

BHAKTI MOVEMENT: CHALLENGING SOCIAL INEQUALITIES AND PROMOTING EQUALITY IN INDIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The marginalised parts of Shudras and Atishudras found an important venue in the Bhakti Movement to air their concerns against the social injustices that were ingrained in the 'varna' system, which received validity in Manusmriti and other Vedic texts. This platform was known as the Bhakti Movement. This movement was a style of socialist critique that addressed a variety of different types of social injustices. It expanded the meaning of "bhakti" beyond the confines of organised religion to include, even if only tacitly, the redemption of the individual. The Sants, who were the leaders of the movement, advocated for the rejection of superstitious beliefs and ceremonial practises as well as the promotion of the virtues of love and harmony. They promoted a society without castes and a non-hierarchical, brotherly, humanistic outlook on life as their guiding philosophy for living. The impact of Islam, in especially via the practise of Sufism, also led to the spread of the concept that people have an inherent equal standing in the world. The revolutionary shifts that took place in the Vedic worldview were a major factor in the schism that occurred within the Bhakti Movement, which resulted in the development of the Saguna and Nirguna schools of thought. Every school followed the tenets and procedures outlined in its own unique set of guiding principles. Traditions of dissent and protest reached its apex with Kabir and Nanak's Sant Mat, in which they not only decried untouchability but also addressed the social and economic issues faced by the agricultural and labouring classes. This book is considered to be the pinnacle of the dissident and protesting traditions. This was the pinnacle of a long history of dissent and protest in India, which had been building up to this point.

Paper Identification



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Historical Background

The Bhakti movement of the mediaeval era was unquestionably the most pervasive, far-reaching, and multi-faceted movement that has had an impact on the Indian subcontinent. Rather than focusing on improving the standard of life for the majority of people, the movement's initial aim was to assist individuals in attaining mystical unity with God and redemption for themselves. However, it evolved into a forum for underprivileged groups to voice their opposition to societal injustices that were rooted in the 'varna' system as well as the Vedic writings, "their guardians (The Brahmins, who had the exclusive right to interpret the scriptures), and their patrons (the kings and other members of the nobility). In my thesis, I want to discuss the Bhakti movement as a socialist critique, and I will be relying upon the social philosophies of significant saints, in especially Kabir and Nanak, who were the models of social reformation at the time they lived".

The Gupta dynasty, which ruled Northern India from the fourth to the sixth century AD and is famous for establishing the foundations of Hindu culture, ruled from the fourth to the sixth century AD. They said that they were from a heavenly lineage that descended from Lord Vishnu and took the name Bhagavata, which means "devotees of God." Because of this, they were able to form a royal dynasty that was endowed with heavenly favour and inherited power. As the official language of the state, Sanskrit was selected because of its reputation as the language of the gods. The Dravidians, who regarded themselves to be descendants of Lord Brahma and keepers of the Vedic legacy, quickly adopted these concepts, identifying themselves as upholders of the Vedic heritage. This is because the Dravidians believed that Lord Brahma was their ancestor. As a direct consequence of this, the birth of Bhakti in Southern India during the sixth century was a natural consequence of the connection with Northern India. This interaction resulted in the establishment of a civilization that was severely caste-ridden and had repressive norms directed against Shudras and Mlecchas who were of lower caste.

Vedic philosophy was transformed into sympathetic faiths such as Shaivism and Vaishnavism with the advent of reformist and humanitarian religions like as Jainism and Buddhism, which gave a means for the downtrodden people to seek relief. These alterations were made with the intention of discouraging persons from adhering to these reformist beliefs. While Shiva bhakti flourished mostly in agricultural areas, it also absorbed other Shakti cults that adored local deities, which helped to create an ongoing devotion. This occurred as a result of the combination of these two factors. These movements spurred demonstrations against caste and gender limits, which prevented people from worshipping their own deities in their vernacular languages, which was a barrier that had existed for a very long time. Tantriks and Nathpanthi sadhus, who followed the teachings of Gorakhnath and resided in the western and northern parts of India, respectively, were the driving forces behind these various movements. Gorakhnath was the group's spiritual leader at that time. Temples opened their doors, allowing members of lower social classes to join in religious observances. This was a crucial step towards individuals breaking away from organised religion since it allowed individuals from lower social classes to participate in religious activities.

Although the Bhakti movement in the south had an essentially egalitarian vision, it seldom expressed outright criticism of the caste system or the benefits enjoyed by Brahmanical society. This was due to the fact that the majority of its adherents were women. After that, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Karnataka, it gave birth to the iconoclastic group that is known as the Vaishnavas. They are also referred to as Lingayats owing to the fact that their roots are in the Shaiva tradition. The Vaishnavas were a group of people who advocated for social reform, opposed the standards of Brahmanical orthodoxy, dismantled ceremonial practises, and spread the Puranic faith. Both of these movements might be seen as "revolts from within," since they encouraged a feeling of liberalism within the social system and welcomed vernacular versions of Prakrit as more approachable methods of expressing Bhakti. They had a disproportionate amount of sway among members of the lower social classes, such as the Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, Chamars, and other social strata that were at a disadvantage economically.

The movement quickly moved higher over the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as it gained momentum. "In Maharashtra, it took the form of the Vithoba cult, which was an offshoot of the Warkari group. This cult, which was led by Jyandev and Namdev, preached exemplary standards of castelessness and a non-hierarchical life of fellow humanism, spread the message of love and unity, and urged people to rid themselves of their slough of rituals and

superstitions". In the latter part of the fifteenth century, Namdev was the one who introduced the Warkari Panth philosophy to the Punjab region of North India.

Beginning in the early twelfth century and continuing onwards, India started to feel the tremendous effect of a burgeoning Islamic culture, which led to what is now known as the Islamic Cultural Revolution or, more accurately, the Islamic Cultural Awakening. Prior to this era, "the northern and western areas of India, which were then under the dominion of the Rajputs, experienced political instability, cultural insecurity, and fear in the face of the coming of Islam". This concern was due to the fact that the Rajputs were the dominant group in those regions. Despite the Rajputs' dominance over those lands, these problems lasted throughout their rule. There was a remarkable confluence in the fourteenth century between the beginning of the Bhakti movement and the increasing influence of Islam in northern and northwestern India. This occurred at the same time. India became the dynamic meeting place for two groups of rebels: the Sufis, who were saint-poets attacking orthodox Islam, and the Hindu saints, who were similarly positioned vis-à-vis Brahmin orthodoxy. Both groups saw themselves as challenging the status quo of their respective religions. It is crucial to notice that these organisations did not originate as counter-movements; rather, India became the fascinating confluence point for them, where they identified a common cause in their resistance to Brahmin orthodoxy. This is a key point to keep in mind.

The Bhakta tradition of singing hymns (bhajans and kirtans) and chanting the name of the lord (naam-japna) was adopted by the Sufis as a technique of devotion. The Bhakta tradition was passed down from generation to generation. Sufis adopted the practise of singing bhajans and kirtans, and they also introduced qawwali, a kind of poetry that is unique to the Sufi tradition. The concept of Nirguna and the kirtans and bhajans of Saguna were brought together in a novel way in Sufism. There was a growing acceptance and resonance with the songs of Nanak and Kabir, who were pioneers of Hindu-Muslim unification, inside the Sufi orders, such as the Chishtis, Suhrawardis, Firdausis, Qadiris, and Shattaris. Nanak and Kabir were both religious figures who wrote songs.

The well-known concept of the "displacement of the centre, as described by Derrida, or the gradual shift of focus from the periphery (represented by the vernacular and lower castes) towards the core (Sanskrit language and Brahmins), reached its theological climax in the fourteenth century and beyond. This occurred as a gradual shift in focus from the periphery towards the core". He did this by making egalitarian adaptations to Vedic teachings and by openly inviting students from lower castes and groups, whom he referred to as "Harijans, the

followers of Hari." Ramananda played a vital part in this revolutionary process by making these egalitarian adjustments to Vedic teachings. By doing so, he questioned the established order of the caste system's hierarchy and brought egalitarian reforms into the teachings of the Vedas. In the southern regions of India, Ramananda was successful in bridging the gap between the Vedic traditions and the Tamil traditions, harmonising theistic interpretations of Vedanta and Bhakti, and reconciling social boundaries based on varna with the sectarian orientation of Bhakti. These outstanding accomplishments are a direct outcome of his efforts and hard work. As he travelled across the northern areas preaching the devotion of Ram and Sita, two separate schools of religious thought emerged: one conservative and the other radical.

“The Bhakti religion in Northern India has been split into two primary streams or currents known as NIRGUNI and SAGUNI since the latter half of the fifteenth century”. Since the beginning of the sixteenth century, these two schools of thought have coexisted throughout the world. The fundamental factor that led to the rift that eventually developed was a theological dispute between the two groups on the manner in which each of them thought of the nature of the divine entity. Those who adhered to the Saguna school, also known as the "with attributes" school, worshipped what are described as "the anthropomorphic manifestations of the divine being" (typically the triad consisting of “Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh”). The "with attributes" school is another name for this particular institution. This school of thought stayed true to the textual authority of the Vedas and placed a considerable amount of significance on the need of a human guru to act as a religious mediator between God and man. In addition, this school of thought adhered to the idea that the Vedas should be read in their original language. The conformist saints, such as Ramananda and Chaitanya, advocated for the idea of incarnation while worshipping the Saguna Ram and Krishna, respectively. This was done in contradiction to their devotion to the deities. Those who adhered to the Nirguna school, which is also known as the "without attributes" school, worshipped a divine being that is conceived of as Ishvara. Ishvara is the personal and completely spiritual component of godhead. The "without attributes" school is another name for this particular institution. It is claimed that the only method to grasp this Supreme Being is by the experience of one's inner self (mysticism), and it is considered that this Supreme Being is beyond all names and forms (Nama-Rupa). The leaders of this extreme nonconformist movement were Kabir, Nanak, and Dadu, and they established a theological school that denied the authority of the scriptures as well as any type of idol worship. In addition to this,

they developed formal ceremonies and rituals, battled against social inequality, and sought peace between Hindus and Muslims.

Dissent and Protest

“The Sant Mat, written by Ravidas, Kabir, Nanak, and Tulsidas, amongst many others, is considered to be the pinnacle of the tradition of dissent and protest”. They steadfastly defended the notion of a monotheistic God who lacked attributes; Nanak referred to him as "Onkar," which means "The Word of God." They did not believe in the varna system or in the concept of reincarnation, also known as avatars, which was the foundation of that system. Instead, they maintained that salvation could be attained by one's karmas during one's lifetime (also known as Jivan Mukti). The one who guides the naive along the way to the Truth is known as a "Guru." In this context, the term "Guru does not refer to a Brahmin but rather to the enlightened soul." This idea is emphasised in a well-known couplet written by Kabir, which asks, "If a believer finds himself simultaneously in the presence of God and his guru, whom should he pay his obeisance to first?" According to Kabir, the problem that the believer is having may be solved if he "first demonstrates his reverence to his guru, who in turn directed him towards God." The figures of Ram, Rahim, and Gobind are often interchanged with those of the 'Guru' in Kabir's Bijak, Granthavali, and in the Adi Granth.

Their social philosophy was based on the idea that all people should be treated equally and that we are all one. Nanak believed that God was the real ruler, or PADSHAH. The concept of untouchability, which held that some people should not be touched because of their "pollution" or "impurity," was fiercely condemned. “The Sants, who all self-awerely belonged to the outcaste segment (Namdev was a tailor, Ravidas was a leatherworker, Kabir was a weaver, and Nanak was a lowly clerk), laughed at the notion that sins could be washed away by pilgrimages (Tirtha Yatra) and holy baths”. As a result of their firm adherence to the tenets of ahimsa and their compassion for all forms of life, they maintained the belief that the soul is eternally reborn in new bodies. Kabir was quite vocal in his opposition to the rituals of sacrifice worship that were practised in both Hinduism and Islam.

The social philosophy of “Kabir and Nanak stretched against the feudal system of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, respectively, to the landless peasant class who were continuously exploited by the nobles and the landed class, and to the money lenders who charged high interest rates to the poor. Kabir and Nanak both lived during the time period of the 15th century. Except for the saints, those who chose to live in poverty were not held in high regard. Both of them argued that a real devotee of God does not need to be a hermit (Bairagi), and Kabir demonstrated by his own

example that it is possible to maintain a healthy balance between one's spiritual calling and their familial and professional responsibilities”.

“Kabir is done with stretching thread and weaving.

He’s written on his frame the name of Ram.”

In point of fact, Nanak's theology placed a significant stress on the importance of a life lived in community, and it was essential for his followers to engage in communal acts of worship (also known as *sangat*) and to share meals (also known as *pangat*). The fact that Kabir never raised a voice of complaint against the horrible conditions under which women were kept prisoner by the old society is one of the most fundamental distinctions that can be made between him and Nanak. Not only did these women continue to suffer in the name of child weddings, *sati*, or the norm of *purdah*, but they were also tortured by the caretakers of the temples, where they were forced to serve the lord or Brahman as "Devdasis." Child marriages, *sati*, and the custom of *purdah* all contributed to these women's mistreatment. Child marriages, the practise of *sati*, and the custom of *purdah* were all factors that led to the abuse of these women. In point of fact, he praised the act of *sati* by claiming that it is the only way for a committed woman to gain paradise and that this was the reason he spoke so highly of the practise. He said this because it was the only way for a devoted woman to achieve heaven. He accomplished this by propagating the idea that *sati* is the one and only method for a woman to enter heaven. He was okay with affluent people engaging in polygamy and the habit of remarrying widows, therefore he didn't put a stop to either of those traditions. He did not provide any criticism on any of these methods. On the other hand, it is possible to accuse Kabir of having a gender bias against women due to the fact that he made women a symbol of sex and labelled her immoral (*Papini*), a destroyer of authentic familial bonds (*Dakini*), and an enticer of committed spouses and dedicated family men (*Mohini*). This is because he made women a symbol of sex and named her immoral (*Papini*). This is due to the fact that he elevated women to the status of a symbol of sex and labelled her as immoral (*Papini*). On the other hand, Nanak treated them with respect despite the fact that they were in the role of mother, and he gave them dignity despite the fact that they were in the role of life partner. He accepted the significance of women not just as the genetic carriers of the race, but also as the ones who were responsible for the continued existence of the community. According to what he claimed, it was women who were primarily responsible for the development of civilisation.

Conclusion

The Bhakti movement was actually an extraordinary uprising of the disadvantaged element, which consisted of the lower castes and classes, against the Brahmin fraternity's imposition of a hierarchy. The disadvantaged element was constituted of the lowest castes and classes. The Brahmin fraternity was attempting to build a hierarchy at the time that this rebellion took place, which served as a background. The Bhakti ideology was founded on the ideas of humanising cosmopolitanism, emotional ardour, and a longing for the divine essence and personal experience. These ideas formed the foundation of the ideology. These principles served as the foundation around which the philosophy was built. Since the very beginning, when the philosophy was initially conceived, these fundamental principles have always served as its central compass. In the early stages of its existence, it came into confrontation with the caste-based social system that was common in the Brahmanized southern area. This fight lasted for many decades. Even after the Vedic extremists had moved on to other regions, it kept up its fight against them after it had a foothold in Maharashtra and after it had migrated there. As a general rule of thumb, the advent of Islam and the Sufis may be estimated to have taken place sometime between the middle of the eleventh century and the beginning of the twelfth century. The Sagun School of Bhakti, which is connected with Vaishnava-Shaivite worship, was finally superseded by the Nirguna School of Bhakti, which was established as a result of the devotional music played by Sufis amidst the oppressive darkness of the Middle Ages. The Nirguna School of Bhakti was developed as a consequence of the devotional music produced by Sufis during this time. The Nirguna School of Bhakti eventually supplanted the Sagun School of Bhakti as the dominant school. Since that point in time, Sants all throughout the northern and eastern regions of India have been leading a unified social protest against the inequalities of the caste and class system, the practise of untouchability, and feudal reforms, and they have been successful in obtaining equal rights to cohabit (with "Brahmins and Muslims") with dignity. They have been doing this throughout the entire country.

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