



Bhakti Movement: A Socio-Religious Struggle of The Marginalised Society

KEYWORDS

Bhakti Movement, social criticism, Saguna and Nirguna ideology, Kabir, Nanak

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ABSTRACT *Bhakti Movement, as a socialist criticism, became a platform for the marginalised sections of shudras and atishudras to protest against social inequalities based on the 'varna' system, authorised by Manusmriti and other vedic scriptures. It belied the term 'bhakti' to not only mean institutionalised religion, but also individual salvation. The sants preached exemplary standards of castelessness and a non-hierarchical life of fellow humanism, spread the message of love and unity, and urged people to shed their slough of rituals and superstitions. Islam also played its role in spreading the message of equality through Sufism. The egalitarian reforms in the Vedic ideology further led to the division of Bhakti Movement into Saguna and Nirguna school, both having its separate set of ideals and practices. The tradition of dissent and protest culminated in the Sant Mat of Kabir and Nanak who spoke not only against the practices of untouchability, but also the social and economic concerns of the farmer and labour classes.*

Historical Background

The medieval Bhakti movement has undoubtedly been the most widespread, far ranging and multi-faceted movement to have affected the Indian subcontinent. In its genesis, the objective of the movement was individual salvation and mystical union with god, rather than a change in the living condition of the masses. But it became a platform for the marginalised sections to protest against social inequalities based on the 'varna' system and vedic scriptures, its custodians (the Brahmins who had the sole right to interpret them) and its benefactors (the kings and the aristocracy). In my paper, I would like to review the Bhakti movement as a socialist criticism and will be drawing upon the social philosophies of major saints, Kabir and Nanak in particular, who were the exemplars of social reformation.

During the rule of the Gupta dynasty in Northern India from fourth to sixth centuries AD, the Hindu culture came to be firmly established. They called themselves the bhagvatas- devotees of God - and identified themselves with the lineage of Lord Vishnu; thus establishing the precedent of a royalty blessed by divinity and kingship by heredity. The language of the gods i.e. Sanskrit became the official language of the state. These ideas were instantaneously lapped up by the Dravidians, who called themselves the descendants of Lord Brahma and became the upholders of the Vedic tradition. The inception of Bhakti in the sixth century South India was thus the logical result of its interaction with the North which led to the emergence of a rigidly caste ridden society with oppressing policies towards the lower caste shudras and mlechhas. The presence of reformative and humanitarian religions like Jainism and Buddhism, which had provided an opportune escape for the oppressed masses, also led to the transformation of Vedic ideology into sympathetic religions of Shaivism and Vaishnavism to dissuade people from converting. Although Shiva bhakti was more popular in the agrarian setup, it subsumed under its fold the various Shakti cults (i.e. primitive local deities) as continuing forms of worship. Emerging from Tantriks and Nathpanthi sadhus (under Gorakhnath) which existed in the northern and western parts of India, these movements began the protests against caste and gender barriers which prohibited the people from worshipping their personal gods in their vernacular. The temples were forced open and the lower castes were al-

lowed to join in the worship rituals. This marked a radical step towards the departure from institutionalised religion. While the southern movement of Bhakti was fundamentally egalitarian in spirit, it hardly denounced the caste system or Brahmanical privileges. Thereafter it developed in eleventh and twelfth century Karnataka as the Virashaivas (developed from the Shaiva cult, also known as Lingayats), the outrightly iconoclastic sect, questioning the conventions of Brahmanical orthodoxy, deconstructing sacrificial rituals, inducing social reform, and propagating the Puranic religion. Thus, both of these movements were "revolts from within", i.e. they induced a sense of liberality in the social structure and made use of vernacular forms of Prakrit as more acceptable forms of Bhakti hymns. They particularly appealed to the 'non privileged class' (Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, Chamars and the other economically backward classes).

In the thirteenth and fourteenth century, the movement swiftly spread upwards. In Maharashtra, under the aegis of Jyandev and Namdev, it took the form of Vithoba cult (an offshoot of the Warkari group) which preached exemplary standards of castelessness and a non-hierarchical life of fellow humanism, spread the message of love and unity, and urged people to shed their slough of rituals and superstitions. Namdev further carried the ethos of Warkari Panth to North India (Punjab) in the latter half of fifteenth century.

Beginning from the early twelfth century, the tremors of expanding Islamic culture's presence began to be felt on almost the whole of India. Until then the northern and western parts of India (under the rule of the Rajputs) were wrought in political instability, cultural insecurity and the terror of the advent of Islam. The inception of Bhakti movement and the onslaught of Islam were curiously instantaneous in the northern and north-western parts of India in the fourteenth century. It would be wrong to assume that they flourished as counter-movements; in fact, India became the stimulating meeting point of the two rebel groups i.e. Sufis being the rebel saint-poets against orthodox Islam, and Hindu saints placed similarly vis-à-vis the Brahmin orthodoxy. The Sufis absorbed the Bhakta's tradition of singing hymns (bhajans and kirtans) and repeating the name of the lord (naam-japna) as a means of devotion, and initiated Sufi poetry in the qawwali form. Sufism presents a unique

combination of Nirguna ideology and Saguna kirtans/bhajans. Among the Sufi orders; the Chishtis, the Suhrawardis, the Firdausis, the Qadiris and the Shattaris found greater acceptance and resonance in the verses of Nanak and Kabir who became the harbingers of Hindu-Muslim unity.

The proverbial Derridean "displacement of the centre" i.e. the steady march of the periphery (represented by the vernacular and the lower castes) into the centre (Sanskrit language and the Brahmins) was at its theological volatility from the fifteenth century onwards. Ramananda introduced egalitarian reforms in Vedic ideology and readily accepted disciples from lower castes and communities (shudras and atishudras whom he called 'harijans', the disciples of Hari), thus dismissing the sanctity of casteism. He brought about reconciliation between the Vedic and Tamil traditions, between theistic interpretations of Vedanta and Bhakti, and between the social divisions based on varna and the sectarian orientation of Bhakti in the south. He introduced the cult of Ram-Sita worship in north, and thus gave rise to two schools of religious thought, one conservative and the other radical.

Since the latter part of the fifteenth century, Bhakti religion in North India had been divided into two major streams or currents — nirguni and saguni — based on the theological difference in the way of conceptualizing the nature of the divine being. Those belonging to the saguna school ("with attributes") worshiped the anthropomorphic manifestations of the divine being (usually the trilogy of Brahma-Vishnu-Mahesh). This school of thought remained committed to the scriptural authority of the Vedas and emphasised the need of a human guru as religious mediator between God and man. The conformist saints like Ramananda and Chaitanya, espoused the doctrine of incarnation and worshipped the saguna Ram and Krishna respectively. Those who followed the nirguna school ("without attributes") worshipped a divine being who remains un-manifested, formless (nirakara) and extends beyond the three gunas (nirguna). This Supreme Being is conceived as Ishvara, the personal and purely spiritual aspect of godhead, beyond all names and forms (nama-rupa), and is to be apprehended only by inner (mystical) experience. This radical non-conformist group, headed by Kabir, Nanak and Dadu, created a religious school which rejected the scriptural authority and every form of idol worship and institutionalised rites and rituals, and fought against social discrimination and strove for Hindu-Muslim reconciliation.

Dissent and Protest

The tradition of dissent and protest culminated in the Sant Mat of Ravidas, Kabir, Nanak and Tulsidas, amongst many others. They strongly upheld the concept of an attributeless monotheistic God; Nanak called him 'Onkar' (The Word). Placing no faith in the varna system, or in rebirth (avatars) which was the basis of it, they insisted that one's salvation is attainable within one's lifetime (jivan mukti) through one's karmas. A 'guru' is the one who initiates the naive on the path of Truth. Here 'Guru' does not refer to any Brahmin, but the 'enlightened soul'. A familiar couplet by Kabir emphasises this point: "If a believer finds himself simultaneously in the presence of God and his guru, whom should he pay his obeisance first? The believer solves his predicament, says Kabir, by showing his reverence to his guru first, who in turn directed him towards God." In Kabir's Bijak, Granthavali and in Adi Granth, the figure of the 'guru' have often been interchangeable with that of Ram, Rahim and Gobind.

Equality and oneness of the humankind was the cornerstone of their social philosophy. To Nanak, the true king (padshah) was God. The practice of untouchability, which was based on the principle of "pollution" or "impurity", was vehemently opposed. The saints, all consciously belonging to the outcaste section (Namdev being a tailor, Ravidas a leatherworker, Kabir a weaver, and Nanak a mere clerk) ridiculed the ideas of pilgrimages (tirtha yatra) and holy baths to wash away one's sins. Believing in the endless transmigration of the soul, they adhered to strict ahimsa, and held every living being in reverence. Kabir spoke extensively against the sacrificial rites in both Hindu and Islamic practices.

Kabir and Nanak's social philosophy also extended against the feudal set up of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Punjab respectively, to the landless peasant class who were repeatedly exploited by the nobility and the landed class, and the money lenders who charged exorbitant interest rates to the poor. Poverty was not to be lauded, except for the saints. Both of them insisted that a true devotee of God need not be a recluse (bairagi) and Kabir showed by his own example that family and professional life can be balanced with one's true calling.

"Kabir is done with stretching thread and weaving.
He's written on his frame the name of Ram."
[KG Pad, 12]

In fact, Nanak's ideology includes the importance of community life, and followers were strictly required to worship in congregation (sangat) and dine together (pangat). One of the points of difference between Kabir and Nanak, however, is that Kabir never spoke anything against the pitiable condition of the women trapped in the orthodox society and who not only continued to suffer in the name of child marriages, sati or the custom of purdah, but were also exploited by the custodians of the temples where they were forced to serve the lord/Brahman as 'devdasis'. In fact, he spoke of the practice of sati in laudatory terms, saying that it is the only way for the devoted wife to achieve heaven. He neither advocated widow remarriage nor denounced polygamy by the upper classes. On the contrary, Kabir could actually be accused of being biased towards the female gender, since he made the woman a symbol of sex and called her sinful (papini), a destroyer of legitimate familial ties (dakini) and enticer of loyal husbands and devoted family men (mohini). Nanak, on the other hand, offered them respect as mothers and dignity as life-partners. He acknowledged the role of women not just as bearers of the race, but also as the one who nourishes the society.

Conclusion

The Bhakti movement was essentially the phenomenal revolt of the marginalised segment (i.e. the lower castes and classes) at decentralising the hierarchy imposed by the Brahmin fraternity. From its very inception, the Bhakti ideology was guided by a humanising cosmopolitanism, an emotional fervour and a thirst for the divine essence and personal experience. In its initiation, it had rebelled against the caste-ridden system of the Brahmanized south. Later as it reached Maharashtra, it continued its fight against the Vedic fanatics. Somewhere midway through the eleventh and twelfth century marked the arrival of Islam and the Sufis. In the oppressing darkness of the medieval ages, the devotional music of Sufis gave birth to the Nirguna School of Santism as opposed to the existing Saguna School of Bhakti of Vaishnava-Shaivite cult. From then on,

sants from all over the northern and eastern India, gave a unified social protest against the inequalities of the caste/class system, the practice of untouchability, feudal reforms and achieved equal rights to coexist (with Brahmins and Muslims) with dignity.

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