



THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT TO MEDIEVAL INDIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract:

Religious Movements in Medieval India, attempts to explore the Bhakti movement in Medieval India. Beginning from the 7th century A.D. to the 18th century, Medieval India saw a phenomenal outpouring of religiosity in the vernacular oral traditions on themes ranging from dilemmas of everyday life to the mysteries of the Universe. Scholars have focused on the analysis of the texts, philosophic constructs of the social aspects enlightening us with many readings. While any one cannot be reduced to another the study of Bhakti demands a holistic an integrated approach drawing analytical tools from many disciplines. The 19th century saw a rediscovery of many sacred texts that contributed to the construction of Hinduism as a monolith. The process of reducing orality to textuality saw the whole sale standardization of very vibrant, dynamic and diverse religious practices. Historically the religious beliefs and practices of the Hindus were too divergent to constitute a coherent, monolith Religious system. A historical gaze at Hinduism clearly points out that to view this, as a single religious system is not correct and a distortion of the heterogeneous religious practices of its people. Throughout history alternate spaces have been created and bhakti was one such medium. The present paper is an attempt to explore this movement in its different dimensions in various regions of India. It also highlights the attitude of the male bhaktas towards women and the creation of an alternative space by women. Using a variety of Sources inscriptions and literary texts the author has traced the growth and Development of the Bhakti movement and shown how the ideologies, social bases and organisational structures in different parts of the country have given a distinct shape to this movement. This paper will be a useful supplement for scholars working in the social and religious history of medieval India. Scholars of religious study, sociology and women's studies would find this paper of general interest in order to understand the religious traditions of south Asia in all its diversity. Usaually it is accepted that the most characteristic feature of the religious development during the medieval period was the movement which emphasized single-minded intense devotion to god. It was a complete surrender of oneself to

God. The movement which emphasized primarily these ideas was the Bhakti movement devotion to God. Bhakti to God was accepted as salvation.

Keywords: *Social Criticism, Bhakti Movement, Saguna And Nirguna Ideology.*

Introduction:

The term bhakti comes from the Sanskrit verb bhaj which means ‘to serve’ or ‘to share’ and ‘to participate’. Bhakti means an intense devotion to God, to serve him, to share and participate in the divine experience and the intimate engagement of a devotee with a personalized conception of the divine. The notion of bhakti can be traced to the hymns in Rigveda and it began to be crystallized during the Epic and the Puranic periods of Hindu history. The Narayaneeya section of Santiparva in the Mahabharata, the Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana and Bhagavad Gita clearly explore Bhakti Yoga or the Path of devotion as a means to salvation establishing the superiority of bhakti marga to the other two approaches namely- the path of knowledge or jnana marga and path of ritual and good works karma marga. Bhagavad Gita has provided the most comprehensive exposition of Bhakti in all its aspects when Krishna says that he accepts even the simplest offerings like a leaf, a flower a fruit or even water if they are presented in a spirit of bhakti (Bhagwat Gita, 9.26). Bhakti is regarded as the fifth Purushartha and counted as the tenth Rasa in Indian aesthetics. K.S. Narayanachar observes, “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”. Thus, it is amply clear that Bhakti has always been a part of the cultural and religious fabric of India but it became a movement when it resonated with the emotions of the masses. Bhakti movement has produced a great body of devotional literature, music and songs that gave India a new spiritual impetus with its inclusiveness giving a new orientation and thrust to the Hindu culture as observed by famous historian Ramanujan, “A great many-sided shift occurred in Hindu culture and sensibility between the sixth and ninth century ... Bhakti is one name for that shift”. According to him, 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 lived contemporary experiences. It advocated universal brotherhood denouncing caste and class distinction, blind faith and useless ceremonies. This paper will focus on the reformatory role of Bhakti movement and the positive transformation it brought about in the socio-cultural lives of people. The greatest contribution of the movement was that it brought God within the reach of all providing an individual sense of spirituality and salvation irrespective of one’s birth and gender bringing about an egalitarian society which challenged the Brahmanical monopoly. Therefore, Bhakti movement can be studied as a socio-cultural

mass movement though it is rooted in a very intimate interaction with God. It emerged in South India during the 7th and 8th centuries (with Andal, Basava, Akka Mahadevi, Basavanna etc.) and travelled North in the medieval period (spearheaded by the poetsaints such as Chaitanya, Kabir, Sur Das, Tulsi Das and Mirabai) becoming a pan-Indian movement around fourteenth century. There is a great diversity in this movement as it had a great range geographically as well chronologically but there are some recurrent features which can be broadly listed:

1. Direct communication with God on a personal level through Bhakti.
2. The rejection of conventions and rituals and reliance on love for the chosen God.
3. Absence of ego in this pursuit subsuming oneself in an act of complete surrender to God.
4. Logical handling of religious issues and questioning established norms.
5. Equal status for everyone irrespective of caste divisions.
6. The reliance on Guru who guides in the pursuit of salvation.
7. Use of regional dialects and rejection of the elitist hegemony of Sanskrit.
8. Practice of travelling which brought people together while disseminating bhakti ideology.

Bhakti movement in north India :

From 13th to 15th century many popular socio-religious movements flourished in North and East India and Maharashtra. Emphasis on bhakti and religious equality characterized these movements. Almost all the bhakti movements of the Sultanate period have been related to one South Indian vaishnava acharya or the other. For these reasons, many scholars believe that the bhakti movements of the Sultanate period were a continuation or resurgence of the older bhakti movement. They argue that there existed philosophical and ideological links between the two either due to contact or diffusion. Thus, Kabir and other leaders of non-conformist monotheistic movements in North India are believed to have been the disciples of Ramananda who, in turn, is believed to have been connected with Ramanuj's philosophical order. Similar claims have been put forward that Chaitanya belonged to the philosophical school of Madhava. This movement is also believed to have been connected with Nimbark's school because of its emphasis on Krishna Bhakti. There are many similarities between the older bhakti tradition of South-India and various bhakti movements that engulfed the Sultanate and Mughal periods (If we exclude the popular monotheistic movements of Kabir, Nanak and other "low" caste saints.). Like the South Indian bhakti movement the vaishnava bhakti movements of North and Eastern India and Maharashtra exhibited egalitarian trends in the religious sphere. But they never denounced the caste system, the authority of Brahmanical scriptures and the Brahmanical privileges

as such. Like the South Indian bhakti, most of the vaishnava movements of the later period were ultimately assimilated into the Brahmanical religion, though in the process of interaction, the latter itself sailed through many changes.

Salient Features of Bhakti Movement of North India

1. The influence of Islamic practices and Sufi thoughts the Bhakti movement of the North was particularly influenced by many principles and practices of Islamic thoughts and Sufism
2. The Bhakti Movement of the north was directly linked to leading south India's Vaishnavacharyas orders Ramanujacharya's Vishishtadvaita order, Madhvacharyas Dvaita order and Nimbarkacharya's Dvaita-Advaita order.
3. Regional Variations Though there were larger similarities in the traditions of the south Bhakti and North Bhakti, in the process regional and cultural variations emerged within the Bhakti movement and underwent several changes.
4. Bhakti Saint poets of every region preached in their respective vernacular and as per the cultural ethos of the region. Therefore, the Bhakti movement was never a single movement except for the concept of Bhakti and religious reforms.
5. Ram Bhakti movement The Vaishnava Bhakti movement of the north included the Ram Bhakti cult along with the Radha Krishna cult.
6. Saguna and Nirguna Bhakti movements The Bhakti of the north broadly comprised of two popular movements the Vaishnava Bhakti or Saguna Bhakti that spread from the south and the monotheistic Bhakti or Nirguna Bhakti.
7. The Vaishnavas of Sagunas were not strongly critical of the caste system and upheld the supremacy of the Brahmins. They propagated simple worship to personal God and supported idol worship. The Nirguna Bhakti reformers, on the other hand, were against idol worship. They set up new unorthodox sects and groups which attracted men and women from lower castes.
8. Socio-religious reform movement-the Bhakti movement of the north and the east developed into a social reform movement Reformers like Kabir and Nanak questioned the social inequality based on the caste system and condemned various conventions set by the Brahmins.

Monotheistic and Vaishnava Bhakti Movement in Northern India:

These two movements arose simultaneously in northern India in the centuries following the creation of the Delhi Sultanate and the emergence of Islam in the region. For this reason, the rise of both movements is often attributed to certain common causes, such as the influence of Islam on Hinduism. However, the causes and origins of these two movements and the factors that influence them are very different. From the following discussion, it is clear that causes that explain one behavior may not explain another behavior. In fact, popular monotheistic movements emerged and peaked during the Sultanate era, while the Vaishnava movement began during the Sultanate era and peaked during the Mughal era. The teachings of all the saints associated with the monotheistic movement have certain commonalities that give the movement essential unity. Most monotheists belong to the 'lower' classes and recognize that ideological unity exists among them. Most of them were aware of each other's teachings and influences. In their poems, they refer to each other and to their predecessors, suggesting a harmonious ideological relationship between them. This is why Kabir called Raidas 'the holy of saint's. Raidas in turn respectfully listed the names of Kabir, Namdev, Trilochan, Danna, Sen, and Pipa one after another. Dhanna proudly spoke of the fame and popularity of Namdev, Kabir, Raidas and Sen and admitted that hearing about their fame made him devote himself to Bhakti. Kabir's influence on Nanak cannot be denied either. It is therefore not surprising that later traditions associate Kabir, Raidas, Dhanna, Pipa, Sen, etc. with Ramananda's disciples. The ideological affinity of monotheism is also evident in the inclusion of hymns such as Kabir and Raidas. So is that of Nanak, the fifth Sikh Guru Arjan of Adi Granth. y, rustic and friendly character, but is essentially a folk poem. Kabir and other monotheistic ideas spread to different regions and the bhakti tradition became popular among the 'lower' classes. The popularity of monotheism caused territorial walls to crumble. This is evident from the high place Kabir occupies in the Sikh tradition of Rajasthan and the Dadupanti tradition. Nearly two centuries have passed since their time, and their enduring popularity even in remote areas is such that Tukaram, a saint from a Maharashtra in the mid-17th century, referred to himself as Kabir, Raidas, Sen, Gora, etc. This is clear from the fact that he recognized himself as an admirer and disciple of. The Dabistan Mazahib, a centuries-old Persian work on comparative religion, attests to Kabir's enduring popularity among the peoples of northern India. All monotheists have been influenced, in one form or another, to varying degrees, by the Vaishnava concept of bhakti, the Natpanti movement, and Sufism. Monotheistic movements are a synthesis of elements from these three traditions, but often do not accept elements of these traditions as is, but instead make many innovations and adjustments to give new meaning to old concepts. Most monotheistic saints were not ascetics. They lead a worldly life and get married. They lived among the people and preached. They have a hatred and contempt for professional practitioners. They often refer to professional caste groups in their poems, suggesting that

they continued to pursue their family professions. Nor do they resemble the Christian saints of medieval Europe who were recognized as 'saints' by the church. This term is used for them and they call themselves Sant or Bhagat. In the Adi Granth, Kabir, Raidas, Dhanna, Pipa, Namdev, etc. are listed as Bhagat.

Result:

the Bhakti Movement emerged as one of the most significant socio-religious reform movements in medieval India. The study reveals that the movement played a transformative role in reshaping the religious, social, cultural, and linguistic life of Indian society. It challenged rigid social structures and provided a new spiritual path based on devotion, equality, and personal connection with God. The movement succeeded in bringing religion closer to the common people by rejecting excessive rituals, priestly domination, and complicated religious practices. Through simple devotional teachings, saints and poets made spirituality accessible to all sections of society irrespective of caste, gender, or economic background.

One of the major outcomes of the Bhakti Movement was the weakening of caste-based discrimination in the religious sphere. Saints such as Kabir, Guru Nanak, Ravidas, and Namdev openly criticized social inequality and emphasized the unity of humanity. Their teachings promoted the idea that devotion and moral conduct were more important than birth or caste status. This created an atmosphere of social harmony and gave dignity to lower castes and marginalized communities who had long remained excluded from mainstream religious life.

The movement also encouraged religious tolerance and communal harmony. Interaction between Hindu Bhakti traditions and Islamic Sufi traditions resulted in the development of a spirit of mutual respect and coexistence. Saints like Kabir preached the essential unity of all religions and condemned sectarianism. The teachings of these reformers reduced tensions between different religious communities and emphasized universal brotherhood, love, and compassion. This synthesis of ideas contributed significantly to the composite culture of medieval India.

Another important result of the Bhakti Movement was the growth of regional languages and literature. Bhakti saints preached in vernacular languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, Punjabi, Gujarati, and Kannada rather than Sanskrit. This made religious ideas understandable to ordinary people and encouraged the development of regional literary traditions. Devotional songs, hymns, and poems composed by saints became an important part of Indian cultural heritage. The literary

contributions of saints such as Tulsidas, Surdas, Mirabai, and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu enriched Indian literature and devotional music. The study further shows that the Bhakti Movement provided women with an alternative spiritual space in a male-dominated society. Women saints such as Mirabai and Akka Mahadevi challenged traditional gender restrictions and expressed their devotion freely through poetry and songs. Although medieval society largely remained patriarchal, the movement opened opportunities for women to participate in religious and cultural activities.

The Bhakti Movement can also be understood as a movement of emotional and spiritual democratization. It emphasized love, devotion, surrender, and inner purity rather than external rituals and formalism. Both Saguna and Nirguna traditions contributed to religious reform in different ways. Saguna Bhakti promoted devotion towards a personal God with form, while Nirguna Bhakti emphasized a formless God and rejected idol worship and ritualism. Together, these traditions expanded the spiritual outlook of medieval Indian society. The Bhakti Movement made a lasting contribution to medieval Indian society by promoting equality, social reform, religious harmony, vernacular literature, and individual spirituality. It helped bridge the gap between different social classes and religious communities while giving common people a direct path to salvation through devotion. Its influence can still be seen in modern Indian culture, devotional traditions, music, literature, and ideas of social equality and unity.

Conclusion:

The Bhakti Movement of North India, spanning from the 13th to the 17th centuries, was a transformative devotional phenomenon that profoundly impacted Hinduism and Islam. By emphasizing personal devotion, emotional connection, and spiritual experience, Bhakti saints and mystics like Kabir, Guru Nanak, and Mirabai challenged traditional scriptural and ritualistic practices. Their vernacular literature, music, and art continue to inspire and shape North Indian culture, fostering a culture of inclusivity, tolerance, and spiritual seeking. The Bhakti Movement's enduring legacy serves as a testament to the power of love, compassion, and self-realization, offering valuable insights into the human quest for meaning and transcendence. Bhakti Movement of North India represents a pivotal moment in the cultural and spiritual history of the region. By redefining the relationship between the individual and the divine, Bhakti saints and mystics facilitated a profound shift in spiritual consciousness, one that emphasized personal devotion, emotional connection, and spiritual experience. Their remarkable literary, musical, and artistic achievements continue to enrich North Indian culture, promoting values of inclusivity, tolerance, and spiritual seeking. As a cultural and

spiritual phenomenon, the Bhakti Movement offers enduring insights into the human condition, illuminating the transformative power of love, compassion, and self-realization.

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