

Bhakti Movement in India: A Catalyst of Cultural Change



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The term bhakti comes from the Sanskrit verb bhaj which means 'to serve' or 'to share' and 'to participate'. Bhakti means an intense devotion to God, to serve him, to share and participate in the divine experience and the intimate engagement of a devotee with a personalized conception of the divine. The notion of bhakti can be traced to the hymns in Rigveda and it began to be crystallized during the Epic and the Puranic periods of Hindu history. The Narayaneeya section of Santiparva in the Mahabharata, the Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana and Bhagavd Gita clearly explore Bhakti Yoga or the Path of devotion as a means to salvation establishing the superiority of bhakti marga to the other two approaches namely- the path of knowledge or jnana marga and path of ritual and good works karma marga. Bhagavd Gita has provided the most comprehensive exposition of Bhakti in all its aspects when Krishna says that he accepts even the simplest offerings like a leaf, a flower a fruit or even water if they are presented in a spirit of bhakti (Bhagwat Gita, 9.26). Bhakti is regarded as the fifth Purushartha and counted as the tenth Rasa in Indian aesthetics. K.S. Narayanachar observes, "Bhakti, according to the highest traditions of philosophical and religious thought in India, is living for God, and living in God, in thought, feeling and deed". Thus, it is amply clear that Bhakti has always been a part of the cultural and religious fabric of India but it became a movement when it resonated with the emotions of the masses. Bhakti movement has produced a great body of devotional literature, music and songs that gave India a new spiritual impetus with its inclusiveness giving a new orientation and thrust to the Hindu culture as observed by famous historian Ramanujan, "A great many-sided shift occurred in Hindu culture and sensibility between the sixth and ninth century ... Bhakti is one name for that shift". According to him, its main contribution lies in bringing the high to the low, esoteric paradox to the man in the street, transmuting ancient and abstruse ideas into lived contemporary experiences. It

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advocated universal brotherhood denouncing caste and class distinction, blind faith and useless ceremonies. This paper will focus on the reformative role of Bhakti movement and the positive transformation it brought about in the socio-cultural lives of people.

The greatest contribution of the movement was that it brought God within the reach of all providing an individual sense of spirituality and salvation irrespective of one's birth and gender bringing about an egalitarian society which challenged the Brahmanical monopoly. Therefore, Bhakti movement can be studied as a socio-cultural mass movement though it is rooted in a very intimate interaction with God. It emerged in South India during the 7th and 8th centuries (with Andal, Basava, Akka Mahadevi, Basavanna etc.) and travelled North in the medieval period (spearheaded by the poet-saints such as Chaitanya, Kabir, Sur Das, Tulsi Das and Mirabai) becoming a pan-Indian movement around fourteenth century. There is a great diversity in this movement as it had a great range geographically as well chronologically but there are some recurrent features which can be broadly listed:

1. Direct communication with God on a personal level through Bhakti.
2. The rejection of conventions and rituals and reliance on love for the chosen God.
3. Absence of ego in this pursuit subsuming oneself in an act of complete surrender to God.
4. Logical handling of religious issues and questioning established norms.
5. Equal status for everyone irrespective of caste divisions.
6. The reliance on Guru who guides in the pursuit of salvation.
7. Use of regional dialects and rejection of the elitist hegemony of Sanskrit.
8. Practice of travelling which brought people together while disseminating bhakti ideology.





**Kabir Das by Satyam Tiwari,
Class-XII, AFGJI**



**Chaitanya Mahaprabhu by
Md. Adil, Class-XII, AFGJI**



**Tulsidas by Sarthak,
Class-XII, AFGJI**

These are very impressive tenets with a potential for immense possibilities. Hence, it is not a surprise that Bhakti became an agent of social change in spite of being an intensely personal religious and spiritual experience. Bhakti movement encouraged humane qualities and moral attitudes preaching purity of thought and action. Bhakti movement was a way to connect with the God directly and broke away from the orthodox and organized religious traditions which were being used as the tools of oppression by the powerful. God and the right to reach out to him was limited to the Brahmins who would carry out the various rituals. They were holding the keys to salvation which meant an utter dependence on their powerful agency. Bhakti tradition bypassed this intermediary and intimidating link in the chain between the devotee and the deity and advocated a direct and intimate relation with God. This brought religion and spirituality to the marginalized classes specifically women who joined the movement and expressed themselves with no inhibitions. The quest for salvation no longer required Sanskrit mantras and rituals and became accessible to the unlettered masses.

*मन मक्का दिल द्वारिका, काया काशी जान
दश द्वारे का देहरा, तामें ज्योति पिछान*

Kabir says that the pure heart is as good as Makka, Dwarika or Kashi because God lives in the temple of our bodies as the consciousness. The same sentiment can be found in the vachana poetry of the South-Indian Bhakti poets. Vachana literally means saying or things and has a sense of immediacy. It is a protest poetry questioning the dominant tradition and prevalent practices and it rejects the classical as well as the folk rituals. Basavanna mocks the empty recitations of Vedic hymns before God and also condemns the animal sacrifice in the folk festivals.

*Rich build temple for shiva
What can I, a poor man do
My legs are pillars
My body is the temple*

Bhakti movement created a new paradigm without Brahminical traditions rendering the role of Brahmin priests questionable because one could reach out to the God directly now. Bhakti saints revolutionized the belief system and when temples closed doors, they carried their God in their hearts and worshipped a nirguna God. Sometimes, they created a personal God who could co-exist with them without the paraphernalia associated the temple deities.

This revolt against the established Brahminical authority impacted not only their religious outlook but their societal interactions. Espousing the Bhakti Marga, anyone could reach out to God irrespective of caste, class, race or gender. This concept of fundamental equality was a truly revolutionary thing during the medieval times during which society was defined and classified in terms of caste and class. The Bhakti saints were great social reformers and one very important outcome of the Bhakti movement was the rejection of caste distinctions. Kabir famously said:

*जात न पूछो साक्षु की, पूछ लीजिए ज्ञान
मोक्ष करो तलवार का, पड़ा रहन दो म्यान*

He dismisses the whole system of caste division by declaring it as redundant as the outer cover Myan because it is the intrinsic knowledge and substance of a man which defines him. They took their meals together which was a radical move during those times. This became an integral part of guru Nanak's philosophy who incorporated the concept of langar in Sikh Panth.

Bhakti movement became so popular and widespread with an instant connect with the common people because of the use of vernacular languages replacing Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian. The Bhakti saints used local dialects in their discourses which could be understood very easily by the illiterate masses. The use of common man's language is a recurrent connection in all the Bhakti saints. For instance, Kabir used a combination of languages spoken in everyday use by masses. Surdas used Braj dialect which was local the dialect of Hindi in his region. Goswami Tulsi Das used Awadhi to express his devotion. Similarly, Raidas wrote in vernacular Hindi which has a colloquial feel while Ramananda and Namdev used their mother tongue Marathi. Chaitanya popularized the chanting of Hare Krishna mantra. Thus, Bhakti movement witnessed the emergence of many lower-caste saints who became spiritual leaders in their own regions connecting with the people through easily accessible poems, songs and anecdotes in vernacular languages spoken by them. This movement transcended

the initial objective of devotion and effectively took upon the cause of social struggle against oppressive power structures of language, caste and class divisions.

Another important aspect of Bhakti movement is the emergence of women saints, which is phenomenal both in scale (as there were numerous women saints) but also in principle because this was happening in an era when women were the most marginalized section of society. Women had no individual rights because the prevalent norms kept them in subordination of the male relative – father, husband or son. At a time when most spaces were beyond the scope of women's reach, Bhakti created a niche to define their emotions reforming society in a revolutionary stride. They rejected gender stereotypes ingrained within the social structures creating a paradigm which was hitherto unimaginable. "In the Bhakti movements, women take on the qualities that men traditionally have. They break rules of Manu that forbid them to do so. A respectable woman is not, for instance, allowed to live by herself or outdoors, or refuse sex to her husband- but women saints wander and travel alone, give up husband, children and family" (A.K. Ramanujan). Women saints addressed poems and songs to God who is envisioned as paramour or husband rather than a distant deity. They share their pain and sadness and also their innermost desires for personal and emotional emancipation. This is almost an adulterous relationship defying the unlimited powers of the husbands in matrimony. Further, they discarded the constraints of motherhood and family which was always used to restrict the activities of women. In this aspect, Bhakti offered something really revolutionary to the women who had never tasted personal freedom. It required a total break from the family ties on their part because a male bhakta could follow his chosen path and remain a householder while this option was not available to the women. Therefore, most Bhaktins abandoned their married and domestic life to embark on their spiritual quest. In such an oppressive scenario, it is indeed amazing to see Mirabai declare:



Picture clicked by
Peeyush Jain at Udaipur



Mira Bai Temple in Chittor
Picture clicked by Prasoon
Jain

मारे तो बिरधर गोपाल दूसरों ना कोई
जाके सिर मोर मुकुट मेरो पति सोई

A woman and that too a married woman, choosing Krishna as her lover is remarkable. Mirabai is one of the most renowned Bhakti poet of the 15th century. She was a Rajput princess who was married to Raja Bhojraj but she refused to accept this worldly arrangement openly declaring her love for Lord Krishna. At a time, when royal women were expected to stay within their palaces, she spent a footloose life worshipping her beloved God and interacting with her contemporary saints. There are numerous narratives associated with Mira which describe her passionate devotion which embarrassed her royal relatives. They were desperate to redeem their honor and conspired against her to the extent of attempted poisoning which she miraculously escaped through divine intervention. Mira refused to be cowed by a patriarchal society and is a role model whose indomitable spirit is visible in her songs and poems which describe not only her utmost devotion and love towards Lord Krishna but also her fiercely independent spirit.

Many women Bhakti poets refused to maneuver within the domains demarcated by the society and rejected them outright. This meant ignoring expectations attached with the traditional roles prescribed by the society. They left husbands and homes and became wandering bhaktas like the South Indian saint Mahadeviyakka. She declared that she was married to her personal God Chennamallikarjuna (a name of Shiva). Her Vachanas are an expression of her fierce personality trying to break free of the shackles of societal bonds.

*“My Lord, while as Jasmine, is my husband
Take These husbands who die, decay
and feed them
To your kitchen fires”*

Her poetry reveals a sense of great revolt against the prevalent system of chaining women to domestic spaces. She expressed her views not only through powerful poetry but also through her conduct. She wandered naked with her body covered only by her hair embracing the natural form endowed by God which is a testimony of her ultimate refusal to abide by the rules of men. Commenting on her own nakedness, she observes in her vachana

*“you fool, Where is the need for cover and jewel?
....When all the world is the eye of the lord,
onlooking everywhere,
What can you
cover and conceal?”*

Her vachanas express her dejection with the body of a woman stuck within a repressive world. She wants to transcend the mortal physical self she was born in. Her

poetry is a plea for freedom from earthly bonds craving for union of her essential being with her God.

There are many more women who used the medium of Bhakti to express their dissatisfaction with the society. Andal, the south Indian poet saint, was found as a baby near a tulsi bush and married Lord Ranganatha. She is the only woman who is acknowledged to be an Alwar. Ammaiyar was the first saint to write poems for Shiva in Tamil. She was born during the Chola period and was devoted to God from early childhood. Atukuri Molla was the daughter of a potter and became a famous Telugu poet who authored the Telugu language Ramayana translating it from Sanskrit bringing it to people in their local language. Kanhopatra was a Marathi poet who was believed to be born in a family of prostitutes. She wrote about her devotion to Vithoba (a local name of Krishna) whom she implores to be her savior rescuing her from the clutches of her profession. She died in the central shrine of Vithoba in Pandharpur which has her Samadhi. Her Abhangas have survived and continue to be sung even today.

On the other hand, there are women like Soyarabai who managed to follow the middle path reconciling their devotion with her role of a married woman. In fact, her poetry is mostly about her family, chores, her devotion to God Vithoba and her pilgrimage to Pandharpur. She describes the struggles of matrimonial life which she survives due to the supportive love of her God. She was a Mahar and her Abhangas give an insight into her twofold misery as a woman born in a low caste household. Janabai was another saint from Maharashtra who was born in a low caste sudra family. She worked as a servant in the upper-caste family of Namdev whom she considered her Guru. Janabai is credited with numerous poems about domestic chores she performed as a low caste woman. Bahinabai or Bahina was another poet-saint from Maharashtra and her songs are centered around the agricultural labor she performed. She used autobiographical idiom to describe the different phases of her life along with her devotional and spiritual journey. Her devotion to Lord Vithoba was not appreciated by her husband who must have felt insecure due to her divine lover but she carried out her wifely duties sincerely conforming to her given role. Her husband did not approve of her appreciation for Saint Tukaram. She seems to understand the reservations of her spouse who is a prisoner of social stereotypes unlike her spiritual upliftment due to Bhakti. Thus, her writings reveal an empathetical understanding of the situation rather than anger.

The poetry of these women is highly significant and inspirational. Their imagery is grounded in the household describing the perennial problems of family, physical labor, household chores, unsupportive husbands and rigid restrictions in a woman's life. Some of these women undertook the radical path of total disregard and rejection of socially sanctioned role of wife abandoning husband and family. On the other hand, there were those who tried to carve a middle path between the traditions and personal devotion

writing beautiful poetry sung by generations of singers throughout India touching the innermost chord because of its honesty. They led remarkable lives and are interesting from the point of gender studies. These women provide a glimpse of the struggles in the lives of women in a patriarchal setup but Bhakti movement provided an outlet so that they could find a platform to express their emotional as well as poetic personas. Women used Bhakti as a tool to fight against the limitations of domestic spaces which confined their very existence. They used their devotion to counter patriarchy and Brahminical supremacy in a single stroke. They did not give up their fight in spite of being in lopsided power relation with their husbands expressing their angst in powerful poetry. Bhakti provided the refuge and resources to redeem themselves by creating a parallel world of spiritual devotion and equality. Thus, Bhaktins can be seen as earliest examples of feminists in India who succeeded in creating a niche for themselves defeating the prejudices of gender and social structures. They led the way for the successive generations of women who were inspired by their exemplary courage at a time when women could not even take minor decisions for themselves. And yet, they managed to live on their own terms bringing about a massive transformation in the society through their radical choices.

Along with these well- defined markers discussed above, Bhakti movement was a positive influence on the social life in general providing solace in the conflicted Medieval Age. It improved the moral values of the society and changed the rigid belief system by encouraging a spirit of enquiry. It gave importance to the spiritual well-being of the masses encouraging people to transcend monetary purpose and lead an honest life. It highlighted the role of community service for a fulfilling and meaningful existence. It celebrated the virtues of contentment and self-control criticizing the evils of anger, greed and vanity. In conclusion, it can be seen that a movement steeped in an intensely personalized relation with God influenced the society in myriad ways bringing about a positive change. It is as relevant today as during the Medieval Ages because the society is facing many challenges which threaten to divide people in the name of religion, race, caste and class and Bhakti ideology of universal brotherhood can provide a much-needed principle of peaceful coexistence.

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