

CC-7: HISTORY OF INDIA (c.1206-1526)

IV. RELIGION AND CULTURE

(B). BHAKTI MOVEMENTS AND MONOTHEISTIC TRADITIONS IN SOUTH AND NORTH INDIA; WOMEN BHAKTAS; NATHPANTIS; KABIR, NANAK AND THE SANT TRADITION

The Bhakti movement which stressed mystical union of the individual with God had been at work in India long before the arrival of the Turks. Although the seeds of Bhakti can be found in the Vedas, it was not emphasized during the early period.

The development of popular Bhakti took place in south India between the seventh and the twelfth century.

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 know 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 Shaivaite Nayannars and the Vaishnavite Alvars, 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.

The evolution of Bhakti movement in medieval India, which gained momentum in the northern part of the country during the 12th-17th century differs from the southern Bhakti movement. The Bhakti movement in the north included socio-

religious movements that were linked to one of the acharyas from the south, and is sometimes seen as a continuation of the movement that originated in the south. Though there were similarities in the traditions of the two regions, the notion of Bhakti varied in the teachings of each of the saints.

Although there were many points of contact between south and north India, the transmission of the ideas of the Bhakti saints from south to north India was a slow and long drawn-out process. The fact that they preached and composed in local languages was the reason that made the nayanars and alvars popular on south India but also limited their appeal outside the area. Sanskrit was still the vehicle of thought in the country. The ideas of Bhakti was carried to the north by scholars as well as by saints. Among these mention must be made of the Maharashtrian saint, Namadeva, who flourished in the first part of the fourteenth century, and Ramananda, who is flourished in the second half of the fourteenth century and first quarter of the fifteenth century. Among the disciples of Ramananda mention must be made of Ravidas, Kabir, Sena, Sadhana.

The seeds scattered by these saints fell on fertile soil. The Brahmanas had lost both in prestige and power following the defeat of Rajput rulers and the establishment of the Turkish Sultanate. As a result movements such as the Nath Panthi movement challenging the caste system and the superiority of Brahmanas, had gained popularity.

The Bhakti movement is also divided into two different ideological stream of 'Saguna' (those poet-saints who composed verses extolling a god with attributes or form) a 'Nirguna' (those extolling god without and beyond all attribute or form). For instance, the Saguna Bhaktas like Tulsidas upheld the caste system and the supremacy of the Brahmins, and preached a religion of surrender and simple faith in a personal God, having a strong commitment towards idol worship. On the other hand, the Nirguna Bhaktas like Kabir rejected the varnashrama and all conventions based on caste distinctions. They

championed new values, helping the emergence of new groups and new unorthodox or protestant sects. The Nirguna Bhaktas are also known as Monotheistic Bhakti saints, who gave more importance to the personal experience of Bhakti saints with God.

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. He was born in Kaladi (kerala) and propounded the Advaita (Monism) philosophy and Nirgunabrahman (God without attributes).
- **Ramanuja**, born in the 12th century in Chennai opposed the mayavada of Sankaracharya and advocated the philosophy of the Vishista Advaita and founded the Shrivaisnava sect.
- Another great leader was **Madhavacharya**, who in the 13th century propagated Dvaita or the dualism of the Jivatma and Paramatma. According to this philosophy, the world is not an illusion but a reality, full of real distinction.
- **Vallabhacharya**, born in the 15th century and lived in the court of king Krishnadeva Ray, propounded the Shudhadvaita (pure monism).
- **Jnaneswara** a 13th century pioneer Bhakti saint of Maharashtra, whose commentary on the Bhagavat Gita called Jnanesvari served as a foundation of the Bhakti ideology in Maharashtra.
- **Namdeva** was another 14th century poetsaint from Maharashtra who belonged to the Varkari sect.
- **Sant Eknath** was a prominent saint scholar and religious poet of Varkari Sampradaya, belonging to the 16th century. In the development of Marathi literature Sant Eknath is seen a bridge between his predecessors-

Dyaneshwar and **Namdeva**-and the later **Tukaram** and **Ramdas**. He introduced a new form of Marathi religious song called Bharood.

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. They greatly emphasised on the fundamental unity of all religions. They condemned polytheism and believed in one God. They also denounced all forms of idolatry.

Among the disciples of Ramananda, one of the most famous was **Kabir**. He was a 15th century Bhakti poet and saint, whose verses are found in the Sikh holy scripture, Adi Granth. He was born near Benares to a Brahman widow, but was brought up by a Muslim couple who were weavers by profession. He possessed an inquiring mind, and while in Benares, learnt much about Hinduism and became familiar with Islamic teachings also. He denounced idolatry and rituals and laid emphasis on the equality of man before God. Kabir's objective was to reconcile Hindus and Muslims and establish harmony between the two sects. He is regarded as the greatest of the mystic saints and his followers are called Kabirpanthis.

The first Sikh guru and founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak was also a Nirguna Bhakti saint and social reformer. Like Kabir, Nanak laid emphasis on the one God by repeating whose name and dwelling on it by love and devotion one could get salvation without distinction of caste, creed or sect. However, Nanak laid emphasis on the purity of Character and conduct as the first condition of approaching God and the need a guru for guidance. Like Kabir, he strongly denounced idol-worship, pilgrimages and other formal observations of the various faiths. He advocated a middle path in which spiritual life could be combined with the duties of the householder.

Female poet-saints also played a significant role in the Bhakti Movement. Nonetheless, many of these women had to struggle for acceptance within the largely male-dominated movement. Only through demonstrations of their utter devotion to the Divine, their outstanding poetry and stubborn insistence of their spiritual equality with their contemporaries, were they able to garner acceptance and more egalitarian access to the Divine.

Some of the female Bhaktas are:-

- **Akkamahadevi:** During the 12th century CE, Akkamahadevi, also known as Akka or Mahadevi, belonging to the southern region of Karnataka, established herself as an ardent devotee of Shiva whom she addressed as Chennamallikarjuna.
- **Janabai** was another important female Bhakta who was born in Maharashtra in the 13th century.
- **Mirabai:** She belonged to a high class ruling Rajput family. Mirabai's poetry speaks of her vision of Lord Krishna when she was a child.
- **Bahinabai:** She was a poet-saint from 17th century Maharashtra, writing in the form of abangas, women's folk songs, that portray the working life of woman, especially in the fields.

IMPORTANCE OF THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

- The Bhakti movement provided an impetus for the development of regional languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, Bengali etc. Since various Bhakti leader spoke and wrote in these languages, these regional language developed.

- The position of women in the society and also the lower classes of people were raised to a position of greater importance because the Bhakti leader condemned the caste system and also the superiority enjoyed only by the male members of the society.
 - As a result of the Bhakti movement unity was established among the two communities- the Hindus and the Muslims.
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REFERENCE AND SUGGESTED READING

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