

# BHAKTI MOVEMENT

---

An important landmark in the cultural history of medieval India was the silent revolution in society brought about by a galaxy of socio-religious reformers, a revolution known as the Bhakti Movement. This movement was responsible for many rites and rituals associated with the worship of God by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of Indian subcontinent. For example, Kirtan at a Hindu Temple, Qawaali at a Dargah (by Muslims), and singing of Gurbani at a Gurdwara are all derived from the Bhakti movement of medieval India (800-1700). The leader of this Hindu revivalist movement was Shankaracharya, a great thinker and a distinguished philosopher. And this movement was propounded by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Namadeva, Tukaram, Jayadeva. The movement's major achievement was its abolition of idol worship.

The movement probably began in the Tamil region around the 6th and 7th century AD and achieved a great deal of popularity through the poems of the Alvars and Nayanars, the Vaishnavite and Shaivite poets. Hailing from both high and low castes, these poets created a formidable body of literature that firmly established itself in the popular canon.

The twelve **Alvars** were Tamil poet-saints, who lived between 6th and 9th centuries AD and espoused 'emotional devotion' or bhakti to *Visnu-Krishna* in their songs. The devotional songs of the Alvars were created during the Early medieval period of Tamil history and they helped can be called the pioneers of the Bhakti Movement in India.

The collection of their hymns is known as **Divya Prabandha**. *All the saints were male except one named Andal.*

The 63 **Nayanars saints** were the *Shiva* devotional poets, who lived between 5th and 10th centuries. One saint "Appar" is said to have converted Pallava King Mahendravarman to Saivism. The compilation of their poetry / literature Tirumurai is also called "Tamil Veda". These 63 Nayanar saints, along with the 12 Alvars are known as South India's *75 Apostles of Bhakti movement*.

In the Kannada region, the movement begun by **Basavanna** (1105-68) in the 12th century for a time threatened the caste hierarchy and stretched the fabric of local society. While the orthodoxy managed to resist, the Bhakti movement in this region produced a rich vein of literature that came to be known as Vachana sahitya composed by Basava himself as well as his disciples (Akkamahadevi, Allama Prabhu, Devara Dasimayya and others). Consisting of pithy aphorisms, these Vachanas conveyed in unambiguous terms certain astute observations on spiritual and social matters.

Basavanna, the fount of the movement in Karnataka, was a minister of King Bijjala. He used his considerable powers to initiate programmes of social reform and saw his verses as extending his message to the masses. He was ultimately defeated by the orthodoxy, but he had initiated a new

thinking in society that survives to the modern day, and in Karnataka, he remains an inspirational figure to this day.

As a social movement, the Bhakti movement in Karnataka, and indeed everywhere in India, challenged caste hierarchy, emphasized the individual's direct connection to god and the possibility of salvation for all through good deeds and simple living. As a literary movement, it liberated poetry from singing the praises of kings and introduced spiritual themes. From a style point of view, it introduced simple and accessible styles like vachanas (in Kannada) and other forms in various languages to literature and ended the hegemony of Sanskrit metrical forms.

In Maharashtra, the Bhakti movement began in the late 13th century. Its proponents were known as the Varkaris. Among its most popular figures were Jnanadev (1275- 96), Namdev (1270-50) and Tukaram (1608-50), who have left behind many verses that embody the essence of Bhakti.

**Tukaram** was a rebel in more ways than one. A Shudra by caste, he became a merchant. Later, defying the injunctions of the Brahmins, Tukaram chose to write on religious matters, and that too in Marathi, the language of the people.

That a Shudra chose to write was itself unacceptable to the Brahmins. Writing on religious matters in Marathi and not in Sanskrit was yet another issue. Forced by the orthodoxy to throw his manuscripts into the river, legend has it that Tukaram undertook a fast unto death and after the 13th day, his sunken notebooks appeared from the river, undamaged.

In northern India, from the 13th to the 17th centuries, a large number of poets flourished who were all Bhakti figures of considerable importance. At times, speaking of a formless god, sometimes centring their devotion on a preferred god (ishtdevata), these poets have left behind a considerable body of literature in Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Punjabi, Maithili and a number of other languages.

Almost always instinctively rebellious, these poets played an important role in laying the foundation for a reconfiguration of society on more equitable lines. Several strains of thinking emerged out of their efforts.

**Kabir**, the renowned saint of northern India, falls squarely in this tradition of singer-songwriter-critic. Living in the 13th and 14th centuries (the exact dates are disputed, but fall between 1398 and 1518), Kabir upturned the religious notions and social conventions of his time.

Kabir preached a monotheism that appealed directly to the poor and assured them of their access to god without an intermediary. He rejected both Hinduism and Islam, as well as empty religious rituals, and denounced hypocrisy. This outraged the orthodox gentry.

But Kabir was not to be cowed down. He was something of a lone wolf, not afraid to stand up for himself and his beliefs.

**Guru Nanak**, the founder of Sikhism was another great preacher of the Bhakti message. He was born in Talwandi in 1469 AD. He spent his whole life preaching universal brotherhood, religious

tolerance, and unity of the godhead. As Kabir had done before, he too condemned caste distinctions, idol worship, rituals, and ceremonies. According to him, good deeds alone shall be counted in God's court.

He advised his followers to achieve a state of mind where there is neither pain, nor happiness and preached that this state could be attained by constant recitation of the Sat Nam or the sacred name of God. As a result of his simple teachings, Guru Nanak won a large number of followers who came to be known as the Sikhs. He died in 1538 AD at the age of 69.

**Chaitanya Mahaprabhu** was the greatest and most popular of the Vaishnava saints. He was born in a learned Brahmana family of Nadia in Bengal in 1485 AD. He left his home at the age of 24 and spent the rest of his life preaching the message of love and devotion. He became so popular that his followers came to regard him as an incarnation or avatar of Lord Vishnu. He was popularly known as Mahaprabhu. Like other preachers of the Bhakti cult, he too did not believe in caste distinctions and rituals. He preached faith in Vishnu and believed that through love and devotion, song and dance, a state of bliss could be achieved in which the personal presence of God could be realized. His teachings were meant for all and his followers included low caste Hindus and even Muslims. He had a large number of followers in Bengal, Orissa, and other parts of eastern India.

**Ramananda**, the fifth in apostolic succession to Sri Ramanuja, was the connecting link between the Bhakti movements of the South and the North. He was born in a Brahmin family of Allahabad and he probably lived during the last quarter of the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth centuries. He was at first an Advaitin but became a Vaishnavite under the influence of Raghavananda. He was a bold and uncompromising reformer who introduced some radical changes in Vaishnavism.

He founded a new school of Vaishnavism based on the doctrine of love and devotion. He ignored caste distinctions. He introduced the cult of Rama and Sita in place of Krishna and Radha. His followers were called Ramanandis.

Some of his disciples became founders of different schools which spread the Bhakti cult widely in Northern and Central India. Ramananda occupies a unique place in the history of religion in medieval India. He was successful in ushering in the new epoch of medieval mysticism.

Another offshoot of the Bhakti Movement was the Krishna cult of **Vallabhacharya**. He belonged to a Telugu Brahmin family and was born in 1479 Banaras, when the family was on pilgrimage to the place. He was looked upon as prodigy. After finishing his education he went on his travels. At the court of Krishna Deva Raya of Vijayanagar, he scored a triumph over the Saivas in public debate. After visiting Mathura, Brindavan and other places he finally settled in Banaras. He composed many works including Bhagvata Tika, Subodhami. He taught the doctrine of *Suddha Advaita* which denied any distinction between God and individual soul and regarded Bhakti as the means for the soul to escape its bandage due to delusion. In spite of Vallabha's stress on self-control and renunciation, his doctrine came to be known as "*Pushti Marga*" for his successors laid stress on the physical side of Krishna's sports so that the creed came to be called as the "*Epicureanism of the East*".

He laid emphasis on the worship of Krishna as an incarnation of the Almighty God. He preached that there was no difference between the Atma and Parmatma (God). "It is by means of Bhakti alone that one can get salvation and merge with him."

**Mirabai** was the great worshipper of Krishna, who preached in the common language of the people. Her songs are very popular all over India. It is Bhakti or devotion to Lord Krishna that can alone ensure salvation from the endless circle of births and deaths.

**Raidas or Ravidas** was another Nirguna Bhakta disciple of Ramananda. He belonged to a family of leather workers.

## **Major Impacts of Bhakti Movement**

### **Surge in vernacular Literature**

Bhakti Movement resulted in a surge in Hindu literature in regional / vernacular languages mainly in the form of devotional poems and music.

### **Development of Philosophies**

The Bhakti Movement led to development of different philosophies within the Vedanta school, ranging from dvaita to advaita.

### **Devotional transformation of society and Inclusiveness**

It led to devotional transformation of medieval Hindu society and pushed the early means to achieve salvation {Vedic rituals and ascetic lifestyles} to background and brought individualistic relationship with personally defined God on forefront. Thus, Salvation which was hitherto considered achievable only for Brahmins, Kshatriya and Vaishya castes, was not available to everyone. Thus, this movement provided inclusive path to spiritual salvation to women and members of Shudra and untouchable community. In many ways, the impact was similar to that of Protestant Reformation of Christianity in Europe. It was able to evoke shared religiosity, direct emotional attachment to divine and pursuit of spiritual satisfaction without overhead of institutional super structures.

### **New forms of Worship**

Bhakti Movement led to emergence of new forms of spiritual leadership and social cohesion such as community singing, chanting together of deity names, festivals, pilgrimages, rituals etc. many of which are in vogue even today. It also led to new forms of voluntary social giving such as Seva {service}, Dana (Charity) and Community Kitchens {Bhandra / Langar etc.}. Some of the temples and Gurudwaras adopted social functions such as helping poor, providing education by establishing charity schools, charity hospitals, relief in the aftermath of natural disasters etc.

In summary, Bhakti movement was essentially the phenomenal revolt of the marginalized segment at decentralizing the hierarchy imposed by the Brahminic domination. It rebelled against the caste ridden system of the south and fought against Vedic fanatics in north