

CC-5: HISTORY OF INDIA (CE 750-1206)

V. RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS:

A. BHAKTI, TANTRISM, PURANIC TRADITIONS; POPULAR RELIGIOUS CULTS.

Religious developments in early medieval India show continuities with the preceding centuries and can be reconstructed on the basis of religious texts, inscriptions, architecture, and sculptural remains. At the level of popular worship, the focus was on devotional worship in temples and on pilgrimage. The Hindu cults, especially those associated with the worship of Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti, became increasingly popular. The Tantric tradition became more visible and exerted its influence over Hindu, Buddhist and, to a lesser extent, Jaina traditions. While the Hindu cults were fairly widespread throughout the subcontinent, Buddhism and Jainism had a more restricted provenance. The age-old naga cults still held their ground, as evident in the importance of the worship of the Naga in Kashmir.

The relationship between different cults and sects was partly marked by interaction and a certain level of syncretism. For instance, the Jaina tirthankara Rishabha was turned into an avatara of Vishnu in the Bhagavata Purana. As already mentioned, certain Puranas include the Buddha among the incarnations of Vishnu. A verse in Jayadeva's Gita Govind refers to the Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Keshava (Vishnu). The Brihadishvara temple at Tanjore has a large image of a seated Buddha to the right of the main gateway and the Buddha under a bodhi tree is depicted in some relief carvings around the temple. At the same time, the relationship between religious traditions and sects could also be marked by tensions and rivalry, an example of which is the hostility between Shaivas and Jainas in South India. Such antagonism was sometimes expressed

in graphic iconic form for instance in sculptures of deities trampling on their rivals.

Although certain theistic tracts are ascribed to Shankara, Advaita Vedanta is not essentially theistic philosophical system. At the level of popular practice, however, it was theistic worship that prevailed, and along with this, there was the development of a theology of bhakti. Within the Hindu tradition, although many deities (e.g., Surya, Ganesha Kartikeya, and Brahma) formed the locus of devotional worship, it was the Vaishnava Shaiva, and Shakta cults that were the most popular.

Although at one level, deities like Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti formed the focus of exclusive worship of devotees who considered them supreme deities, at another level, they were also part of a larger community of gods. Monolatry—a belief in a supreme god without denying the existence of other gods—is an important aspect of Hinduism. This is why, apart from representations of the presiding deity, Hindu temples often depict various other deities as well.

VISHNUISM AND SHIVAISM

Textual evidence and temple sculpture indicate that the idea of the ten incarnations of Vishnu was more or less standardized in the early medieval period. Pancharatra texts expanded on the idea of the vyuhas (emanations) of Vishnu, and the number of vyuhas increased from 4 to 24.

The divine cowherd Krishna emerged as a major locus of devotional worship within Vishnuism. The Harivamsha, a supplement to the Mahabharata, describes the many legends associated with Krishna's childhood and youth. The Bhagavata Purana is another important Vaishnava text. It seems to have been composed in South India in the 10th centuries. Book 10 of this Purana is the Krishna-charita, which gives a detailed account of Krishna's life—his birth and his childhood with his foster-parents Nanda and Yashodha; his cowherd life in

Braja and his miraculous exploits such as killing Putana and overcoming the serpent Kaliya; and his relationship with the gopis (cowherd girls). The Text speaks in particular of one gopi whom Krishna desires especially, but does not mention her name. In Krishna bhakti, the love of the gopis for Krishna, their longing for him and their grief at their separation from him, is used as a metaphor for the relationship between devotee and God.

There are stray references to Radha in earlier texts such as the Matsya, Varaha, and Linga Puranas. It was Jayadeva's celebrated 12th century lyric poem, the Gita Govinda that brought Radha into the limelight. Sculptural representations of the various avatars of Vishnu have been found in many parts of the subcontinent. The goddesses Lakshmi, Sarasvati, and Bhudevi are often associated with him. Vaishnava devotionism acquired a strong expression in South India in the hymns of the Alvars. Many Vaishnava temples and sculptures are attributed to the early medieval period. Many Vaishnava temples and sculptures are attributed to the early medieval period.

The increasing popularity of the worship of Shiva was accompanied by the development of various Shaiva philosophical schools, whose ideas show considerable overlap. The Agamas considered authoritative texts by followers of Shaiva Siddhanta, Kashmir Shivaism and the Virashaiva tradition. They are considered as containing the words of Shiva himself and are supposed to be taught only to select initiates. These Agamas seem to have been composed in the Tamil-speaking area between c.400 and 800 CE. Although they recognise the importance of knowledge (jnana), ritual (kriya) and yogic practice and conduct (charya), they attach prime importance to bhakti. Recognizing the authority of the Vedic tradition, they nevertheless consider Shaiva bhakti as superior to the performance of Vedic sacrifices.

Shaiva Siddhanta was a major Shaiva philosophical school in South India. It recognized three eternal principles-God (Shiva), the universe, and souls. Shiva was considered to have created the world through his will and energy (shakti).

The influential Kashmir Shaiva school was associated with a monistic or non-dualistic philosophy, according to which the atman (individual soul) and the world were identical with Shiva. The universe was considered a manifestation created by Shiva through his creative power, and is compared to a reflection of a city or village in a mirror. Shakti is considered the feminine aspect of the god. The ideas of the Kashmir Shaiva school are contained in the Shivasutras, which, according to tradition, were revealed by the god himself to a sage named Vasugupta, who can be placed in the 8th-9th centuries.

Shaiva bhakti became extremely popular in South India due to the ideas and activities of the Nayanmar saints.

THE SHAKTI CULT

The worship of Goddesses associated with fertility is one of the oldest and most enduring features of the religious practice in the subcontinent. In the course of the 1st millennium, the Puranas tried to bring some of the goddesses together, presenting them as different manifestations of the female principle- Shakti. The Durga-Gayatri in the Taittiriya Aranyaka is the first place where we find the names of some of the goddesses who later came to be associated with the worship of Shakti- Katyayani, Kanyakumari, Durga. Durga is described as an impetuous, energetic goddess. The growing popularity of the worship of Durga is reflected in the epics. The Devi-Mahatmya which was incorporated into the Markandeya Purana by about the 7th century BCE, contains verses in praise of the Devi and gives many accounts of her exploits and greatness.

Architectural and sculptural remains from various parts of the subcontinent reflect the widespread worship of Durga, as well as the allied cults of the

Matrikas (usually mentioned as seven or eight in number) and the Yoginis. Multi-armed Durga images of this period occur in large numbers, especially in eastern India. They also occur in the Tamil Nadu area, where an iconographic peculiarity is the association of the goddess with a stag. Representations of the goddess as Nishumbhamardini (slayer of the demon Nishumbha) occur among the reliefs at many temples belonging to the Chola period. The worship of the Sapta-Matrikas and Yoginis was also popular in eastern India. In Orissa, several Matrika images have been found in and near Jajpur (among other areas), and hypaethral (roofless) temples of the Yoginis occur at Ranipur Jharial and Hirapur.

The inscriptions of early medieval India refer to many local goddesses. For instance, those of Orissa mention Viraja and Stambheshvari, and those of Assam mention Kamakhya. The Puranic tradition wove the many goddess cults together by developing the idea that the various local goddesses were manifestations of one great goddess, the great Devi. The Kalika Purana is an important Shakta text belonging to the early medieval period. Composed in the area of Assam or in some adjoining part of Bengal, it reflects the diverse forms of the worship of Devi. The Purana also contains details of the performance of the popular festival of Durga Puja. The Devi Bhagvata refers to such places as pithas. The Kalika Purana mentions seven pithas, associated with places where the dismembered pieces of Sati's body are supposed to have fallen. These were located at Purnagiri, Devikuta, Uddiyana, Kamagiri, the eastern point of Kamarupa, the western point of Kamarupa, and Jalandhar. Pilgrimage to Shakta pithas were well established in the early medieval period.

An important landmark in the cultural history of medieval India was the silent revolution in the society known as the Bhakti Movement. The term Bhakti symbolises devotion or passionate love for the Divine. The Bhakti Movement we known about had its genesis in southern India in the 7th and 12th century

CE. It was in south India that the Bhakti grew from a religious tradition to a popular movement, based on notions of religious equality and broad-based social participation. It is characterised by the writing of its poet-saints, the Shaivaites and the Vaishnavaites, who preached the Bhakti cult under the Pallavas, Pandyas and the Cholas. The ideas of the Bhakti cult were carried to the north by scholars as well as by saints.

Prominent leaders of the Bhakti movement were-

Sankaracharya, a great thinker, distinguished philosopher and leader of the Hindu revivalist movement of the 9th century, who gave a new orientation to Hinduism. **Ramanuja**, born in the 12th century in Chennai opposed the mayavada of Sankaracharya and advocated the philosophy of the Vishista Advaita and founded the Shri Vaishnava sect. Another great leader was **Madhavacharya**, who in the 13th century propagated Dvaita or the dualism of the Jivatma and Paramatma. **Vallabhacharya**, born in the 15th century and lived in the court of king Krishnadeva Ray, propounded the Shudhadvaita (pure monism).

Jnanaswara, a 13th century pioneer Bhakti saint of Maharashtra, whose commentary on the Bhagavat Gita called Jnanasvari served as a foundation of the Bhakti ideology in Maharashtra. **Namdeva** was another 14th century poet-saint from Maharashtra who belonged to the Varkari sect.

In the 14th and 15th century, **Ramananda**, **Kabir** and **Guru Nanak** emerged as the great apostles of the Bhakti cult. They greatly emphasised on the fundamental unity of all religions. They helped the common people to shed age old superstition and attain salvation through bhakti or pure devotion.

Apart from the non-sectarian movement, the Bhakti movement in north India developed around the worship of Ram and Krishan, two of the incarnations of the God Vishnu. The leading light of the Ram cult was the poet-saint **Tulsidas**

who wrote the great poem, the Ramacharitamanasa. He was a great scholar and has made a profound study of Indian philosophy and literature.

The Vaishnava Bhakti Movement in Bengal was very different from its counterparts in north and south India. **Jayadeva** was an important Bhakti saint in this tradition. **Sri Chaitanya** was another popular Bhakti saint from this region, who was even looked upon as an avatar of Krishna.

Female poet-saints also played a significant role in the Bhakti Movement. Some of the female Bhaktas are: **Akkamahadevi, Janabai, Mirabai, Bahinabai.**

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