



2023

Mai Bhago and Amrita Devi Bishnoi: Women of Strength

Sowmya Ayyar

Malaviya Center for Peace Research, Banaras Hindu University, sowmyaayyar.bhuphd@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/monsoon-sasa-journal>



Part of the [Alternative and Complementary Medicine Commons](#), [Asian Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Body Regions Commons](#), [Broadcast and Video Studies Commons](#), [Buddhist Studies Commons](#), [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), [Comparative Philosophy Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [Environmental Education Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), [Hindu Studies Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), [Islamic Studies Commons](#), [Law Commons](#), [Linguistics Commons](#), [Migration Studies Commons](#), [Multicultural Psychology Commons](#), [Other Music Commons](#), [Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), and the [South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ayyar, Sowmya (2023) "Mai Bhago and Amrita Devi Bishnoi: Women of Strength," *Monsoon: South Asian Studies Association Journal*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/monsoon-sasa-journal/vol2/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Monsoon: South Asian Studies Association Journal by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu.

**MAI BHAGO AND AMRITA DEVI BISHNOI:
WOMEN OF STRENGTH**

*Sowmya Ayyar
Research Scholar
Malaviya Center for Peace Research
Banaras Hindu University*

Abstract:

Mai Bhago (1670-1720), also known as Bhag Kaur, distinguished herself on the battlefield to defend the Sikh faith. Amrita Devi Bishnoi (d. 1730) is said to have sacrificed her life with 362 others to protect the Khejari trees in the Rajasthan desert. Both women continue to inspire social justice and ecological activism.

Key Words: Mai Bhago, Amrita Devi Bishnoi, tree-hugging, women's activism in India, Bishnoi

Introduction

Several years ago (in late 2009), at the European Peace University in Stadtschlaining, Austria, I had the opportunity to present a paper on the topics of female warrior and tree hugging. With limited access to research materials, my team and I scoured the internet and found nine amazing women from India, including Mai Bhago and Amrita Devi Bishnoi.

Now, in 2023, as I embark on research on Indian women and peace building, these names come back to me. When I looked at more closely at the work of these activists, standing side by side, I found similarities in their work and capabilities. This article will shed a new light on their work in the area of peace.

While living in India over the last twelve years, I visited the Bishnoi villages a few times, interviewed some of its leaders, and befriended Bishnois across India. I also found that over the past fourteen years, still little to no academic literature, especially journal articles, has addressed the work of these two women. Likewise, there is a paucity of publications about them in popular culture in the way of blogs, news articles, videos, and books (in English). This article is my humble attempt as a researcher to recognize these women under the status of peace builders.

Stories of and about the work of women are often told and retold orally, passed down from elders to their children. And historically, women have been written about to a lesser extent than men, both in academic and popular culture.

Women's stories (or herstory) are pertinent examples for today's women and girls, as well as important to stories of men and

boys. Herstories can give inspiration to current-day persons, showing them the path of commitment and bravery. In addition, it is important to analyze women's contributions to society beyond serving as role models. It is also of paramount importance to recognize them for the work they have done in specific fields, such as ecofeminism, community building, and peace activism. Retelling of such narratives can provide clues to the methods of ecofeminism and peace building from the past, methods which could potentially be used today. These narratives can also show the process over time of community and capacity building. Furthermore, the ultimate goal in this research is to uplift the status of women in general, and recognize specific women who were trail-blazers in their fields, showing the start of a lineage of women in peacebuilding. By putting forth the work of these women in academic circles, more international organizations can take note and herald women's work on the local level.

Definitions

It is vital to define the terms by which this research analyzes Mai Bhago and Amrita Devi Bishnoi. These terms include woman warriors, community builders, and peace activists.

Pamela D. Toler writes in her book, *Women Warriors*, that women warriors "come in a variety of flavors" (Toler, 2019: 14). Toler defines the term as "a woman who leads a charge is a warrior" (14). Such charges, in the field of peace, could be on traditional battlefields against another group. The charge should be "fighting" against injustices towards individuals, communities, society, environment, or the world. The fight could also be carried out through non-traditional methods, such as silence. In the case of activism, it could be conducted through rallies or voicing opinions.

The general belief is that women who take on the role of warrior are exceptions to the general reality. Pamela D. Toler explains in her book that women have always gone to battle for their families, homes, cities, and nations, as well as to expand their kingdoms. They have also fought to win independence, as well as to battle for religious purposes (Toler, 2019: 5).

Toler goes on to point out that women warriors are often not included in history books or accounts; they "have been pushed into the historical shadows" (Toler, 2019: 6). The case is such for many women around the world, and Indian women such as Mai Bhago and Amrita Devi fall into this category as well.

Peace Activist

It is often noted that women hold important power in creating peace. At the Women in the World Summit 2013, Former US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton stated, “When women participate in peacemaking and peacekeeping, we are all safer and more secure.”¹.

The 2000 UN Security Council Resolution 1325² provided a space for recognizing women involved in conflict transformation and peace building. This should be extended historically, highlighting women who have contributed throughout time and throughout the world, whether at global or local levels. Highlighting local herstories can especially help to create a feeling of pride among communities, and help show contributions of women throughout the world, elevating the status of women.

Activism plays an important role in peace building, and women play vital roles in activism. El-Bushra (2007: 131) writes that “women’s resistance to violence is widely believed to be a mobilizing factor in both local and international peace movements.” That is to say, the work of women warriors for justice and peace is more than just the work of one. It invites others to engage in the battle through peaceful means and for liberation purposes. V. K. Srivastava has noted:

Indian green thoughts and politics are well nurtured by the citizens’ participation in which the roles of women are quite impactful. ... Indian green thinking has been much supported by women at the philosophical and agitation levels. No other country can offer any such example in the environmental movement.³

Women have led peaceful movements in India for centuries, though much of their work is not recognized. The two lesser known activists from the early 1700s that this article will cover are Mai Bhago, a Sikh soldier from Punjab, and Amrita Devi, an eco-martyr from Rajasthan. While many other women in India have contributed to peace building in a variety of ways, these two led their people to

¹ Clinton, Hillary Rodham, Women in the World Summit 2013. Accessed on 1 May, 2023, at <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/5-inspiring-women-our-favorite-quotes/>.

² Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women. Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace, and Security. Accessed on May 1, 2023, at <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>.

³ Srivastava, V.K. (2017). Green Political Thought and the Green Movement in India: Role of Women and Civil Society Organizations, in *International Journal of the Uttarakhand Political Science Association*, Vol. 01, Issue 01 (July-December), p. 9.

embrace martyrdom in the quest for justice. They inspired movements and led others in their battles for peace and justice, making them more than just singular heroes. They became leaders of their communities, actively working for peace through recognition of their fundamental religious rights, while also adhering to their religious doctrines.

Methodology

There is sparse literature available on Indian women activists. Therefore, this article includes what literature is available on Mai Bhago and Amrita Devi Bishnoi, as well as stories from multiple sources. Some stories are told through communities, and have been passed down orally.⁴ Others have been recorded in historical books (see the chapter on the Bishnoi community, Jain, 2011: 51). Many other important stories are now being propagated through formats such as news articles and television, websites and blogs, and videos. All of these are equally important to consider when discussing the importance of women as community builders and peace activists. This article examines the available sources which enables us to understand the stories of these two women and analyze their work and lives in greater depth.

Sikhism and Mai Bhago: Gender Equality and Religious Freedom

To understand Mai Bhago's work, it is important to first understand the social climate in which she lived. Several Sikh gurus, starting with the first, Guru Nanak, advocated for gender equality, religious freedom, and non-violence unless battle is absolutely required. Several Sikh gurus, starting with the first, Guru Nanak, advocated for gender equality, religious freedom, and non-violence unless battle is required. From the start of Sikhism in the early 1500s, Guru Nanak promoted equality amongst the genders. Lovepreet Kaur writes that "the Guru Granth Sahib promotes an egalitarian outlook irrespective of gender and caste" (Kaur, L., 2013, p. 97). Scholars recognize Guru Nanak's "respect for women: Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, raised his voice for justice to women and provided the scriptural basis for equality which was not to be found in the scriptures of other India-born religions" (Kaur Singh, 2000, p. 67).

⁴ Author has traveled to Bishnoi regions of Rajasthan and conducted exploratory research with leaders of the community. Author has worked with prominent Sikh community members in the United States.

One of the important tenets of Sikhism is to reject discrimination against religions. During the time of Sikhism's emergence in 1500-1700, the 10 gurus would fight to protect Hindus and other local religions against persecution by Muslim invaders. Gurus would create armies of men to fight for justice.

The Sikh tradition allowed women to enter into the battlefield, which was progressive in contrast with others traditions at the time. Historically, several women in Sikhism have been heralded for their bravery and valor. This includes "Mata Tripta, Mai Bhago, Mata Kheevi, Bibi Sharan Kaur, Mata Gujri Ji, Maa Ajit Kaur, Bibi Bhani Ji and so on shows how those Sikh women stepped onto the battleground and fought the wars" (Bhardwaj, 2021: 35).

Mai Bhago

"With Guru Gobind Singh (Nanak X), we have the inspiring case of Mai Bhago. She was a courageous woman from the Amritsar district who rallied men to fight for the Guru against the imperial forces of Mughal. She herself fought on his behalf and was injured in the battle at Muktsar" (Kaur Singh, 2000, p. 68).

Born in the late 1600s as Bhag Kaur to a devout Sikh family, she learned the art of warfare from her father who was a member of the Guru's army. According to Prabhjot Kaur, it was from him that she learned not only the art of warfare but also the martial arts, including archery and horse-riding (Kaur, 2012).

During the late 1600s and early 1800s, most of Punjab was under Mughal rule. At one point, a large army of Mughals laid siege upon the Fort of Anandpur Sahib while Guru Gobind Singh was fighting this injustice, along with a handful of Sikhs. All the entrances were blocked, and basic supplies were quickly diminishing. Several members of the army appealed to the Guru to surrender. Sticking to the faith and its tenets, including to fight against religious persecution, Gobind Singh said that anyone who wanted to leave would have to sign a note of disassociation with the Khalsa and Guru. Forty Sikhs who could not handle the conflict ultimately did so, leaving the army and guru.

Bhag Kaur, who was at home initially, was shocked to see them returning with their heads hung low. She decided to take control of the situation, leading forty deserters back to the battlefield. Through her inspiration, these additional men, along with the rest of the Sikh army, caused the enemy to retreat. Guru Gobind Singh noted that the forty men who returned and became martyred on the battlefield. Because of these actions, he forgave their indiscretions and blessed them as the "Forty Liberated Ones."

Bhag Kaur, renamed Mai Bhago, survived but suffered injuries. Upon recovery, she stayed with Guru Ji in Nanded until his

death in 1708, after which she went south to continue her life, passing away in 1720.⁵

Amrita Devi and Bishnoism: Save the Trees

To understand Amrita Devi's contribution, it is important to first understand the Bishnoi religious movement. Bishnoism (literally "twenty-nine") was founded by Guru Jambheshwar (or Jamboji) in the late 1400s in Rajasthan (Jain, 2011: 52). The religion has twenty-nine tenets which its members must follow. Several of the tenets delineate responsibility to nature. An online English website about Bishnois translates the nineteenth rule as "Do not cut the green trees; Save the environment," the eighteenth is "Be compassionate towards all living beings," and the twenty-second is "Provide shelters for abandoned animals to prevent their being slaughtered."⁶

Field research including participant observation and interviews shows that from the start, these tenets were taken to heart by the members of their community. While these English translations give an overview of the tenets, the meaning for Bishnois has always been deep: to provide safety and security to animals and plants. Caring for these beings is not because nature has something to give, as traditional thought on environmental security purports. In Bishnoism, the main element of environmental security is the environment itself. It is believed that Bishnois attain a revered place in the after-life through dying in an act of protecting nature (Soule, 2003).

A relatively unknown group, Bishnoism has about 600 million followers worldwide, most of whom live in Rajasthan, India, or hold ties to the region. Others have migrated into nearby states in India, including neighboring Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Haryana. Pankaj Jain writes that although Bishnoism may have ties to Hinduism, Bishnois have even escaped the attention of Hinduism scholars (Jain, 2010).

The most famous act of martyrdom by a Bishnoi occurred when, in the 1700s, the maharaja's army was charged with collecting timber to build a fort. Known as the Khejarli Massacre, it started with a young woman, Amrita Devi, who activated 363 Bishnois to hug the trees which were planned by the army to be cut down. However, these activists were consequently killed by the army. When the king heard of this atrocity, he issued a royal *farman*,

⁵ Story partially adapted from SikhWiki and YouTube films, Accessed on May 1, 2023, at https://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Mai_Bhago, <https://youtu.be/M4oR9WvxZAU>, and https://youtu.be/qJ9a_76VO4A

⁶ 29 Rules Bishnoi, Accessed on April 25, 2023, at <https://www.29rules.bishnoism.org/2020/04/29rules-in-english.html>.

or edict, to protect the religious environmentalists, providing religious and environmental security all at once.



Figure 1: A carving at the new temple construction site depicts the Kherjali Massacre (photo by author)

Greatly distressed by the violent acts committed and moved by the courage of the Bishnoi community, the king apologized for the mistake committed by his officials and issued a decree. “Once word got back to the King about this activity he rushed to the village and apologized, ordering the soldiers to cease logging operations. Soon afterwards, the *maharajah* designated the Bishnoi state as a protected area, forbidding harm to trees and animals. This legislation still exists today in the region” (Alam, 2018, p. 285). The *farman*⁷ prohibited the cutting of green trees and hunting of animals within the boundaries of Bishnoi villages. It was also ordered that the state would prosecute any individual who violated this order, even unknowingly.

The environmental movement started by Amrita Devi continues to inspire Bishnois to fight for and protect animals and plants in their territory. The protocol, which began in the 1700s, is still adhered to today. Through law, animals and plants are now protected in Bishnoi villages. The Bishnois continue to save animals from pleasure hunters and others in the region. The government recognizes the Bishnoi work to save their local environment, and there is even a governmental award, the Amrita Devi Award, honoring those who sacrificed their lives for other living beings (Mehrotra, 2009).

Analysis

There are several similarities between Mai Bhago and Amrita Devi, both of whom are now recognized as community builders and peace activists. First, both Bhago and Bishnoi lived in a similar time frame (late 1600s-early 1700s) in communities that

⁷ Urdu: An irrevocable royal decree

were originally formed in the early 1500s. Both communities evidenced slight deviations from the mainstream religions of the region—Hinduism and Islam—towards what they claimed to be more peaceful practices. Sikhism guarded against persecution based on religion, and supported women’s rights and gender equality. Bishnoism was developed to improve environmental security, which also supported women. Rules eighteen, nineteen, and twenty-two of their doctrine specifically point to the primary methods in which Guru Jambheshwar proposed a means of environmental justice.

Second, both women took their Guru’s words and religious tenets to heart, willing to put their lives at stake for them. Though it was not asked of them to sacrifice their lives, they put themselves on the frontline in order to protect what was important to the religion and communities. As such, they have become role models for women and men in their lineages.

For their courage and work, both have temples dedicated to them, a clear example of the reverence given to them. Prabhjot Kaur (2013) describes two notable sites where Bhago is revered:

1. The home where she lived in Sri Hazur Sahib, outside of Amritsar, while she served the Guru until 1708, known as Bunga Mai Bhago.
2. A hut-home in Jinvara, near Bidar, Karnataka, where Mai Bhago traveled south post-1708 and became converted into Gurudwar Tap Asthan Mai Bhago.

Amrita Devi Bishnoi is one of the most famous figures of Bishnoism, an example by which the community tries to live. There is a temple at Kherjli and several depictions of her work throughout the region in which the community lives (near Jodhpur, Rajasthan). Furthermore, the Government of India (GOI) has instituted an annual national level award, called the Amrita Devi Wildlife Protection Award, to honor persons from rural areas who protect wildlife.⁸

Both women are also recounted in (limited) academic works, depicting the strength of women in their communities at the time, in order to evoke those energies in modern women (Alam, 2012; Kaur, L., 2013; Kaur, P., 2012; Kaur Singh, 2000; Srivastava, 2017). They are meant to be role models of what anyone (not just women) can accomplish when following their core truths. Srivastava finds that Indian environmental movements “can be traced to the efforts of Amrita Devi” (Srivastava, 2017: 3).

The work of these women shows the importance of community in peace activism. Both were leaders and community

⁸ India Science Technology & Innovation, Accessed on May 3, 2023, at <https://www.indiasciencetechnology.gov.in/nurturing-minds/s-and-t-awards/national/amrita-devi-wildlife-protection-award>

builders. Neither woman worked independently or in a silo. Rather, they built a community of believers to fight against injustice. They led through example, increasing capacity in others, both male and female. Through her motivational speeches, Mai Bhago was able to inspire soldiers to generate strength to fight for their religious cause. Amrita Devi rounded up men and women from several Bishnoi villages to hug trees to protect the environment. They both believed this was what their religion prescribed.

Through their work, both women were able to transform the minds of those around them, as well as authorities. Mai Bhago, on the other hand, helped the men revive their spirits and energies to re-enter the battlefield and be unafraid of martyrdom. The guru saw this and reinitiated the men as Sikhs, liberating their soul. Amrita Devi showed a path of peace to the king, and according to Bishnoism, those who died to protect the trees were also liberated.

Mai Bhago, as a warrior on the battlefield, had elements of violence, which were condoned by the religious tradition she followed. While she may have incited war, and ultimately death, she did it in order to defend her religion, and in order to transform the Mughal law into one that provided equality and justice for all religions.

Amrita Devi Bishnoi's work showed a path to non-violent protest, a method which many others (such as Chipkos) have followed in the 1900s and 2000s. In today's world she can be termed as an environmentalist, eco-feminist, or eco-warrior. While Bishnoi did not take up arms, she was a peaceful warrior in the eyes of her community, doing so resulted in her death. Both women ultimately achieved their goal: to uphold the tenets of their religion which fought for peace.

Conclusion

This research highlights the work of two women warriors, who stood up to injustices against their communities' religious beliefs: Mai Bhago, who fought for equality with regards to religion itself; and Amrita Devi, who hugged trees as a protest against tree felling of living trees, which they regarded as living beings. It shows the impact of women warriors, community and capacity building, and peace activism.

References

Alam, K. (2018). A Pioneer of Environmental Movements in India: Bishnoi Movement, in *Journal of Education & Development*, Vol. 8, No. 15, p 283-287.

Bhardwaj, P. (2021). Sikh History and Feminism: Trajectory During the Times of Sikh Gurus and Present Status of Feminism in Sikhism, in *Noesis, The Annual Philosophy Journal of LSR* (Lady Shriram College), Vol. VII, p 32-45.

Clinton, H. R. (2013). Women in the World Summit 2013. Accessed on 1 May, 2023, at <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/5-inspiring-women-our-favorite-quotes/>.

El-Bushra, J. (2007). Feminism, Gender, and Women's Peace Activism. *Development and Change*, 38: 131-147. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2007.00406.x>

Jain, P. (2010). Bishnoi: An Eco-Theological "New Religious Movement" in the Indian Desert. *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, August: 19.1.

Jain, P. (2011). "The Bishnoi Community" in *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability*, p 51-77. London: Routledge.

Kaur, L. (2013). Exploration of Gender Equality in Sikhism, in *Understanding Sikhism—The Research Journal*, Volume 15, No.1-2 (January–December 2013), p 97-102.

Kaur, P. (2012). Women Liberation through the Prism of Sikh Faith. A Wisdom Collection: India.

Kaur Singh, N.G. (2000). Why Did I Not Light the Fire? The Refeminization of Ritual in Sikhism, in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 2000), p 63-85.

Mehrotra, R. (2009, February 6), And now "Conservation Reserves" in Rajasthan in 12th Birding Fair. Accessed on March 10, 2011, from Dedicated to 'Communities in Conservation' at <http://www.birdfair.org/12thBirdingFair.pdf>

Soule, J.P. (2003, February), The Desert Dwellers of Rajasthan: Bishnoi and Bhil People. Accessed on March 10, 2011, from The Native Planet Website at <http://www.nativeplanet.org/indigenous/cultures/india/bishnoi/bishnoi.shtml>

Srivastava, V.K. (2017). Green Political Thought and the Green Movement in India: Role of Women and Civil Society Organizations, in *International Journal of the Uttarakhand Political Science Association*, Vol. 01, Issue 01 (July-December), p 1-10.

Toler, P. (2019). *Women Warriors: An Unexpected History*. Beacon Press: Boston.