

BHAKTI: FROM ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY TO SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN SOUTH INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The theological idea of Bhakti entails the act of devoted submission to a personally conceived supreme deity with the ultimate goal of achieving redemption. The genesis of this philosophy can be attributed to both the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions of ancient India, as well as to several scriptures, including the Gita. However, it was during the period between the 7th and 10th century in South India that the concept of bhakti transformed from a simple religious philosophy into a widespread movement characterized by religious egalitarianism and extensive social involvement. The movement, led by renowned saint-poets, reached its pinnacle in the 10th century, subsequently experiencing a period of decline. However, the movement underwent a transformation into a philosophical and intellectual entity, initiated by a succession of wandering scholars or acharyas, commencing with Ramanuja in the 11th century. The emergence of the Sultanate of Delhi occurred concurrently with other socio-religious movements that were prevalent in different regions of the kingdom, which were influenced by the principles of bhakti. The aforementioned movements have been interpreted as a resurgence of the historical South Indian bhakti movement. However, it is important to note that each subsequent movement has its own distinct historical background and unique characteristics. This paper focuses on the Bhakti philosophy rising to the extent of taking the shape of a Social Movement in South India and the consequences thereupon.

Keywords: *Bhakti movement; social consequences; socio-religious movements; Buddhist traditions.*

INTRODUCTION

During the period spanning from the 7th to the 10th century, the Saiva Nayanar saints and Vaisnava Alvar saints of South India played a significant role in disseminating the notion of bhakti across many segments of society, regardless of caste or gender. A portion of these saints originated from the lower castes, while some were of the female gender. The saint poets advocated the concept of bhakti in a fervent and emotive fashion, while also endeavouring to further the principles of religious egalitarianism. (Alavi 2002) The individuals disregarded customary practices and traversed the area on multiple occasions, engaging in the activities of singing, dancing, and promoting the concept of bhakti.

The Alvar and Nayanar saints opted to utilize the Tamil language rather than Sanskrit for the purposes of disseminating religious teachings and crafting devotional songs. Consequently, the movement was able to garner a substantial following among the general population.

The South Indian bhakti saints engaged in criticism of the Jains and Buddhists who had a position of privilege inside the courts of South Indian monarchs during the specified historical era. They gained the support of numerous followers of Buddhism and Jainism, both of which had been

established as structured and ceremonial belief systems by that time. The saint-poets effectively challenged the authority of the orthodox Brahmins by promoting a form of devotion known as bhakti that was inclusive and did not discriminate based on caste or gender. However, it is important to acknowledge that the South Indian bhakti movement was not without its limitations. The ideology of Brahmanism and the social institutions of varna and caste were not explicitly advocated by it. The integration of the caste system resulted in the perpetuation of several socioeconomic disadvantages experienced by the lower castes. Despite the emphasis on bhakti as the preeminent form of worship, Brahmanical rites, including the veneration of idols, the reciting of Vedic mantras, and the undertaking of pilgrimages to holy sites, were not eliminated. (Anantadas 2000) The primary focus of the aforementioned entity was directed at the Jains and Buddhists, rather than the Brahmins. The dominance of Brahman-controlled temples likely contributed to the significant influence of the South Indian bhakti movement's development. The South Indian saint poets did not attack the ideological and sociological basis of the caste system. Consequently, the bhakti movement in the southern region ultimately reinforced the hierarchical system instead of diminishing its influence. Following its peak in the 10th century, the movement was progressively assimilated into the conventional Brahmanical religious system.

In spite of the aforementioned limitations, the South Indian bhakti movement, during its peak, effectively advocated for religious egalitarianism. As a result, the Brahmin community was compelled to acknowledge the low caste's entitlement to engage in preaching, partake in bhakti as a form of worship, and even access the Vedas.

During a period of declining popularity of the bhakti movement in South India, certain erudite Vaishnava Brahmin scholars (acharyas) undertook the task of philosophically defending the concept of bhakti. Ramanuja, who lived in the 11th century, was the foremost figure within this group. He provided a philosophical rationale for the practice of bhakti. The individual in question endeavored to build a meticulous equilibrium between orthodox Brahmanism and the inclusive practice of bhakti that was accessible to all individuals.

While Ramanuja did not endorse the notion of granting the lower castes access to the Vedas, he pushed for the practice of bhakti as a form of worship that could be embraced by all individuals, including the Sudras and even those considered outcastes. In his efforts to promote bhakti, he abstained from acknowledging caste differentiations and actively endeavoured to eliminate the practice of untouchability. Nimbarka, an individual belonging to the Telegu Brahman community, is widely regarded as a younger contemporary of Ramanuja. He primarily allocated a significant portion of his time residing in Vrindavan, a location situated in close proximity to Mathura in the northern region of India. (Sundaram et al. 2017) He held a strong belief in the concept of complete dedication to the deities Krishna and Radha. Madhava, a prominent Vaishnavite bhakti philosopher hailing from South India, emerged during the 13th century. Similar to Ramanuja, he refrained from challenging the conventional Brahmanical imposition of restrictions on Sudras' access to Vedic education. He had the belief that bhakti offered an alternative means of worship for the Sudras. The foundation of his intellectual framework was derived from the Bhagvat Purana. There is also a belief that he undertook a journey to North India.

The two most notable Vaishnava acharyas who emerged during the late 14th and early 15th century were Ramananda and Vallabha, although Vallabha continued to exert influence during the late 15th and early 16th century.

During the period spanning from the 13th to the 15th century, a multitude of socio-religious movements experienced significant growth and prosperity in the regions of North and East India, as well as Maharashtra. These movements were marked by a strong emphasis on bhakti and the promotion of religious equality. The majority of bhakti movements throughout the Sultanate period were associated with various South Indian Vaishnava Acharyas. Numerous academics suggest that the bhakti movements observed during the Sultanate period can be perceived as a continuation or revival of the preceding bhakti movement, based on various justifications. The authors contend that there were philosophical and ideological connections between the two entities, either as a result of direct interaction or through the process of dissemination. It is widely thought that Kabir and other prominent figures leading non-conformist monotheistic movements in North India were students of Ramananda. Ramananda himself is considered to have had links with Ramanuja's intellectual order. There have been assertions made that Chaitanya was affiliated with the philosophical tradition of Madhava. There is a perceived association between this movement and Nimbarka's school due to its emphasis on Krishna Bhakti.

There exist numerous parallels between the traditional bhakti practices of South India and the diverse bhakti movements that emerged during the Sultanate and Mughal eras, with the exception of the well-known monotheistic movements led by figures such as Kabir, Nanak, and other saints from lower castes. Similar to the South Indian bhakti movement, the Vaishnava bhakti movements in North and Eastern India, as well as Maharashtra, had egalitarian tendencies within the realm of religion. However, they did not publicly disavow the caste system, the authority of Brahmanical scriptures, and the associated benefits enjoyed by the Brahmanical class.

Similar to the South Indian bhakti tradition, a significant number of Vaishnava groups throughout the later period underwent assimilation into the Brahmanical religion. However, this assimilation process resulted in notable transformations within the Brahmanical religion itself. The Bhakti movement, in its broad theological sense, encompassed several movements that emphasized bhakti (devotion) and advocated for religious equality. It is important to note that the Bhakti movement was not a singular unified movement. The bhakti movements that emerged during medieval India exhibited notable distinctions when compared to the pre-existing South Indian bhakti tradition. Diversity can be observed within the bhakti movements that thrived in medieval India. Each of these entities possessed distinct regional identities, as well as socio-historical and cultural circumstances unique to their own regions. The non-conformist groups rooted in popular monotheistic bhakti exhibited distinct characteristics that set them apart from diverse Vaishnava bhakti movements. Kabir's conceptualization of bhakti differed from that of the medieval Vaishnava saints, such as Chaitanya or Mirabai. (Alavi 2002) The historical setting of Maharashtra bhakti within the Vaishnava movement differed from that of the Bengal Vaishnavism or the North Indian bhakti movement associated with Ramanand, Vallabhacharya, Surdas, and Tulsidas. In subsequent developments, when the Vaishnava Bhakti movement solidified into distinct sects, a notable increase in conflicts emerged, occasionally escalating to acts of violence. The bhakti

movements that emerged during the era spanning from the 14th to the 17th century encompassed various religious expressions. Notably, the monotheistic movements led by prominent figures such as Kabir, Nanak, Raidas, and other saints from lower castes had distinctive characteristics.

It has been observed that the prevalence of the Rajput-Brahman alliance in Northern India prior to the Turkish conquest hindered the establishment of the popular bhakti movement. This socio-religious milieu was characterized by a dominant and antagonistic attitude towards any heretical movement. The Turkish conquests dealt a fatal blow to the symbiotic relationship.

The emergence of Islam and the subsequent development of Turkish political dominance resulted in the gradual decline of the Brahmins' authority and influence. Consequently, the conditions were established for the rise of non-conformist movements characterized by their opposition to the caste system and Brahmanical ideology. The Brahmins had successfully instilled in the populace the belief that the images and idols housed within the temples were not simple symbolic representations of deities, but rather embodied gods with inherent divine abilities, susceptible to the influence exerted upon them by the Brahmins themselves. The Turks achieved victory by confiscating the temple wealth and state patronage that had been previously enjoyed by the Brahmins. Consequently, the Brahmins experienced hardships both in terms of their material conditions and their ideological beliefs. The initial beneficiaries of the weakening Rajput-Brahman alliance were the Nathpanthis, a non-conformist religious community. (Alavi 2002) This particular religious group appears to have attained its zenith during the early years of the Sultanate era. The decline in authority and influence experienced by the Brahmins, coupled with the shifting political landscape, ultimately fostered an environment conducive to the rise of popular monotheistic movements and other bhakti movements in North India.

Scholars have posited that the bhakti groups that emerged in medieval India were indicative of the feelings expressed by the general populace in response to feudal oppression. According to this perspective, the lyrics of the bhakti saints, including Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya, and Tulsidas, include aspects of revolutionary rebellion to feudalism. The medieval bhakti movements in India are frequently regarded as the Indian equivalent of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, given the prevailing circumstances. Nevertheless, the poems of the bhakti saints do not provide any indication that they advocated for the class interests of the peasants in opposition to the feudal state's extraction of surplus. The Vaishnava bhakti saints diverged from the orthodox Brahmanical order to the extent that they espoused the principles of bhakti and advocated for religious egalitarianism. Typically, they adhered to numerous fundamental doctrines of traditional Brahmanism. The most radical monotheistic saints completely rejected the conventional Brahmanical religion. However, it is important to note that even these saints did not advocate for the fall of the state or the ruling elite. Due to this rationale, it is not appropriate to consider the bhakti movements as an Indian adaptation of the European Protestant Reformation, as the latter constituted a significantly more substantial societal transformation that was intertwined with the waning of feudalism and the ascent of capitalism.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the bhakti saints did not exhibit indifference for the societal circumstances faced by individuals. The utilization of visual representations depicting

ordinary existence was a prevalent practice, consistently aimed at establishing a sense of identification with the plight experienced by the general populace. The considerable rise in the influence of monotheistic groups such as Kabir, Nanak, Dhanna, and Pipa can be comprehensively understood only when considering the notable socio-economic transformations that occurred after the Turkish conquest of Northern India.

In contrast to the Rajputs, the Turkish ruling elite resided predominantly in urban areas. The acquisition of substantial agricultural surplus resulted in a significant consolidation of resources among the ruling elite. The resource-rich class's desire for manufactured products, indulgences, and essential items resulted in the widespread implementation of numerous novel techniques and crafts. Consequently, there was a further increase in the population of urban artisans during the 13th and 14th centuries.

The increasing cohorts of urban artisans were drawn to the monotheistic movement due to its egalitarian principles, since they found the ancient Brahmanical order to be unsatisfactory in terms of their social standing. It has been proposed that certain groups of traders, such as the Khatri in the Punjab region, were motivated to participate in the movement due to their direct gains from the development of urban areas, the creation of crafts inside these urban centres, and the subsequent extension of markets. The rise in popularity of the monotheistic movement can be attributed to the endorsement it received from various segments of society. The social base of the movement in various regions of North India was comprised of one or more of these categories. In the region of Punjab, the movement's popularity extended beyond the urban elite as it gained support from the Jat peasants, thus broadening its base. The assistance provided by the Jats of Punjab to Nanak's movement ultimately played a significant role in the growth and establishment of Sikhism as a widely embraced religious movement.

The Monotheistic Movements of North India refer to religious movements that advocate the belief in a single, supreme deity. Kabir, who lived from 1440 to 1518, emerged as a prominent and influential person within the monotheistic movements that originated throughout the 15th century. He was a member of a Julaha family, which was a group of weavers that had converted to Islam and were indigenous to the region. He dedicated a significant portion of his life residing in Banaras, also known as Kashi. The subsequent monotheistic saints either professed to be his disciples or made reverent references to him. A significant quantity of his verses was incorporated into the Sikh text, known as the Adi Granth, surpassing the inclusion of verses from other monotheistic traditions.

This evidence suggests his prominent status within the monotheistic community. Raidas (also known as Ravidas) is believed to have been a contemporary of Kabir, likely belonging to the succeeding generation. He belonged to the tanner caste. Additionally, he resided in Banaras and was exposed to the influential teachings of Kabir. Dhanna is a historical figure who lived during the 15th century in Rajasthan, India, and belonged to the Jat peasant community. During the same period, there were other notable saints such as Sen, who was a barber, and Pipa.

Nanak (1469-1539) propagated his beliefs in a manner similar to Kabir and other proponents of monotheism. However, subsequent developments resulted in the transformation of his teachings

into the establishment of a widespread religious movement known as Sikhism. The fundamental resemblance between his teachings and those of Kabir and other saints, along with their underlying ideological concurrence, establishes him as an essential component of the monotheistic movement. He was a member of the Khatri caste, a group of traders, and was born in the village of Nankana in the Punjab region (referred to as Nankana Sahib in its entirety). During the latter part of his life, he engaged in extensive travel in order to disseminate his ideals through preaching. Subsequently, he established residence at a region located in Punjab, presently recognized as Dera Baba Nanak. There, he garnered a substantial following of devotees. The hymns authored by him were integrated into the Adi Granth, a sacred scripture, by the fifth Sikh Guru Arjan in the year 1604.

COMMON FEATURES OF THE TEACHINGS OF THE SAINTS OF MONOTHEISTIC MOVEMENT

The teachings espoused by the saints affiliated with the monotheistic movement share certain common elements that contribute to the fundamental cohesion of the movement.

i) The majority of those who adhered to monotheistic beliefs were members of the lower castes and possessed an understanding of the shared ideological unity within their community. The majority of individuals possessed knowledge of the teachings and impacts of one another. The authors make references to one another and their predecessors in a manner that implies a cohesive ideological connection between them. In this regard, Kabir refers to Raidas as a "saint among saints." Raidas, in his discourse, respectfully acknowledges the individuals Kabir, Namdev, Trilochan, Dhanna, Sen, and Pipa.

The impact of Kabir on Nanak is well acknowledged and indisputable. Hence, it is unsurprising that subsequent traditions associate Kabir, Raidas, Dhanna, Pipa, Sen, and others as followers of Ramananda. The presence of hymns composed by Kabir, Raidas, and other religious figures alongside those of Nanak in the Adi Granth, as curated by the 5th Sikh Guru Arjan, provides evidence of the ideological affinity shared across monotheistic believers.

ii) The monotheistic individuals were subject to varied degrees of influence from the ideals of bhakti in Vaishnavism, the Nathpanthi movement, and Sufism.

The monotheistic movement is characterized by the amalgamation of many aspects derived from these three religions. However, it is frequently observed that individuals did not readily embrace the entirety of these traditions in their initial manifestation. Instead, they introduced several modifications and adjustments, so imparting fresh interpretations to preexisting notions.

iii) Monotheistic individuals adhered to a singular method of creating a connection with the divine: namely, through the practice of personally encountered bhakti. The Vaishnava bhakti saints also adhered to this approach, though with a key distinction in their perspectives: they were universally recognized as monotheists due to their unwavering belief in a singular deity. According to Nanak's theological beliefs, the deity he referred to as God was characterized as non-incarnate and formless (referred to as Nirankar), eternal (known as Akal), and ineffable (referred to as Alakh). The form of monotheistic devotion known as bhakti can be classified as either Nirguna bhakti or Saguna

bhakti. The followers of Vaishnavism, who believed in several human incarnations of God, practiced Saguna bhakti. The concept of bhakti was embraced by the monotheists, who drew inspiration from the Vaishnava bhakti tradition, although with a focus on Nirguna. Frequently, Kabir was referred to as Ram. Due of this rationale, he has been referred to as Ram bhakta. However, Kabir explicitly said in his statements that the deity Ram to whom he was committed was neither the incarnation born in the household of King Dasharatha or the one who vanquished Ravana, but rather an abstract and non-incarnate manifestation of the divine. In conjunction with the concept of monotheism and Nirguna bhakti, adherents of this belief system also placed significant stress on practices such as the repetitive recitation of holy names, the guidance of a spiritual mentor, communal singing of devotional songs (kirtan), and the company of individuals regarded as saints (Satsang).

iv) The adherents of monotheism pursued a distinct trajectory that diverged from the prevailing religious traditions of the era, namely Hinduism and Islam. The individuals in question refused to pledge their loyalty to either faction and expressed disapproval towards the superstitious and orthodox aspects present in both religious systems.

A strong ideological campaign was initiated against the caste system and idolatry. They contested the legitimacy of the Brahmans' authority and the holy texts they upheld. Kabir had a direct and confrontational approach, utilizing ridicule as a potent means to criticize traditional Brahmanism. Namdev, a revered saint from the 14th century hailing from Maharashtra, embarked on a journey that extended as far as Punjab. His teachings garnered immense popularity in this region, ultimately leading to their incorporation into the Adi-Granth.

INTERACTION OF BHAKTI AND SUFI MOVEMENTS

The potential interplay between Hinduism and Islam, if it exists, cannot be accurately documented in a chronological manner. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain resemblances between the bhakti and Sufi movements. Historians struggled to demonstrate a correlation between the process of urbanization, the consolidation of agricultural surplus within the Turkish nobility, and the emergence and expansion of popular monotheistic beliefs. Undoubtedly, the examination of the proliferation of popular monotheism within the framework of technological advancements, the rising significance of artisans, and the transition of the Jats from a pastoralist to an agriculturalist lifestyle presents a captivating area of study. The Jats, craftsmen, and Khatris, the latter of whom were known for their proficiency in trade and administration, expressed discontent with the hierarchical structure of the Brahmanical caste system and lent their support to the bhakti movement due to its emphasis on equality.

The lowest strata of society provided support for the bhakti and Sufi movements due to comparable motivations. The notion of egalitarianism was established by both the bhakti and Sufi movements through the adoption of certain ritual dynamics that were shared between them, such as the practice of langar. The practice of Langar was first introduced and popularized by the Sufis, and then embraced by Nanak. Similar to various other regions in India, this rite was prevalent in the Punjab region far before the arrival of Nanak. The latter individual recognized the practicality of

incorporating it into their efforts to challenge the Brahmanical caste order. In the langar, a communal dining practice within Sikhism, all participants are required to partake in the same meal while seated in rows, regardless of their caste, social class, or religious associations. This observation also exemplifies an intricate yet prevalent phenomena, namely, the diverse support base encompassing multiple social classes for both of these groups. In alternative terms, it would be inaccurate to categorize both movements solely as mass movements; yet, both movements did embody the desires of the general public.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was a notable revival of popular bhakti in both North Eastern and Western regions of India. This revival centred around the worship and devotion towards personal deities, namely Rama and Krishna, who were revered as avatars of the Hindu god Vishnu. The Saguna bhakti, which gained popularity, had a greater appeal in rural areas, while the preceding period's bhakti, which was deeply rooted in radical monotheism, had a more urban character.

The accuracy of the argument that the resurgence of bhakti under Tulsidas can be interpreted as a reassertion of the zamindars during the Mughal era warrants analysis. The Brahmin successors of Tulsidas primarily emphasized the conventional and ceremonial elements of his teachings while downplaying the humanistic perspectives of this saint, resulting in his portrayal as a figure with conservative tendencies. This observation substantiates the notion that bhakti groups did not consistently achieve significant success in contesting the Brahman's dominant control over knowledge. In this particular context, it is crucial to bear in mind that a number of Chaitanya's highly knowledgeable adherents were also members of the Brahmin caste. Given the prevailing conditions, it would be an overstatement to assert the 'revolutionary' character of the bhakti movement.

Chaitanya's religious movement maybe exhibited similarities with the Sufi tradition, which also gained prominence in the region of Bengal. (Pankaj 2017) For instance, the Vaishnava Kirtana bears resemblance to the Sufi musical concert, commonly referred to as Sama, in terms of its technical aspects. These observed similarities have prompted historians like Enamul Haq to infer that Chaitanya's movement may have been influenced by Sufism. However, alternative perspectives have been put up by historians such as M.R. Tarafdar and Ramakanta Chakravarty, who challenge this viewpoint by asserting that Haq's claim lacks substantial proof.

The emergence of a spirit of mutual understanding and toleration can be attributed to the influence of the Sufi and Bhakti movements, as seen by their impact on various aspects of culture like as literature, music, arts, and spiritual practices. The sufi saints, notably Nizamuddin Awliya (d.1325AD), frequently expressed admiration for yogic practices, encompassing techniques such as breathing exercises, asanas, and mudras. According to historian Rajat Ray, as mentioned in his lecture delivered at the Refresher Courses in History at Calcutta University in early 2010, it is believed that Muslims acquired the practice of sitting in the lotus posture only after their arrival in the Indian subcontinent. The act of translating Patanjali's Yoga Sutra into Arabic by Alberuni and Amrit Kunda, as well as the translation of hath yogic literature by Ruknuddin Samarqandi into

Persian, exemplified the ethos of tolerance and the fostering of intellectual exchange between Hindu and Muslim communities in medieval India.

Yogis historically engaged in visits to sufi hospices and Jamat Khanas, so facilitating the establishment of an environment conducive to intermingling and exchange. Mulla Daud, the author of Chhandayan and associated with the renowned Sufi Chirag Delhi, expressed the view that the Vedas and Puranas should be regarded as divinely revealed texts. The renowned bhakta Ramananda of the fourteenth century successfully integrated underprivileged individuals into his movement, specifically lower caste disciples and women disciples. It is noteworthy that within the realm of Sufism, specifically among the Chisti Sufis, women were accorded a heightened position within the spiritual hierarchy. Women frequently had a heightened level of autonomy inside these enigmatic movements. Rajjab (1567-1683), a follower of Dadu, also attracted a significant number of Muslim adherents. The artist created a multitude of songs by blending Sanskrit with Rajasthani, drawing parallels to Amir Khusrau, a prominent figure in qawwali, who also combined Persian with Braj Bhasha. The symbolic significance of this amalgamation of classical and vernacular elements lies in its representation of the bhakti and sufi movements' concerted effort to bridge the gap between high culture and common culture. Therefore, these movements, which relied on mysticism rather than scriptures as their modus operandi, were able to expand their influence in the subcontinent. The individuals in question presented a significant obstacle to the Brahmins and ulama, who asserted exclusive control over religious texts. Mira Bai (1498-1546 AD), who predates Rajjab, shown a commitment to the development of vernacular languages by her composition of poems in Braja Bhasha, Rajasthani, and Gujarati. The adoption of a receptive approach towards several languages serves as evidence that these groups in contemporary India did not exhibit linguistic chauvinism.

A comprehensive comprehension of the medieval bhakti movement will facilitate a more profound understanding of the inclusive disposition exhibited by numerous contemporary Indian figures, including Raja Rammohun Roy, Kesab Chandra Sen, Bhai Girish Chandra Sen, Tagore, Gandhi, Abul Kalam Azad, and Ambedkar. Within the context of the bhakti movement, it is possible to anticipate the response of Ambedkar towards Hindu literature. The significance and relevance of Kabir to both Gandhi and Tagore can be easily comprehended in the context of heightened communal strife.

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