

ASPECTS OF BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN INDIA

Dr. Amit Dey, Professor of History,
University of Calcutta.

Introduction:

Bhakti as a religious concept means devotional surrender to a personally conceived supreme God for attaining salvation. The origin of this doctrine has been traced to both the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions of ancient India and to various scriptures such as the Gita. But it was for the first time in South India between the 7th and the 10th century that bhakti emerged from a mere religious doctrine into a popular movement based on religious equality and broad-based social participation. The movement which was spearheaded by popular saint-poets reached its apex in the 10th century after which it began to decline. However, it was revamped as a philosophical and ideological movement by a series of ambulatory scholars or acharyas, beginning with Ramanuja in the 11th century. The establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi coincided with many widespread socio-religious movements in various parts of the country drawing upon the concepts of bhakti. These movements have been perceived as revival of the older South Indian bhakti movement. But each one of these later movements had a historical context of its own and its own peculiarities.

BACKGROUND: BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN SOUTH INDIA

The saiva Nayanar saints and vaisnava Alvar saints of South India spread the concept of bhakti among different sections of the society irrespective of caste and sex during the period between the 7th and the 10th century. Some of these saints hailed from the lower castes and some were women. The saint poets preached bhakti in an intense emotional manner and tried to promote religious egalitarianism. They ignored rituals and traversed the region several times singing, dancing and advocating bhakti. The Alvar and Nayanar saints used the Tamil language and not Sanskrit for preaching and composing devotional songs. Thus the movement could acquire a popular base. The South Indian bhakti saints used to criticize the Jains and Buddhists who enjoyed a privileged status at the courts of South Indian monarchs during that period. They won over many adherents of Buddhism and Jainism both of which by then became rigid and formal religions. These saint-poets simultaneously resisted the domination of the orthodox Brahmins by making bhakti accessible to all without any caste and sex discrimination. But the South Indian bhakti movement also had drawbacks. It never consciously proposed Brahmanism or the varna and caste systems at the social

level. It was integrated with the caste system and the lower castes continued to suffer from myriad social disabilities. There was no elimination of Brahmanical rituals such as worship of idols, recitation of the Vedic mantras and pilgrimages to sacred places in spite of the overriding stress on bhakti as the superior mode of worship. The Jains and Buddhists were its principal targets not the Brahmins. This perhaps was also the reason why the Brahman dominated temples played an important role in the growth of South Indian bhakti movement. The ideological and social foundations of caste system were not challenged by the South Indian saint poets. As a result, the bhakti movement of the south in the long run strengthened that hierarchical system rather than weakening it. Ultimately after the movement reached its zenith in the 10th century, it was gradually incorporated by the traditional Brahmanical religion. Despite these constraints, the South Indian bhakti movement in its heyday succeeded in championing the cause of religious equality and consequently, the Brahmins had to accept the right of the low caste to preach, to have access to bhakti as a mode of worship and to have access even to the Vedas.

BHAKTI AND THE SOUTH INDIAN ACHARYAS:

When the popularity of the bhakti movement in South India was on the wane, the concept of bhakti was defended at the philosophical level by some gifted vaishnava Brahmin scholars (acharyas). Ramanuja (11th century) was the first among them. He gave philosophical justification for bhakti. He tried to establish a careful balance between orthodox Brahmanism and popular bhakti which was open to all. Though he did not support the idea of the lower castes having access to the Vedas, he advocated bhakti as a mode of worship accessible to all including the Sudras and even the outcastes. While propagating bhakti, he did not observe caste distinctions and even tried to eradicate untouchability. Nimbarka, a Telegu Brahman, is believed to have been a younger contemporary of Ramanuja. He spent most of his time in Vrindavan near Mathura in North India. He believed in total devotion to Krishna and Radha. Another South Indian vaishnavite bhakti philosopher was Madhava who belonged to the 13th century. Like Ramanuja he did not dispute orthodox Brahmanical restriction of the Vedic study by the Sudras. He believed that bhakti provided alternate avenue of worship to the Sudras. His philosophical system was based on the Bhagvat Purana. He is also believed to have toured North India. The last two prominent vaishnava acharyas were Ramananda (late 14th and early 15th century) and Vallabha (late 15th and early 16th century).

BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN NORTH INDIA:

From 13th to 15th century many popular socio-religious movements flourished in North and East India and Maharashtra. Emphasis on bhakti and religious equality characterized these movements. Almost all the bhakti movements of the Sultanate period have been related to one South Indian vaishnava acharya or the other. For these reasons, many scholars believe that the bhakti movements of the Sultanate period were a continuation or resurgence of the older bhakti movement. They argue that there existed philosophical and ideological links between the two either due to contact or diffusion. Thus, Kabir and other leaders of non-conformist monotheistic movements in North India are believed to have been the disciples of Ramananda who, in turn, is believed to have been connected with Ramanuja's philosophical order. Similar claims have been put forward that Chaitanya belonged to the philosophical school of Madhava. This movement is also believed to have been connected with Nimbarka's school because of its emphasis on Krishna Bhakti.

There are many similarities between the older bhakti tradition of South-India and various bhakti movements that engulfed the Sultanate and Mughal periods (If we exclude the popular monotheistic movements of Kabir, Nanak and other "low" caste saints.). Like the South Indian bhakti movement the vaishnava bhakti movements of North and Eastern India and Maharashtra exhibited egalitarian trends in the religious sphere. But they never denounced the caste system, the authority of Brahmanical scriptures and the Brahmanical privileges as such.

Like the South Indian bhakti, most of the vaishnava movements of the later period were ultimately assimilated into the Brahmanical religion, though in the process of interaction, the latter itself sailed through many changes. Bhakti movement was never a single movement except in the broad doctrinal sense of a movement which laid emphasis on bhakti and religious equality. The bhakti movements of medieval India differed in many significant respects from the older South Indian bhakti tradition. Heterogeneity could be noticed even among the bhakti movements which flourished in medieval India. Each one of them had its own regional identity and socio-historical and cultural contexts. Thus the non-conformist movements based on popular monotheistic bhakti contained features that were essentially different from various vaishnava bhakti movements. Kabir's notion of bhakti was not the same as that of the medieval vaishnava saints such as Chaitanya or Mirabai. Within the vaishnava movement the historical context of Maharashtra bhakti was different from that of the Bengal vaishnavism or North Indian bhakti movement of Ramanand, Vallabha, Surdas and Tulsidas. Later on, when the vaishnava bhakti movement

crystallised into sects, there arose frequent disputes between them which sometimes even turned violent. Among all the bhakti movements of the period between the 14th and the 17th century, the popular monotheistic movements of Kabir, Nanak, Raidas and other lower caste saints stand out fundamentally different.

POLITICAL FACTORS FOR THE RISE OF THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT:

It has been pointed out that as the popular bhakti movement could not take root in Northern India before the Turkish conquest because the socio-religious milieu was dominated by the Rajput-Brahman alliance which was hostile to any heterodox movement. The Turkish conquests served a death blow to that symbiotic relationship. The advent of Islam and the establishment of Turkish political hegemony eroded the power and prestige of the Brahmins. Thus the stage was set for the emergence of non-conformist movements with anti-caste and anti-Brahmanical ideology. The Brahmins had made the people believe that the images and idols in the temples were not merely symbols of God but were gods themselves who possessed divine power and who could be influenced by them (Brahmans). The triumphant Turks deprived the Brahmins of their temple wealth and state patronage. Thus the Brahmins suffered both materially and ideologically. The non-conformist sect of the Nathpanthis was the first to gain from the declining power of the Rajput-Brahman alliance. This sect seems to have reached its peak in the beginning of the Sultanate period. The loss of power and influence by the Brahmins and the new political situation ultimately created conditions for the emergence of the popular monotheistic movements and other bhakti movements in North India.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS:

It has been suggested that the bhakti movements of medieval India represented sentiments of the common people against feudal oppression. According to this viewpoint, elements of revolutionary opposition to feudalism can be found in the verses of the bhakti saints ranging from Kabir and Nanak to Chaitanya and Tulsidas. It is in this context that often medieval bhakti movements are seen as Indian counterpart of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. However, there is nothing in the verses of the bhakti saints to suggest that they represented the class interests of the peasants against the surplus-extracting feudal state. The Vaishnava bhakti saints broke away from orthodox Brahmanical order only to the extent that they believed in bhakti and religious equality. Normally they continued to subscribe to many basic principles of orthodox Brahmanism. The more radical monotheistic saints rejected

orthodox Brahmanical religion altogether but even they did not call for the overthrow of the state and the ruling class. For this reason, the bhakti movements cannot be regarded as Indian variant of European Protestant Reformation which was a far greater social upheaval linked to the decline of feudalism and the rise of capitalism. This, however, does not mean that the bhakti saints were indifferent to the living conditions of the people. They used images of daily life and always tried to identify themselves in one way or another with the suffering of the common people.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGES:

The vast popularity of the monotheistic movements of Kabir, Nanak, Dhanna, Pipa etc. can be explained fully only in the context of certain significant socio-economic changes in the period following the Turkish conquest of Northern India. The Turkish ruling class, unlike the Rajputs, lived in towns. The extraction of large agricultural surplus led to enormous concentration of resources in the hands of the ruling class. The demands of this resource-wielding class for manufactured goods, luxuries and other necessities led to the introduction of many new techniques and crafts on a large scale. This, in turn, led to the expansion of the class of urban artisans in the 13th and 14th centuries.

The growing classes of urban artisans were attracted towards the monotheistic movement because of its egalitarian ideas as they were now not satisfied with the low status accorded to them in traditional Brahmanical hierarchy. It has been suggested that some group of traders like the Khatri in the Punjab, who benefited directly from the growth of towns, urban crafts production and expansion of markets, were also drawn into the movement for the same reason. The popularity of the monotheistic movement was the result of the support it obtained from one or more of these different classes of the society. It is one or more of these sections which constituted the social base of the movement in different parts of North India. In Punjab, the popularity of the movement did not remain confined to urban classes: it acquired a broader base by the incorporation of the Jat peasants in its ranks. The support extended by the Jats of the Punjab to Nanak's movement ultimately contributed to the development of Sikhism as a mass religion.

MONOTHEISTIC MOVEMENTS OF NORTH INDIA:

Kabir (1440-1518) was the earliest and undoubtedly the most powerful figure of the monotheistic movements that began in the 15th century. He belonged to a family of weavers (Julaha) who were indigenous converts to Islam. He spent greater

part of his life in Banaras (Kashi). The monotheistic saints who succeeded him either claimed to be his disciples or respectfully mention him. His verses were included in the Sikh scripture, the Adi Granth in large numbers than those of other monotheists. All this indicate his pre-eminent position among the monotheists. Raidas (or Ravidas) most probably belonged to the generation next to Kabir's. He was a tanner by caste. He also lived in Banaras and was influenced by Kabir's ideas. Dhanna was a 15th century Jat peasant from Rajasthan. Other prominent saints of the same period were Sen (a barber) and Pipa.

Nanak (1469-1539) preached his ideas much in the same way as Kabir and other monotheists, but due to various developments later his teachings led to the emergence of a mass religion, Sikhism. The basic similarity of his teachings with those of Kabir and other saints and the basic ideological agreement between them makes him an integral part of the monotheistic movement. He belonged to a caste of traders called Khatri and was born in Nankana village of Punjab (Nankana Sahib is the full name). In his later life he travelled widely to preach his ideas. Eventually he settled in a place in Punjab now known as Dera Baba Nanak. There he attracted large number of disciples. The hymns composed by him were incorporated in the Adi Granth by the 5th Sikh Guru Arjan in 1604.

COMMON CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES:

The teachings of all the saints who are associated with the monotheistic movement have certain common features which give the movement its basic unity.

i) Most of the monotheists belonged to the low castes and were aware that there existed a unity of ideas among themselves. Most of them were aware of each other's teachings and influences. In their verses they mention each other and their predecessors in such a way as to suggest a harmonious ideological affinity among them. Thus, Kabir speaks of Raidas as "saint among saints". Raidas in his turn, respectfully mentions the names of Kabir, Namdev, Trilochan, Dhanna, Sen and Pipa. Kabir's influence on Nanak also is beyond dispute. It is, therefore not surprising that the later traditions link Kabir, Raidas, Dhanna, Pipa, Sen etc. together as disciples of Ramananda. The ideological affinity among the monotheists is also clear from the inclusion of the hymns of Kabir, Raidas, etc. along with those of Nanak by the 5th Sikh Guru Arjan in the Adi Granth.

ii) All the monotheists were influenced in one way or another and in varying degrees by the vaishnava concepts of bhakti, the nathpanthi movement and sufism. The monotheistic movement represents the synthesis of elements from these three traditions. But more often than not they did not accept the element of these traditions in their original form and made many innovations and adaptations which gave new meanings to old concepts.

iii) For the monotheists, there was only one way of establishing communion with God: it was the way of personally experienced bhakti. This was also the way of the vaishnava bhakti saints, but there was one fundamental difference of perceptions: They all have been called monotheists because they uncompromisingly believed in one God. Then God of Nanak was non-incarnate and formless (nirankar), eternal (akal) and ineffable (alakh). The monotheistic bhakti, therefore, was nirguna bhakti and not saguna-which was the case with the vaishnavites who believed in various human incarnations of God. The monotheists adopted the notion of bhakti from the vaishnava bhakti tradition but gave it a nirguna orientation. Quite often Kabir called by the name, Ram. For this reason he has been called Ram bhakta. But Kabir himself made it clear in his utterances that the Ram he was devoted to was not the one who was born as an incarnation in the house of king Dasharatha or who killed Ravana, but a formless non-incarnate God. In addition to the oneness of God and nirguna bhakti, the monotheists also emphasised the crucial importance of repetition of divine name, spiritual guru, community singing of devotional songs (kirtan) and companionship of saints (satsang).

iv) The monotheists followed a path which was independent of both dominant religions of the time-Hinduism and Islam. They denied their allegiance to either of them and criticised the superstitions and orthodox elements of both the religions. They launched a vigorous ideological assault on caste system and idolatry. They rejected the authority of the Brahmans and their religious scriptures. Kabir, in his harsh and abrasive style used ridicule as a powerful method for denouncing orthodox Brahmanism.

v) Preached in vernacular languages.

vi) Travelled widely to propagate. Namdev, a 14th century saint from Maharashtra travelled as far as Punjab where his teaching became so popular that they were later absorbed in the Adi-Granth.

WAS THERE ANY INTERACTION BETWEEN BHAKTI AND SUFI MOVEMENTS?

The interaction between Hinduism and Islam if any, cannot be chronologically chronicled. However, some similarities between the *bhakti* and sufi movements can be traced. Historians strive to establish a relationship between urbanization, concentration of agricultural surplus in the hands of the Turkish nobles and the growth of popular monotheism. Indeed! it is intriguing to study the growth of popular monotheism in the context of the development of new technologies, increasing importance of artisans, and the conversion of the *Jats* from pastoralists to agriculturalists. The *Jats*, artisans and the *Khatri*s (*Khatri*s were good traders and efficient administrators) were dissatisfied with the Brahmanical caste hierarchy and supported the *bhakti* movement for its egalitarian appeal. The lower rungs of the society supported the *bhakti* and sufi movements for similar reasons. The egalitarian principle was institutionalized by both the *bhakti* and sufi movements through some ritual dynamics common among them such as the *langar*. *Langar* was initially popularized by the Sufis and later accepted by Nanak. Like other parts of India this ritual was in vogue in the Punjab long before the advent of Nanak. The latter realized its utility and included it in his struggle against Brahmanical caste hierarchy. In the *langar* (free kitchen) all the devotees have to accept the same food sitting in the row irrespective of their caste, class or religious affiliations. This also reflects a complex but common phenomenon, i.e; the multi-class support base of both the movements. In other words, it would be wrong to describe these movements as exclusively mass movements, however, both reflected popular aspirations.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was a resurgence of popular *bhakti* in North Eastern and Western India which revolved round the personal deities such as Rama and Krishna who were venerated as the incarnations of Vishnu. This popular (*saguna*) *bhakti* had a rural appeal whereas the *bhakti* of the earlier period which was strongly grounded in radical monotheism was more urban in character.

It should be analysed whether the interpretation of *bhakti* revivalism under Tulsidas as the reassertion of the zamindars under the Mughals is correct. The Brahmin successors of Tulsidas mainly stressed the traditional and ritualistic aspects of his teachings and suppressed the humanistic views of this saint so much so that he often appears to be a reactionary person. This confirms the fact that *bhakti* movements were not always very successful in challenging the Brahmana monopoly over knowledge. In this context, it is useful to remember that some of Chaitanya's

enormously erudite followers themselves were Brahmins too. Under such circumstances it would be an exaggeration to speak about the 'revolutionary' nature of the *bhakti* movement. Chaitanya's movement might have shared something in common with Sufism which also engulfed Bengal. For example the *vaishnava kirtana* probably resembled the sufi musical concert technically known as *sama* and such similarities encouraged historians such as Enamul Haq to deduce that Chaitanya's movement was influenced by Sufism. However, some other historians like M.R.Tarafdar and Ramakanta Chakravarty refuted this view on the ground that there is no concrete evidence in support of Haq's claim.

The spirit of mutual understanding and toleration developed due to the sufi and *bhakti* movements which was reflected in literature, music, arts and spiritual life. Yogic practices such as breathing exercises, *asanas* and *mudras* were often appreciated by the sufi saints such as Nizamuddin Awliya(d.1325AD). According to historian Rajat Ray (Vide his lecture delivered in the Refresher Courses in History, Calcutta Univ. in early 2010), Muslims learnt to sit in lotus posture only after coming to the subcontinent. Translation of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* into Arabic by Alberuni and *Amrit Kunda* (*hath yogic* literature) into Persian by Ruknuddin Samarqandi reflected the spirit of toleration and creative Hindu Muslim interaction in medieval India. *Yogis* used to visit sufi hospices and *Jamat Khanas*, which created the environment for such interaction. Mulla Daud, who authored *Chhandayan*, and was connected to the famous sufi Chirag Delhi, went to the extent of declaring Vedas and Puranas as revealed books. The great fourteenth century *bhakta* Ramananda incorporated the marginalized elements in his movement which included the so called lower caste disciples and women disciples. It is interesting to note that many Sufis, particularly the Chisti Sufis gave a higher status to women in the spiritual hierarchy. Women often enjoyed a greater freedom in these mystical movements. Rajjab(1567-1683), the disciple of Dadu also had Muslim followers. He composed numerous songs by mixing Sanskrit with Rajasthani which reminds us of Amir Khusrau, the doyen of *qawwali*, who mixed Persian with *Braj Bhasha*. This mixing of classical and the vernacular was symbolically significant because it was an endeavour on the part of the *bhakti* and sufi movements to bring the elite and popular culture together. Thus these movements, which used mysticism and not scriptures as their operational side, could broaden their base in the subcontinent. They posed a serious challenge to the Brahmins and the ulama who claimed monopoly over scriptures. Mira Bai (1498-1546AD) who preexisted Rajjab also cultivated the vernacular languages as she composed poems in *Braja Bhasha*, Rajasthani and Gujarati. Receptive approach to so

many languages confirms the fact that they never shared the linguistic chauvinism of many sectarian groups of modern(?) India.

If we properly understand medieval *bhakti* movement, it would be easier for us to understand the eclectic spirit of many modern Indian personalities such as Raja Rammohun Roy, Kesab Chandra Sen, Bhai Girish Chandra Sen, Tagore, Gandhi, Abul Kalam Azad and Ambedkar. In the *bhakti* movement we can anticipate Ambedkar's reaction to Hindu scriptures. It is not difficult to understand, why in an environment of enhanced communal tension, Kabir appeared to be very symbolic and relevant to both Gandhi and Tagore.

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