

## DIVINE LONGINGS AND MYSTICAL YEARNINGS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SPIRITUAL DEVOTION IN TAGORE'S GITANJALI AND MEERABAI'S POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

*This research paper undertakes a comparative exploration of the spiritual devotion and mystical longing that characterizes Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali and the devotional poems of Meerabai. Both poets, though separated by centuries and differing cultural contexts, embody a deep yearning for the Divine that transcends religious dogma and enters the realm of universal spirituality. The paper investigates thematic parallels such as divine love, surrender, and renunciation, as well as stylistic devices, religious influences, and the philosophical undercurrents that shape their poetic voices. While Tagore's approach leans toward introspective mysticism influenced by Vedantic philosophy, Meerabai's songs reflect an impassioned Bhakti rooted in personal devotion to Lord Krishna. By juxtaposing the literary aesthetics and devotional fervor of Tagore and Meerabai, the study offers insights into how poetic spirituality transcends time, gender, and tradition to become a timeless voice of the soul.*

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**Keywords:** Tagore, Meerabai, Gitanjali, Bhakti, Mysticism, Spiritual Poetry.

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### Introduction

Spiritual literature in India has long served as a bridge between the human and the Divine, merging poetic imagination with theological depth. Through lyrical expression, poets across centuries have articulated their inner spiritual journeys—often marked by longing, surrender, and ecstatic union. These literary creations transcend religious boundaries and offer a glimpse into the soul's yearning for a higher truth.

### Poetic Spirituality in the Indian Tradition

Indian spiritual literature is richly layered, drawing from diverse traditions including Vedanta, Sufism, Tantra, and most notably, Bhakti. The Bhakti movement emphasized personal devotion over ritualistic orthodoxy, making the Divine accessible to all, regardless of caste or gender. Within this tradition, poets have often adopted deeply personal tones, expressing an intimate bond with the Divine through metaphor, allegory, and emotional intensity.

### The Lyrical Devotion of Tagore and Meerabai

Among the luminaries of Indian devotional poetry, Rabindranath Tagore and Meerabai stand out for their unique voices. Tagore's *Gitanjali*, first published in Bengali in 1910 and later translated by the poet himself into English in 1912, captures the universal spirit of devotion and mystical surrender. His poems reflect an intellectual and spiritual syncretism that draws from the Upanishads, Western Romanticism, and the Bhakti ethos.

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In contrast, Meerabai, the 16th-century Rajput princess and mystic, composed songs of fervent love and longing for Lord Krishna. Her poetry is steeped in the Bhakti tradition, and it reflects a radical defiance of social norms in her quest for divine union. While her works are emotionally charged and deeply personal, they resonate with timeless truths about faith, love, and inner liberation.

### **Temporal and Cultural Distance, Spiritual Proximity**

Despite the temporal gap and their vastly different socio-cultural environments, both Tagore and Meerabai engage with similar spiritual concerns. They confront questions of identity, surrender, and the ephemeral nature of worldly life. Yet, their approaches differ—Tagore often meditates through serene introspection, while Meerabai expresses her devotion through passionate and emotive surrender.

### **Objective of the Study**

This paper aims to examine the convergences and divergences in the spiritual poetics of Tagore and Meerabai. By exploring their thematic concerns, stylistic choices, philosophical orientations, and devotional metaphors, the study seeks to understand how each poet constructs a unique relationship with the Divine. In doing so, it also reflects on how spiritual poetry in India evolves yet remains rooted in a common longing for transcendence.

### **Historical and Cultural Context**

- **Tagore's Context:** Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a polymath, philosopher, and poet, composed *Gitanjali* in Bengali, which he later translated into English. The collection earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. Tagore's poetry reflects the influence of the Bhakti movement, Western romanticism, and the Upanishadic philosophy of oneness. His spirituality is deeply philosophical, leaning toward an abstract, universal Divine.
- **Meerabai's Context:** Meerabai (c. 1498 - c. 1547), a Rajput princess turned mystic poetess, was a prominent figure in the Bhakti movement. Her poetry, composed in Rajasthani, Braj, and other dialects, is intensely personal and rooted in her unwavering devotion to Lord Krishna. Her spiritual life defied patriarchal norms and societal expectations, marking her as a radical female voice in devotional literature.

### **Thematic Analysis**

- **Divine Love and Yearning**

Both Tagore and Meerabai articulate a profound yearning for union with the Divine. In *Gitanjali*, Tagore writes:

"My song has put off her adornments. She has no pride of dress and decoration."

This stripping away of worldly identity is akin to Meerabai's surrender:

"I have found my eternal companion, and I have left all worldly bonds."

While Tagore seeks a universal presence often described as "Thou," Meerabai personifies God as Krishna, her lover and Lord.

- **Surrender and Devotional Suffering**

Meerabai's poems often describe the pain of separation (viraha) from Krishna. Her language is raw, emotional, and personal:

"I am drenched in the pain of longing. My eyes rain tears in your absence."

Tagore's approach is more introspective and philosophical, yet equally profound:

"I am like a boat on the dry river-bed, waiting for the flood of your touch."

- **Spiritual Freedom and Renunciation**

Both poets emphasize spiritual liberation through devotion. Meerabai renounces royal life, marital duties, and societal norms for Krishna. Tagore relinquishes ego and material attachments to receive divine grace:

"I have made my life supremely simple, desiring only your presence."

- **Mysticism and Symbolism**

Tagore uses metaphors such as the flute, the journey, and the lamp to express mystical states. Similarly, Meerabai uses symbols like the poison cup, peacock, and monsoon to communicate her ecstasies and agonies.

- **Gender and Voice**

Meerabai's voice is that of a female devotee breaking societal chains to express her divine love. Tagore, though male, adopts a more neutral, sometimes feminine voice, echoing the surrender of the soul to the supreme.

- **Linguistic and Stylistic Features**

The poetic expressions of Rabindranath Tagore and Meerabai are not only spiritual in content but also distinctive in their linguistic choices and stylistic approaches. The way they shape language to convey the depth of devotion, longing, and mystical insight significantly contributes to the emotional and philosophical impact of their work.

- **Language and Accessibility**

Tagore's *Gitanjali*, though originally composed in Bengali, gained international recognition through the poet's own English translation. His use of English is marked by a meditative and lyrical tone, reminiscent of the cadence of prayer or sacred chant. The simplicity of his language allows for universal accessibility, yet beneath this simplicity lies a profound philosophical and emotional complexity. The influence of the Bible, particularly the King James Version, is evident in the cadence and spiritual solemnity of his translated verses. Phrases such as "Thou hast made me endless" and "I know not how thou singest, my master!" evoke both reverence and intimacy.

Meerabai's poems, by contrast, are deeply rooted in vernacular traditions, composed in regional dialects such as Braj, Rajasthani, and other forms of Hindi. Her language is raw, emotionally charged, and often colloquial—imbued with the rhythm and vocabulary of common people. Despite the linguistic limitations that come with oral tradition and translation, her verses have retained their intensity and appeal across centuries. The accessibility of her language made her songs a living part of devotional culture, sung in temples and households, transcending literacy and social boundaries.

- **Form and Structure**

Tagore's poems in *Gitanjali* are largely written in free verse, a stylistic choice that complements the introspective and philosophical nature of his reflections. The lack of a rigid rhyme scheme or meter allows his ideas to unfold fluidly, mirroring the spiritual journey of the seeker. Each poem functions as a standalone meditation, yet collectively they trace a spiritual arc from surrender and longing to union and enlightenment. The poems often conclude with reflective or revelatory lines that reinforce the central theme.

Meerabai's poetry adheres to traditional Bhakti musical forms, often structured in a way that facilitates oral recitation and communal singing. Her songs are typically short, rhythmic, and repetitive, which aids memorization and collective devotion. The use of refrains (dohas and chhands), rhyme, and musicality adds to their lyrical appeal. This structure enhances the emotive power of her verses, making them an enduring part of kirtan and bhajan traditions in Indian devotional practices.

- **Imagery and Symbolism**

Both poets make rich use of nature imagery and symbolic language to convey abstract spiritual experiences in tangible terms. Nature becomes a mirror to inner states and a medium through which the Divine is perceived.

In Tagore's *Gitanjali*, imagery such as the river, the sky, flowers, the flute, and the lamp are recurrent symbols. The river often represents the flow of life and the journey of the soul; the sky symbolizes infinity and divine presence; the lamp stands for inner illumination and divine grace. For example, he writes:

"The morning sea of silence broke into ripples of bird songs." This poetic line fuses the serenity of nature with spiritual awakening, suggesting the gentle arrival of divine presence through the harmony of the natural world.

Meerabai's imagery is deeply mythic and emotional, drawing from her cultural and religious surroundings. She frequently invokes monsoon rains, lotus flowers, peacocks, snakes, and poison cups. These symbols are emotionally loaded—rain as longing and renewal, the peacock as Krishna's avatar, and the poison cup symbolizing suffering or sacrifice in love. One famous line from her poetry states:

"I have swallowed the poison of this world, yet I live because of my Lord."

This line is metaphorical of the suffering she endures due to her unorthodox devotion, yet it also reveals her unwavering spiritual resilience.

- **Voice and Tone**

Tagore's tone is contemplative, serene, and often infused with awe. His poetic voice moves between humble surrender and philosophical musing, striking a balance between emotion and thought. His address to God is respectful yet intimate, often beginning with direct invocation—"Thou"—which lends a sacred solemnity to his words.

Meerabai's tone, on the other hand, is more emotional, urgent, and impassioned. Her poems often resemble the outpourings of a lover in anguish or ecstasy, drawing heavily on the romantic and devotional lexicon of Bhakti literature. Her voice, unmistakably personal and feminine, challenges societal norms, and speaks with remarkable spiritual authority.

### **Philosophical and Religious Underpinnings**

Understanding the philosophical and religious foundations of Tagore's *Gitanjali* and Meerabai's devotional poems is essential to appreciating the depth and nuance of their spiritual poetics. While both poets seek a profound union with the Divine, their theological perspectives and modes of approach are shaped by different traditions—Vedanta in Tagore's case and Bhakti in Meerabai's.

- **Tagore: The Universal Spirit of Vedanta**

Rabindranath Tagore's spiritual worldview is deeply influenced by Advaita Vedanta, especially the Upanishadic concept of Brahman—the formless, infinite, all-pervading reality. In the Upanishadic vision, God is not a distant, anthropomorphic deity, but an immanent presence within all beings and nature. Tagore internalizes this vision in *Gitanjali*, where his poetry consistently portrays the Divine as present in the everyday world, within the self, and in the beauty of creation.

He does not worship a personal god in the traditional sense, but rather addresses a divine consciousness—sometimes referred to as "Thou"—which is both transcendent and intimate. In one of his poems, he writes:

"The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures."

Here, Tagore dissolves the boundary between the individual and the universal, echoing the Vedantic idea of oneness between Atman (self) and Brahman (universal spirit). His poetry reflects an inclusive spirituality, open to influences from Christian mysticism, Sufi poetry, and Western romanticism, but fundamentally rooted in the Indian spiritual ethos.

Moreover, Tagore often expresses the idea of spiritual evolution—that the soul progresses through love, service, and inner realization toward unity with the Divine. His God is not a lawgiver or judge but a companion in life's journey, accessible through self-purification, humility, and surrender.

- **Meerabai: The Intimate God of Bhakti**

Meerabai's religious philosophy emerges from the Bhakti movement, a devotional revolution that swept across India between the 7th and 17th centuries. Unlike the non-dualism of Vedanta, Bhakti traditions often embrace dualism—a clear distinction between the devotee and the deity. For Meerabai, Krishna is not an abstract concept but a living, personal God: her Lord, her lover, her husband, and her ultimate refuge.

Her poems reflect Saguna Bhakti (worship of God with form), where devotion is directed toward a personal deity endowed with attributes, emotions, and stories. Krishna, the cowherd of Vrindavan, becomes both the object of her divine passion and the metaphor for spiritual truth. Her relationship with him is emotionally intense and human-like, echoing the madhura bhava (sweet mood of love) found in the devotional traditions of Radha and Krishna.

"I have fallen in love, O mother, with the Beautiful One who knows no death, no evil, no form... I have given up everything for him alone."

Meerabai's spirituality is not about philosophical contemplation but emotional immersion, where faith, longing, and surrender are the primary paths to divine union. Her songs convey the pain of separation (viraha) from Krishna, as well as the ecstasy of communion. These emotional states are not merely poetic metaphors but spiritual realities, emphasizing love as the supreme path to salvation.

In contrast to Tagore's universalism, Meerabai's devotion is exclusive, personal, and radical—radical in that she renounced her royal lineage, marriage, and societal duties to follow a path considered unacceptable for women in her time. Her spiritual rebellion is also a social statement, challenging the patriarchal restrictions of her era.

**Comparison and Confluence**

While Tagore and Meerabai come from different religious and philosophical traditions, their ultimate aim is the same: union with the Divine. Their paths—Vedantic realization and Bhakti surrender—represent two ends of the spiritual spectrum in Indian thought, yet both are valid and revered.

Aspect	Tagore ( <i>Gitanjali</i> )	Meerabai (Devotional Poems)
Philosophical Base	Advaita Vedanta (Non-dualism)	Bhakti (Dualism)
Nature of the Divine	Formless, universal, immanent	Personal, embodied in Krishna
Path to Realization	Introspection, unity, self-surrender	Emotional devotion, love, surrender
Relationship with God	Companion, inner presence	Lover, master, beloved
Tone	Meditative, philosophical	Emotional, passionate

Both poets, despite their differing frameworks, reflect a deep inner transformation. Their devotion is not merely ritualistic but experiential and poetic, allowing readers to feel, reflect, and awaken to the spiritual call within.

**Contrasts in Approach**

Aspect	Tagore ( <i>Gitanjali</i> )	Meerabai (Translated Poems)
Divine Relationship	Abstract, universal "Thou"	Personal, intimate Krishna
Tone	Philosophical, meditative	Emotional, ecstatic
Language	Literary, stylized English	Folk dialects, raw emotion
Gendered Voice	Gender-neutral to feminine	Female, assertive
Goal	Union through surrender of ego	Union through surrender of self/life

**Influence and Legacy**

The spiritual and literary contributions of Rabindranath Tagore and Meerabai have transcended the bounds of poetry to become enduring elements of India's cultural and spiritual fabric. Their works continue to resonate with readers and devotees across generations, inspiring not only literary appreciation but also deep personal reflection and collective spiritual engagement.

**Tagore's Global and Intellectual Legacy**

Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* holds a unique place in global literature as a work that introduced Indian spirituality to the Western world in a poetic and accessible form. His Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 marked a historic moment—not just for Indian literature, but for the global recognition of non-Western voices in the literary canon. *Gitanjali*, with its meditative tone and universalist vision of the Divine, is often studied as a text that bridges Eastern spiritual philosophy with Western literary aesthetics.

Tagore's influence extends far beyond the realm of poetry. As the creator of Rabindra Sangeet, a genre of music blending poetic lyrics with classical and folk melodies, he has shaped the musical identity of Bengal and much of Eastern India. His songs are an integral part of spiritual and cultural life, often sung in homes, schools, and temples. Even today, his compositions are performed on national occasions, in cultural festivals, and in private spiritual practice, underscoring his relevance across time and context.

Moreover, Tagore's holistic view of education and spirituality found expression in the founding of Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan. The institution was envisioned as a confluence of the world's cultures, where art, music, nature, and learning coexisted in harmony. Through this, Tagore's legacy lives on not just as a poet and mystic, but as a visionary educator and philosopher.

**Meerabai's Devotional and Cultural Legacy**

Meerabai's legacy is equally profound, especially within the devotional traditions of Hinduism. Revered as a saint-poetess, she occupies a space that is both literary and spiritual. Her songs are not confined to texts but are living traditions, sung in temples, households, and kirtan gatherings across India. Her bhajans continue to be passed down orally and through performance, ensuring their vitality and relevance in everyday religious practice.

Meerabai has also become a powerful symbol of spiritual defiance and feminine strength. Her life story, marked by her rejection of royal duties and societal expectations, is celebrated in literature, drama, film, and folklore. She is frequently portrayed as a woman who chose divine love over worldly conformity, inspiring generations of women to find voice and agency in their own spiritual paths.

In Indian classical and folk dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Garba, her life and songs are dramatized, bringing her devotion alive through movement and storytelling. These performances are not merely artistic but are seen as acts of sacred expression, embodying the bhakti rasa that defines her poetry.

### A Shared, Living Heritage

Together, Tagore and Meerabai embody two distinct but harmonious streams of Indian spirituality—introspective mysticism and ecstatic devotion. Their works continue to influence not only literature and music, but also interfaith dialogue, feminist spiritual thought, educational philosophy, and cultural identity. In an increasingly fragmented world, their poetic calls to the Divine remain beacons of unity, love, and transcendence.

### Conclusion

Though separated by several centuries, distinct cultural milieus, and differing spiritual philosophies, Rabindranath Tagore and Meerabai converge in their poetic expression of a deep, transcendent yearning for the Divine. Their works, though stylistically and theologically different, are united by a shared spiritual sensibility that elevates human experience into a space of sacred longing and divine communion. Meerabai's voice is that of a passionate devotee, one who fearlessly challenges the norms of her time, discarding royal privilege and societal expectations in pursuit of her beloved Krishna. Her devotion is emotionally charged, personal, and intense—marked by ecstatic union and agonizing separation. Through her folk-inspired bhajans, she speaks not only of spiritual love but of liberation from worldly constraints, making her an enduring icon of devotional resistance and feminine spiritual autonomy. Tagore, on the other hand, articulates his longing for the Infinite through refined introspection, philosophical depth, and lyrical serenity. His *Gitanjali* presents the Divine not as a personal god limited by form, but as an all-encompassing presence found in nature, in the human spirit, and in the quiet surrender of the ego. His poetry gently invites the reader into a contemplative space where the sacred is both immanent and eternal. Despite their divergent approaches—Tagore's universalism and Vedantic philosophy versus Meerabai's personal devotion grounded in the Bhakti tradition—both poets succeed in collapsing the boundaries between the human and the divine, offering poetry as a sacred bridge. Their language, rich in metaphor and emotion, becomes a vessel through which the soul's most intimate dialogues with the Divine are voiced. What unites them most profoundly is their ability to transform spiritual longing into lyrical art that transcends religion, geography, gender, and time. They do not merely write about God; they embody the seeker's voice—at once vulnerable, courageous, and filled with wonder. In doing so, Tagore and Meerabai illuminate the diversity and depth of Indian devotional literature, offering timeless insights into the human condition and the soul's eternal quest for meaning, union, and transcendence. Their legacy continues to inspire not just readers of poetry, but all who walk the path of the spirit, reminding us that the language of divine love—whether whispered in meditative verse or sung with fervent devotion—is a universal one, rooted in the very core of human longing.

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