
Bhakti Movement in Medieval India: A Study

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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.

KEY WORDS: Social Criticism, Bhakti Movement, Saguna And Nirguna Ideology.

INTRODUCTION:

The most powerful characteristic of the medieval age in India was the Bhakti movement. Bhakti as a religious concept means devotional surrender to a personally conceived supreme God for attaining salvation. The origin of this doctrine has been traced to both the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions of ancient India and to various scriptures such as the Gita. But it was for the first time in South India between the 7th and the 10th century that Bhakti emerged from a mere religious doctrine into a popular movement based on religious equality and broad-based social participation. The movement which was spearheaded by popular saint-poets reached its apex in the 10th century after which it began to decline. However, it was revamped as a philosophical and ideological

movement by a series of ambulatory scholars or acharyas, beginning with Ramanuja in the 11th century. The establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi coincided with many widespread socio-religious movements in various parts of the country drawing upon the concepts of bhakti. These movements have been perceived as revival of the older South Indian bhakti movement. But each one of these later movements had a historical context of its own and its own peculiarities.

MEANING OF BHAKTI MOVEMENT

Usually 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.

MAIN FEATURES OF THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

- Unity of God or one God though known by different names.
- Bhakti, intense love and devotion, the only way to salvation.
- Repetition of the True Name.
- Self-Surrender.
- Condemnation of rituals, ceremonies and blind faith.
- Rejections of idols worship by many saints.
- Open-mindedness about deciding religious matters.
- No distinction of different castes, higher or low.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The medieval Bhakti movement has undoubtedly been the most widespread, far ranging and multi-faceted movement to have affected the Indian subcontinent. In its genesis, the objective of the movement was individual salvation and mystical union with god, rather than a change in the living condition of the masses. But it became a platform for the marginalised sections to protest against social inequalities based on the 'varna' system and vedic scriptures, its custodians (the Brahmins who had the sole right to interpret them) and its benefactors (the kings and the aristocracy). In my paper, I would like to review the Bhakti movement as a socialist criticism and will be drawing upon the social philosophies of major saints, Kabir and Nanak in particular, who were the exemplars of social reformation.

During the rule of the Gupta dynasty in Northern India from fourth to sixth centuries AD, the Hindu culture came to be firmly established. They called themselves the bhagvatas- devotees of God – and identified themselves with the lineage of Lord Vishnu; thus establishing the precedent of a royalty blessed by divinity and kingship by heredity. The language of the gods i.e. Sanskrit became the official language of the state. These ideas were instantaneously lapped up by the Dravidians, who called themselves the descendants of Lord Brahma and became the upholders of the Vedic tradition. The inception of Bhakti in the sixth century South India was thus the logical result of its interaction with the North which led to the emergence of a rigidly caste ridden society with oppressing policies towards the lower caste shudras and mleccas. The presence of reformative and humanitarian religions like Jainism and Buddhism, which had provided an opportune escape for the oppressed masses, also led to the transformation of Vedic

ideology into sympathetic religions of Shaivism and Vaishnavism to dissuade people from converting. Although Shiva bhakti was more popular in the agrarian setup, it subsumed under its fold the various Shakti cults (i.e. primitive local deities) as continuing forms of worship. Emerging from Tantriks and Nathpanthi sadhus (under Gorakhnath) which existed in the northern and western parts of India, these movements began the protests against caste and gender barriers which prohibited the people from worshipping their personal gods in their vernacular. The temple gates were forced open and the lower castes were allowed to join in the worship rituals. This marked a radical step towards the departure from institutionalised religion. While the southern movement of Bhakti was fundamentally egalitarian in spirit, it hardly denounced the caste system or Brahmanical privileges. Thereafter, it developed in eleventh and twelfth century Karnataka as the Virashaivas (developed from the Shaiva cult, also known as Lingayats), the outrightly iconoclastic sect, questioning the conventions of Brahmanical orthodoxy, deconstructing sacrificial rituals, inducing social reform, and propagating the Puranic religion. Thus, both of these movements were “revolts from within”, i.e. they induced a sense of liberality in the social structure and made use of vernacular forms of Prakrit as more acceptable forms of Bhakti hymns. The Bhakti movement began in the sixth-seventh century in south India with the rise of Hindu devotional cults, gradually spread throughout the country, and lasted till the sixteenth - seventeenth century.¹

When the popularity of the Bhakti movement in South India was on the wane, the concept of bhakti was defended at the philosophical level by some gifted Vaishnava Brahmin scholars (acharyas).

Ramanuja (11th century) was the first among them. He gave philosophical justification for bhakti. He tried to establish a careful balance between orthodox Brahmanism and popular bhakti which was open to all. Though he did not support the idea of the lower castes having access to the Vedas, he advocated bhakti as a mode of worship accessible to all including the Sudras and even the outcastes. While propagating bhakti, he did not observe caste distinctions and even tried to eradicate untouchability. Nimbarka, a Telegu Brahman, is believed to have been a younger contemporary of Ramanuja. He spent most of his time in Vrindavan near Mathura in North India. He believed in total devotion to Krishna and Radha. Another South Indian vaishnavite bhakti philosopher was Madhava who belonged to the 13th century. Like Ramanuja he did not dispute orthodox Brahmanical restriction of the Vedic study by the Sudras. He believed that bhakti provided alternate avenue of worship to the Sudras. His philosophical system was based on the Bhagvat Purana. He is also believed to have toured North India. The last two prominent vaishnava acharyas were Ramananda (late 14th and early 15th century) and Vallabha (late 15th and early 16th century).

In the thirteenth and fourteenth century, the movement swiftly spread upwards. In Maharashtra, under the aegis of Jyandev and Namdev, it took the form of Vithoba cult (an offshoot of the Varkari group) which preached exemplary standards of castelessness and a non-hierarchical life of fellow humanism, spread the message of love and unity, and urged people to shed their slough of rituals and superstitions. Namdev further carried the ethos of Varkari Panth to North India (Punjab) in the latter half of fifteenth century.

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.

Bhakti movement was never a single movement except in the broad doctrinal sense of a movement which laid emphasis on bhakti and religious equality. The Bhakti movements of medieval India differed in many significant respects from the older South Indian bhakti tradition. Heterogeneity could be noticed even among the bhakti movements which flourished in medieval India. Each one of them had its own regional identity and socio-historical and cultural contexts. Thus the non-conformist movements based on popular monotheistic bhakti contained features that were essentially different from various vaishnava bhakti movements. Kabir's notion of bhakti was not the same as that of the medieval vaishnava saints such as Chaitanya or Mirabai. Within the vaishnava movement the historical context of Maharashtra bhakti was different from that of the Bengal vaishnavism or North Indian bhakti movement of Ramanand, Vallabha, Surdas and Tulsidas. Later on, when the vaishnava bhakti movement crystallised into sects, there arose frequent disputes between them which sometimes even turned violent. Among all the bhakti movements of the period between the 14th and the 17th century, the popular monotheistic movements of Kabir, Nanak, Raidas and other lower caste saints stand out fundamentally different.

SAGUNA AND NIRGUNA IDEOLOGY

To determine what Bhakti was, we should start with two general divisions of it into the Saguna and Nirguna traditions. Saguna means 'having qualities' and possessing a concretized form. Following the general idea of a unified Deity, Saguna Bhakti supposed that God should be worshiped in same anthropomorphic form of either Rama or Krishna. Among the followers of this traditions were such humanities of medieval

Indian culture as Vallabhacharya, the founder of the celebrated 'Pushti Marg' community in Braj. Members of this community consisted of the poets of the 'Ashtachap', among whom Surdas was especially famous, and other great poets like Vidyapati, Jais and Rashkhan, Tulsidas, Mirabai, Narsi Maheta, the galaxy of Marathi Varkari saints and the Bengali luminary Chaitnya. No less a popularity was enjoyed by the communities and saints of Nirguna Bhakti {nirguna means devoid of qualities}. Among its most celebrated representatives were Kabir, Ravidas (Raidas), Garibdas, Malukdas, Akho Bhagat, Charandas, Dadu Dayal and others. Early Sikhism of Nanak had many features similar to Nirguna Bhakti. The adherents of this tradition followed strict monotheism and believed that Rama, Krishna and Allah were the names of the same God, which was understood by them as an Absolute, devoid of any visible form or life story, and hence no temples, rituals and priests were needed to worship him. The whole of the Nirguna Bhakti literature objects to 'Pathar Puja' or stone worship.²

Both traditions of Bhakti were a challenge to the orthodox religion because many moral, social and ethical categories were critically reviewed by the saints. For instance, the traditional idea of the mundane world being maya (illusion) and God being the 'Reality', was re-considered by the Bhaktas. God, was according to them, dissolved in the mundane being, hence to know God there was no need to renounce the world in the way the ascetics did. According to some scholars, medieval Bhakti emerged as a response to the invasion of Islam. According to K.M. Panikkar, 'Bhakti.... provided calm to the bleeding soul of Hinduism in Northern India during the period of

Muslim Occupation'. Similar views on Bhakti were held by Joshi, Krishna Rao and others.³ Such an estimate does not agree with the facts of history, for if Bhakti was a response to the challenge of Islam, then we cannot account for the development of Bhakti in many regions of India especially in the south, much before the Muslim invasion.

Bhakti indeed was an answer to a challenge, but not to the challenge of Islam. It owed its development to many important changes in Indian society and culture. These changes occurred very gradually, sometimes in different directions, and none of them can be defined as the only important one.

The influence of Bhakti communities was very strong. They played a great role in the development of not only social thought and religion, but also music, literature and fine arts. Many Bhakti preachers as well as Sufis traveled through out India and spread their ideas in different regions. On the one hand, as Ashraffyan has rightly observed, the spread of the Bhakti ideas to different parts and ethnic groups of India testifies to their similar social development.⁴ On the other hand, the spread of Bhakti became a part of India's cultural integrity and unity.

Thus approximately up to the first half of the seventeenth century the main key to the understanding of *Bhakti* ideas was through the sects and fraternities, peaceful gatherings of submissive followers of *Nirguna Bhakti* or *Saguna Bhakti*. Feudal authorities both Hindu and Muslim, who were sympathetic to these sects, some times granted them lands and money.⁵

Historically the growth of the *Bhakti* movement can be divided into two phases: the first, from its early development in South India to the 13th century; the second, from the thirteenth century to the seventeenth, when in north India it came in contact with Islam, was inspired by its monotheism and

stimulated by its challenge, and developed against it a system of self-defence and selfpreservation for Hindu spirituality by borrowing Islam's monotheistic egalitarianism.

THE SCHOOL AND SAINTS OF BHAKTI MOVEMENT

The Varkari panth was an important center of Bhakti in Maharashtra. This school of Bhakti worshipped the local deity Vithosa who was supposed to be an incarnation of Krishna. The main center of Varkari tradition was the city of Pandharpur, to which the devotees still make annual pilgrimages. This school of Bhakti gave birth to a galaxy of poets like Namder, Nashari, Bahinabai, Chokha, Mela, and of course Eknath and Tukaram.⁶

In Maharashtra during the 17th century the most influential of Maratha saints was Tuka Ram (b. 1608) whose conception of God was very much like that of Kabir and who occasionally used Sufi terms in his hymns. Sukaram, who is generally believed to have inspired Shivaji as his spiritual guide, does not seem to have shared his dislike of Islam or of the Muslims. Some of his verses could have been written only by one who believed not only in one God but also in the mission of the prophet.⁷

The Bhakti many, both in the south and in the north could not be considered as a single unified movement; it had many facets and its sources were diverse. Bhakti literature is an important part of Tamil literature. It is nonvedic and its traces are found in Buddhist and Jain literature as well.⁸

KABIR(1440-1518)

Kabir was the earliest and undoubtedly the most powerful figure of the monotheistic movements that began in the 15th century.

He belonged to a family of weavers (Julaha) who were indigenous converts to Islam. He spent greater part of his life in Banaras (Kashi). The monotheistic saints who succeeded him either claimed to be his disciples or respectfully mention him. His verses were included in the Sikh scripture, the 'Adi-Granth' in large numbers than those of other monotheists. All this indicate his pre-eminent position among the monotheists. Raidas (or Ravidas) most probably belonged to the generation next to Kabir's. He was a tanner by caste. He also lived in Banaras and was influenced by Kabir's ideas. Dhanna was a 15th century Jaat peasant from Rajasthan. Other prominent saints of the same period were Sen (a barber) and Pipa.

DADU DAYAL (1544-1603)

Dadu was a spiritual descendent of Kabir. He was a contemporary of Akbar. Among Bhakti poets of the eclectic group Dadu Dayal (1544-1603) came nearest to Sufism.⁹ Like Kabir he rejected the authority of Hindu and Muslim scriptures, denounced the priest craft and believed passionately in the worship of God as Ram.

Through out identified with the tradition of Kabir, Gorakhnath and others, he enter the court under the insignia of Kabir - uttering the names of Ram, Rahim and Allah - further aligning Akbar with that same tradition. Akbar, hearing of Dadu and impressed by Dadu's pupil, repeatedly asks him to come to the court. Since Dadu was a preacher who covered a large area in northern India, the language of his verses must have varied according to the audience he was addressing Dadu's verses have been preserved in the traditions - the oral (maghazia) and the written (Kaghazia).¹⁰ The verses communicated orally have not yet been compiled.

Dadu fully accepts the social function of all classes and groups in the society of his day. In fact he used the smile of God for almost every one of them in different verses thus elevating their position in society. The Dadupanthi sect was synergetic in the beginning one of its early exponents being Rajjabdas, a re-convert to Hinduism.¹¹ Gradually it transformed itself from an esoteric to a militant orientation under the influence of the vairagis and the Sikhs.¹²

NANAK(1469-1539)

Nanak preached his ideas much in the same way as Kabir and other monotheists, but due to various developments later his teachings led to the emergence of a mass religion, Sikhism. The basic similarity of his teachings with those of Kabir and other saints and the basic ideological agreement between them makes him an integral part of the monotheistic movement. He belonged to a caste of traders called Khatri and was born in Nankana village of Punjab (Nankana Sahib is the full name). In his later life he travelled widely to preach his ideas. Eventually he settled in a place in Punjab now known as Dera Baba Nanak. There he attracted large number of disciples. The hymns composed by him were incorporated in the 'Adi-Granth' by the 5th Sikh Guru Arjan Dev in 1604.

BIR BHAN (1543)

A contemporary of Dadu founded the Satnami sect which demounced caste system. The followers of the Satnami sect married within their own sect and believed in monotheists. In Sundardas the eclectic school of Bhakti returned to orthodoxy; though he enjoyed the patronage of Muslim

nobles he was essentially a scholar of Sanskrit. His Sundar Vitasa draws purely from

Sanskrit sources.¹³ The difference between the eclectic and the orthodox Ramaite Bhakti school is that whereas the former worshiped God as Ram, the latter worshiped Rama, the son of Dasratha king of Ayodha as God.

TULSIDAS (1532-1623)

The great representative of the orthodox Ramaite school (Saguna) was Tulsidas (1532-1623) who is said to have enjoyed the patronage of Abdul Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, but wrote exclusively for the Hindus without any attempt at eclecticism. His great contribution was 'Ram Carita Manas', the religious epic of the life of Rama, and in its spiritual significance a work as great in its way as Valmiki's Ramayan, and more popular. He regarded all eclecticism including that of Kabir and Akbar as hypocritical. 'Kal-Yug' (evil time) has swallowed the Dharma (religion), scriptures are lost; hypocrites have established religious sects at will.... Brahmins sell the Vedas; the rulers have no sense of morality.¹⁴ Neither the farmers has land nor the beggar alms, merchants have no income, menids no jobs; every one is hungry and distressed This is due to Ravana of poverty. 'O' Ram kill this demon of poverty as you killed Ravan.¹⁵

CHAITANYA (1485-1533)

In Bengal Chaitanya (1485-1533) started a *Bhakti* movement in the form of Krishna work ship. He believed firmly in devotion to God, Krishna in his case, and rejected the ritual and caste system of Hinduism. The main purpose of religious life was the attainment of an ecstatic feeling in the love of God, which was helped by music, this feeling could be any men whatever his creed or caste, provided he devoted himself to the

love of God.¹⁶ It has recently been pointed out that after becoming a sanyasin, Chaitanya spend twenty years of his life in the Hindu Kingdom of Orissa away from Muslim Bengal.¹⁷ Chaitaniya is also reported to have converted a Muslim theologian Bijli Khan to Vaishnavism¹⁸ and according to another tradition a group of Pathans.¹⁹ But Kartabhajas, a group among chaitaniya's followers were monotheists and synergetic and had contact with Muslim faqirs, they recruited Muslims and Christian into their fold and celebrated their *Sabbath* on Friday.²⁰

MIRABAI (1498-1546)

A very charming figure in the Krishna cult of North India is that of the princess Mira Bai, who worshiped Krishna in the name of Girdhar-Gopal or Hari and though she denounced Hindu ritual, her devotion was intensely subjective and more and less untouched by the polemical atmosphere that was simultaneously borrowing from Islam and rejecting it. Mira started to worship Sri Krishna since her childhood. She has also been regarded as an incarnation of Radha. Krishna P. Bahadur opines –“Mira did not deliberately choose her words to create an effect” but measured her poetry to be “the spontaneous outburst of her heart” which “achieved perfection because of her artless and deep emotions.”²¹

CONCLUSION

The Bhakti movement was essentially the phenomenal revolt of the marginalised segment (i.e. the lower castes and classes) at decentralising the hierarchy imposed by the Brahmin fraternity. From its very inception, the Bhakti ideology was guided by a humanising cosmopolitanism, an emotional

fervour and a thirst for the divine essence and personal experience. In its initiation, it had rebelled against the caste ridden system of the Brahmanized south. Later as it reached Maharashtra, it continued its fight against the Vedicfanatics. Somewhere midway through the eleventh and twelfth century marked the arrival of Islam and the Sufis. In the oppressing darkness of the medieval ages, the devotional music of Sufis gave birth to the Nirguna School of Santism as opposed to the existing Saguna School of Bhakti of Vaishnava-Shaivite cult. From then on, saints from all over the northern and eastern India, gave a unified social protest against the inequalities of the caste/class system, the practice of untouchability, feudal reforms and achieved equal rights to coexist (with Brahmins and Muslims) with dignity.

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