

Bhakti Poetry and Social Change in Contemporary India

The Bhakti movement brought about a countercultural movement against the dominant, abstruse philosophical speculations. Defying the religion and ritual, it assumed the form of protest against the multiple divisive barriers of the society, thus reaching out to a vast majority of people who were hitherto kept outside the rigid framework of *Sanskritik* tradition. Bhakti means devotional surrender to the Supreme Being, the Bhakti movement became popular in 7th to 10th century A.D in South India while the North Indian Bhakti Movement had to wait till the invasion of the turks . This Bhakti movement was the movement of the masses irrespective of the status, caste, creed and religion, this was against rigid caste hierarchy, social exclusion and domination of classical language over the vernacular. The Bhakti movement brought the God out of the temples and scriptures to the heart of masses; the God was available to everybody out of the temple and the complex religious rituals of Sanskrit language. The Bhakti movement was launched against the Buddhist and Jain Supremacy in South India, it was heterogeneous in nature, further it developed into two major groups; Shaiva Naynar saints and Vaishnava Alwar saints. The bhakti saints had to oppose Buddhists, Jain and Brahmanical cultural supremacy. The Brahmanical caste hierarchy offered the use of their temples to the bhakti saint poets in their fight against the Buddhist and Jains. Brahmanical caste hierarchy got itself associated with the radical Bhakti saint poets and demolished the cultural hegemony of the Jains and Buddhists and they dislodged them from the centre.

The bhakti saints of South India were supposed to oppose the caste hierarchy and elaborate, expensive and meaningless religious rituals from the society. In place of opposing the Brahmanical privileges, the bhakti saints launched criticism and opposition of Buddhist and Jains

who were having a privileged position in the king's court in the then society. The Bhakti saints were not vehemently critical of the Brahmanical exclusive caste hierarchial system. Around 10th century A D erosion of Bhakti movement began and a time came when there was no difference between the Bhakti movement and the Brahmanical movement and the bhakti movement got appropriated by the Brahmanical caste hierarchy. The Bhakti movement got bereft of its main purpose which was to oppose the exploitative caste hierarchy prevalent as the root cause of the suffering of the populace in the existing society but it failed to do so.

North India had to wait for 400 hundred years for the Bhakti movement to take place in its soil, It took place nearly in the 14th century, the then rulers Rajputs had the symbiotic relationship with the Brahmins. Political and moral support was offered to Brahmins by the Rajputs, Brahmins got the patronage of Rajputs and in return Brahmins prayed for the Rajputs in the warfare and for the perpetuity of their dynasties. This friendship was hostile to any heterodox movement in North India. The military triumph of the Turks created a rift in the symbiotic relationship between Rajputs and Brahmins. Rajputs were isolated from their subjects and they receded to country side, Brahmins were also bereft of the support which they got from the Rajputs in return. After the disruption in this relationship, the heterogenous movement emerged in the different parts of the north India by extraordinary thinkers from ordinary background. Bhakti poets wanted to get rid of elaborate, expensive, meaningless religious rituals which were making people poor. Bhakti and contemporary Sufi movement emphasized on mysticism and made it, their operational site. They undermined the importance of Scriptures, Vedas and Classical language. Mysticism was their operational aspect. Bhakti poets venerated personal Gods, some of them were Sagun Bhakti Poets and some of them were Nirgun Bhakti Poets. Guru Nanak and Kabir were the protagonists of Nirguna Bhakti, while Tulsi, Surdas and Mira were Sagun Bhakti Poets, eternal spirit was

celebrated in the Bhakti movement; this movement was a melting pot in terms of religion. This was a significant movement which is known for its inclusiveness.

The present paper proposes to look into the most powerful trend of medieval Indian society between 700 A.D and 1800 A.D. India's middle ages brought about a very rich tradition of devotional literature of remarkable merit which dispels the superstitious assumption of a dark period of India's history. The bhakti poetry gave rise to regional languages (Bhasa). The conception of bhakti did away with the elite tradition of Sanskrit and accepted the more acceptable language of the masses. Kabir says that Sanskrit is like water of a well stagnant, Bhasa like flowing water. The catch-word of bhakti is that God is there inside every human being. The movement was in essence subaltern, as most of its poets belonged to the so-called 'lower' castes. Bhakti movement was antitheology and against any kind of conceptual erudition.

The power of ancient bhakti poetry in Tamil set in motion what might well be considered a pan-Indian efflorescence? After Tamil, Pampa's great court epics were composed in Kannada in the 10th century. Devotional literature in Kannada, the Vachanas (sayings) of the various saints of the Krishna, Rama and Shiva cults, is well known. Basavanna was a famous Kannada poet, a Shiva devotee and a great social reformer. Allama Prabhu (Kannada) wrote great poetry under the garb of religion. Chronologically, Marathi, the close successor of Kannada, became the next venue for bhakti. Gyaneswar (1275 A.D.) is the first and foremost bhakti poet in Marathi. In his teens (he died at the age of 21) he became famous for his poetic contribution to bhakti for Vitthal (Vishnu). Eknath wrote his short poetic narratives and devotional abhangas (a literary form), and after him it was Tukaram (1608-1649 A.D.) whose songs cast a spell all over Maharashtra. And then it is Gujarati in the 12th century. Gujarati poets like Narsi Mehta and Premananda occupy a

prominent place in the galaxy of the Vaishnava poets. Afterwards, the sequential order is as follows: Kashmiri, Bengali, Assamese, Manipuri, Oriya, Maithili, Braj, Avadhi (the last three languages come under the umbrella language, Hindi) and other languages of India. Chandidas, a Bengali poet, is acclaimed as a great genius for the lucidity and sweetness of his poems. Similarly, Vidyapati in Maithili created a new poetic language. Jayadeva, a Sanskrit lyric poet of the 12th century, influenced a large number of devotional Bengali poets like Govinda Das (16th century), Balaram Das and others. Sri Chaitanya (1486-1533), a great Bengali saint, helped Vaishnavism to turn into a religious and literary movement, made it a living faith and became a source of never-ending inspiration to a host of Bengali poets, including Jiva Goswami. Sankardev (1449-1568), an Assamese devotional poet, used plays (Ankiya-Nat) and Kirtan (devotional songs) to propagate Vaishnavism and became a legend. Similarly, Jagannath Das is a legendary devotional poet in Oriya who wrote Bhagavat (the story of Krishna), which has spiritually united all the people of Orissa and created a living consciousness. Muslim and Hindu saint-poets of rural Bengal known as Bauls (mad lovers) created oral poetry of divine intoxication under the influence of both Vaishnava and Sufi (Islamic mysticism which enunciates the doctrine of divine love) philosophy. Medieval Muslim Bengali poets like Daulat Kazi and Saiyad Alaoal (17th Century A.D.) wrote narrative poems based on Sufistic philosophy, betraying a happy cultural and religious synthesis of Islam and Hinduism. In fact, bhakti became a great platform for Hindu-Muslim unity. Kabir (Hindi) is the foremost among the poets of the sant tradition (faith in one omnipresent god and not in many gods like Rama and Krishna). Kabir's poetry touches upon the various aspects of devotion, mysticism and social reforms.

Tulsidas (1532 A.D.) was the greatest of the Rama-bhakti poets who wrote his famous epic, the Ramacharit Manas. In fact, epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata received a rebirth in

the new languages. These languages gave a fresh life, a renewed relevance, and a meaningful reincarnation to the great Sanskrit epics, and these epics in their turn provided substance and style to the new languages too. Kamban in Tamil, Krittibasa Ojha in Bengali, Sarala Das in Oriya, Ezhuttacchan in Malayalam, Tulsidas in Hindi and Nannaya in Telugu are well known and legion. Muslim poets like Malik Muhammad Jayasi, Raskhan, Rahim and other wrote Sufi and Vaishnava poetry. The religious and cultural synthesis that was a special feature of medieval India finds abundant expression in its literature. The Islamic element is all-pervasive, next only to the Upanishadic Hindu element. Nanak, the first Sikh Guru, wrote in many languages, but mostly in Punjabi, and was a great poet of inter-religious communication. Nanak says truth is supreme, but above truth is truthful living. Guru Nanak and other Sikh Gurus belong to the sant tradition, which believes in one omnipresent God, and not in many gods like Rama and Krishna. The poetry of the Sikh Gurus is collected in the Guru Granth Sahib (the Revered Book), a multilingual text which talks about the unchanging one reality (Sat) the cosmic law (Hukum), meditation (Satnam), compassion and harmony (Daya and Santosh). Bulleh Shah, the most famous Muslim Punjabi poet, popularised Sufism through Punjabi Kafi (verse-form). Shah Latif, the famous Sindhi Muslim poet (1689 A.D.) in his sacred work Risalo explained Sufi mystic love as the divine truth.

The contribution of women writers in different languages during that period deserves special attention. Women writers like Ghosha, Lopamudra, Gargi, Maitreyi, Apala, Romasha Brahnavadini, etc., right from the days of the Vedas (6000 B.C. – 4000 B.C.), focused on the image of women in mainstream Sanskrit literature. The songs of Buddhist nuns (6th century B.C.) like Mutta and Ubbiri and Mettika in Pali express the torment of feelings for the life left behind. The Alwar women poets (6th century A.D.), like Andal and others, gave expression to

their love for the divine. Lal Ded (1320-1384), the Muslim poetess from Kashmir Lalded & Habba Khatun, represented the sant tradition of bhakti and wrote Vakhs (maxims), which are peerless gems of spiritual experience. Avvayyar, in Tamil, and Akkamahadevi in Kannada, are well known for their sheer lyrical intensity and concentrated emotional appeal. Their writings speak to us about the social conditions prevailing at that time, and the position of woman at home and in society. I would study these popular Bhakti poets and movements for my research paper to explore their epistemic contribution in the making of the society which could still be solution for the contemporary social problems.

Bhakti poetry was marked by a note of ecstasy, and hence it produced a rich body of poetry born of the heart. This new genre was introduced by, the Nyanars, the Alvars, the Virasaivas, and the bhasha poets from different castes, regions, religions and genders. The imagery of saint poets is grounded in the everyday, familiar, language of ordinary people. Everyday lives of men and women appear in rich detail and there is an emphasis on the life of the householder in their poetry. Their verses cultivate a rough-hewn directness. They wrote of the obstacles of home, family tensions, the absent husband, meaningless household chores, and restrictions of married life, including their status as married women. They cajole, chide woo and rage against God. In many cases, they reject traditional women's role to devote and worship their 'Divine Husbands'.

Nammalvar (C. 880-930)

Nammalvar is the most beloved of all the alvars. A shudra with Brahmin disciples he is said to have been a yogi from his birth. He composed a great number of hymns varied in style and substance. Nammalvar strikes on the hypocrisy of caste:

The four castes
uphold all Clans;

go down, far down
to the lowliest outcastes
of outcastes:
If they are the intimate henchmen
of our lord
with the wheel in his right hand
his body dark as blue sapphire, (Ramanujan, 61)

Basavanna (1106-1167)

Basavanna the 12th century Saint poet from Karnataka was arguably the most radical of all bhakti poets in terms of caste as Godwin Siri writes:

'Basava's identification with untouchables was unreserved and knew no bounds...we see how uncomfortable he was feeling within himself because of his own Brahmin roots."I have had my birth in this Obnoxious caste... Is this my lot he lamented... in an eager bid to identify himself with Dalits and Shivbhaktas of Dalit origin, he claimed that he himself was born in a Dalit family. He declared that he was very proud and grateful to be part of the Shiva Bhakta cobbler Chennaya's family.... He claimed that cobbler Chennaiyah was his spiritual guru who had washed off his dirt- the taint of caste.... "

Basava himself still excites ideas of equality, A play by Girish Karnad, *Tale Danda* (1993) concerns the marriage of a Brahmin and an untouchable under the care of Basava, and the terrible punishment that ensues. There are some of Basavanna's poems that have been translated into English that tell of his attitude toward caste. A fragment of one is:

It is said:

A man is born a Shudra;
he becomes twice-born by his deeds;
he becomes a scholar by his lore,
he becomes a Brahmin who walks the Brahmin way.

It is said:

The man in whom there is no Brahman is low born

Therefore, O Lord of the Meeting river,

I say:

The Brahmin is the ass who carries the Veda as load. (Zvelebil, 90)

Janabai(14th Century)

The servant of Namdev, Janabai, wrote an abhanga that is illustrated on large posters sold during pilgrimage time and which indicates Vithoba's love for all his disciples.

My Vitthal has many children

With him is a merry crowd

Nivrutti rides on his shoulder

He holds sopan by the hand,

Jnaneswar walks in front,

Beautiful Muktabai close behind,

Gora the potter rides his hip,

Chokha in his very heart,

Banka clings to his waist

Nama holds his smallest finger.

Jani says, O Gopala,

It is a festival of your dear ones. (Feldhaus,218)

Kanaka (16th Century)

The 16th century Kanaka or Kanakadas was low caste but not untouchable. He wrote boldly of many matters and the following song is about kula, which may be translated as family, community or caste:

They talk of kula
times without number.
pray, tell me what is the kula of men
who have felt real bliss?

when a Lotus is born in mire,
do they not bring it
and offer it to the Almighty?
Do not the Gods of the earth
drink the milk
which comes from the flesh of the cow?

Do they not besmear
their bodies with deer musk?
what is the caste of God Narayana?
and Siva?
what is the cast of Atman:
and of Jiva?
why talk of kula
When God has blessed you? (Sivaramakrishna, 184)

Kabir (15th Century)

Linda Hess has translated a song by Kabir which shows that the iconoclastic Kabir 'has proved a radical equality: not only of all people, but of all substances and interactions'.(Hess,17) The eighty four hundred thousand vessels represent the traditional number of lives an individual must live before he or she can attain salvation. Maya is, of course, here 'illusion'.

Pandit look in your heart for knowledge.

Tell me where untouchability
came from,since you believe in it.

Mix red juice, white juice and air-
a body bakes in a body.

As soon as the eight lotuses says are ready,it comes
into the world. Then what's
untouchable?

Eighty-four hundred thousand vessels decay into dust, while the Potter
keeps slapping clay
on the Wheel, and with a touch
cuts each one off.

We eat by touching, we wash
by touching, from a touch
the world was born.

So who is untouched? asks Kabir.

Only he
who has no taint of Maya.

Tukaram

Tukaram the most beloved saint poet of Maharashtra, wrote hundreds of abhangas, many of which were anti-orthodoxy and anti-caste.

who is purified by pride of Varna?

Tell me if you know!

Untouchables are saved by hymns to Hari,

legendary stories become their bards.

Tuladhar Vaishya, the pot maker Gora,

the leatherworker rohidas, the Momin Kabir, Latif the Muslim,

the barber Sena are Vishnu dasis.

Kanhopatra, Khodu, cotton-carder Dadu

sing hymns to Hari without discord.

Banka, Chokhamela, by caste Mahar, have united with the Lord.

What is the worth of Nama's Jani

when Pandhari's lord eats in her company?

Can you tell the lineage of Mairala?

What greatness did he have, do tell!

Vishnu's servants have no caste,

the Vedas science so decrees.

Tika says, which of your books

have saved the fallen? I know of none. (Zelliot, 262)

Bhakti poetry reflects a wish to replace a social order based on all kinds of discrimination by a more human social order that is based on equality and humanity, which still gives inspiration and strength to the exploited and victimized masses of India. Contemporary Indian society is in deep crisis. This crisis is more a cultural crisis than a socio-political one because political warfare is now using canon balls of culture only. This new politics is moving ahead favoured by the storms of religious fanaticism, narrow-sectarianism and anti-humanist tendencies. And it is destroying

the heritage of broad minded human values, social ideals and cultural aspirations of the Bhakti Movement. In this context, it becomes necessary to recognize the past relevance and present significance of Bhakti poetry. Bhakti Poetry can help us to rise above the present crisis as this poetry is woven into the life of the people even today. Therefore, it helps in creating the possibilities for an intimate dialogue with the masses.

In contemporary Indian society when the families are shrinking into nuclear families, human beings are becoming more individualistic, self-centered, emotionless and mechanical in nature; it's very difficult for an individual to evolve as a culturally sophisticated person, most of the people are not conscious about the deterioration taking place around them which is affecting their lives indirectly. This alienation and insensitivity is the root cause of suffering in the present Indian society. The world could be more culturally sophisticated when we evolve as a better being, social order, and humanity. The lives, messages, thinking and writings of these great beings could be of great help in saving the social, ethical, cultural and spiritual degradation of the common masses of the society. Unless all sections of the society do not achieve equality, we could not save the society from further cultural degradation and devastation.

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