi, and Nirguna traditions, inform their Bhakti poetry? And how is the idea of self, devotion, and spiritual union expressed in their poetry? The analysis found that both poets build Bhakti not just as religious devotion but as a transmutational state of being, where surrender and union with the divine redefine existential identity.

Mirabai's poetry reflects a deeply personal and emotional form of Bhakti, where Krishna is both the lover and the metaphysical ideal. Her surrender to Krishna signifies the dissolution of the ego and the transcendence of worldly attachments. Through her verses, Mirabai articulates Bhakti as an existential act, where longing (viraha) and union become the central forces shaping human identity. Her ontology is in line with the Advaitic concept of a non-duality in which the self transcends and becomes one with the divine, attaining wholeness and liberation (moksha). Her Bhakti is not mediated by priests or temples but is a product of a close, intimate encounter with Krishna, thus indicating the democratization and internalization of religious practice. Kabir's poetry, however, is more mystical and philosophical in its Bhakti. His poems defy the illusion of self and ego as obstacles to divine unity. As a follower of the Nirguna tradition, Kabir's Bhakti concentrates on the divine as formless and beyond duality. His paradoxical and symbolic words dismantle immovable religious forms, driving towards an immediate and unmediated encounter with the divine. Bhakti, to Kabir, is a path of self-annihilation, whereby ego dissolution allows the seeker to realize eternal existence of the divine within. His criticism of religious ritualism stems from his assurance that spiritual reality is not to be found in externals but in interior realization and existential surrender. The integration of Mirabai and Kabir's ontological vision shows that medieval Indian Bhakti poetry was not just a religious movement but a philosophical reinterpretation of life. Both poets redefine the self-divine relationship, situating devotion as an existential condition and not a ritual practice. Their poetry subverts the social and religious hierarchies of their day, spiritualizing access and giving voice to marginalized groups.

This research adds to the larger body of knowledge on Bhakti poetry and Indian philosophy by emphasizing the ontological importance of devotion as a redemptive act. Mirabai and Kabir's poetry attests that Bhakti is not merely about religious practice but about the transformation of human life through love for and surrender to God. Their poems indicate a turn away from externalized religious behavior to one of internalized spirituality, providing a model of existential freedom that cuts across religious and cultural boundaries. In their poetry, Mirabai and Kabir confirm that liberation is not in ritual but in the destruction of the self and the attainment of unity with the divine.

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