

Understanding the Bhakti Movement in India: A study of Early Saints

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Bhakti Movement is an important movement that started in India in the Medieval period. It has lived in India from the time when immemorial saints and thinkers who were displeased with the superstitions and religious vagaries of the Hinduism.¹ Its exponents were the mystic saints and popularly known as the *Bhaktas*. They had many things in common. They never wished to set up any separate religious sects of their own. They were not affiliated with any particular creed. The important *Bhaktas* of Northern India are Ramananda, Kabir, Guru Nanak Dev, Ravidas, Mirabai, Tulsidas, Surdas, and many more. There were many causes responsible for the origin of the Bhakti Movement in India. Some western scholars have earnestly advocated that Bhakti in India originated under the influence of Christianity. But this claim has well been refuted by most of the Indian thinkers. On other hand, they have tried to find its origin in Indian soil.² It is not wise to terminate that a particular country has borrowed Bhakti from a particular country or civilization.

The *Vedas* are the first spoken words of the Aryans and are the oldest record of the Indian civilization but the word Bhakti is not mentioned in it. The different means and essentials of Bhakti like worship, *kirtan*, recurrence of *Naam*, etc. are scattered all over the Vedic literature and have melted in every sacred cry of the Vedic man. In Vedic literature, three methods of salvation are described and these are called *Karma-Kanda*, *Jnan-Kanda*, and *Upasana-Kanda*, and all of the three are available in the *Samhita* portion too. By *Upasana*, it means to sit beside the deity and to devote to the constant repetition which is identical with the word '*Bhaj*' and, hence with Bhakti. The *Puranas* are considered to be the fifth Veda and it is because the whole of the Vedic thought-culture is revealed through these. Most of the Vedic subject matter is expressed through hints and being subtle, is not easily explicable for a common man. Bhakti in *Puranas* becomes the ultimate aim. It is quite motiveless, and even the valuable rewards have been discarded. It knows no bargain and is pure love directed towards a deity. Bhakti is more a gift from God than a personal achievement. Man and his efforts are incomplete. It is only the Grace of Lord that Bhakti can be attained, sustained, and successfully followed. What required is that *Bhakta* should throw himself at His feet prostrating in full obedience and utter humility. The attitude of the *Gita* towards Bhakti is very clear when it classifies *Bhaktas* into four types. The first *Aratharhi*, who devotes for some worldly objective, second *Arta*, who devotes intending to be saved in times of difficulty, third *Jigyasu*, who devotes to apprehend the real nature of his deity and fourth *Jnani* who devotes for the sake of devotion only, i.e. without any specific objective. There is no doubt, as assured by *Bhagwan*, that everyone is rewarded with the fruits, he has devoted. The best and the dearest type of *Bhakta* is therefore

Jnani, who has no motive, empirical or spiritual, behind his devotion to being fulfilled.³ This type of worship is a hundred times greater than liberation.

It is a popular belief amongst the thinkers on Bhakti that the medieval Bhakti Movement made its start in South India and the saints called *Alvars* and *Adiyars* were responsible for it.⁴ *Alvars* accepted *Lord Vishnu* as their altar of faith and worship hence they were called *Vaishnavas*. *Adiyars* centered their faith round *Lord Shiva* and were called *Shaivas*. These spiritual thinkers gave Bhakti a new colour. It remained no longer a subject of scriptures for theoretical discussion or with the *Rishis* to impart with their students, but it became a practical experience and an indispensable part of the life of the people. These Saints did not organize any movement on any systematic pattern with an idea to form a platform, but it automatically formed and a movement came into existence, which could provide relief to the Indian people for many centuries. The followers of these two groups were purely devotional in character. There was no difference between the two except that both would accept Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva as their respective deities and had a belief in absolute power.

They adopted the method of not other than loving the deity as described in their respective hymns. Their devotion depends upon the emotional accessory. It is such a phase in which no theory is formulated and adopted, no nature is defined but the only assimilation in love is recommended. In their philosophy, the *Bhakta* must be in constant devotion to the Lord and the record of their mystical experiences, as revealed in their poetry, shows how deeply they were lost in it. They tried to express these feelings of deep love in many ways. To make it easily perceivable, they described their beloved in the form of human relations. They would love Him as a father, son, brother, etc. and express towards Him the feeling of love, adoration, and gratitude. Another important relation mentioned between the *Bhakta* and the *Bhagwan* is that of the Master and the servant. In medieval history, most of the poets considered the relation of husband and wife or lover and beloved. Love in its sublime form i.e. Bhakti is exclusively an attachment with the soul. The *Bhaktas* of the South was not in favour of Bhakti for personal salvation, but they were preachers with a burning desire to bring some upheaval in society. They wished to give a new pattern to society and that was the pattern of mutual love and faith.⁵ These Southern saints came from different classes of the society and preached the equality and unity of mankind. Thus the entire undesirable ego was gradually coming to an end, and a single unity was being established.

Now the Bhakti entered the practical life of the people. It is an indisputable fact that the Bhakti movement originated in

¹ M.A. McAuliffe, The Sikh Religion Vol. VI, p. 1

² Darshan Singh, Indian Bhakti Tradition and Sikh Gurus, p. 5

³ Darshan Singh, Indian Bhakti Tradition and Sikh Gurus, p. 9-21

⁴ Darshan Singh, Indian Bhakti Tradition and Sikh Gurus, p. 26

⁵ Darshan Singh, Indian Bhakti Tradition and Sikh Gurus, p. 29

the South, though its seeds were available in the past too. With the philosophy of absolute monism popularly called *Advaitvad* given by the great philosopher Sankra, it was incidentally started. Sankra's system rests upon the Supreme *Jnan*, which is a stage of enlightenment, where no illusion contracts human faculty, but along with it, he is also aware of the cohesive nature of Bhakti.⁶ Sankra's attitude towards Bhakti is of a definite kind. Though in his works, he holds a discussion on Bhakti in detail and sometimes he says that Bhakti is the best amongst the means of salvation, yet even then, his absolute monism could not encourage Bhakti to enter his philosophical system. He adopted the religion of love and faith to attain the Supreme *Jnan*.

The later *Vaishnava Acharyas* opposed Shankra's such attitude. His Monism and path of *Jnan* could influence a large number of people but the religion of love and devotion of the *Alvars* and *Adiyars* were making popular, soon found its philosophical ground, which entered the field of controversy and disputed the theories of Shankra. In this series, Ramanuja was the pioneer who refuted the philosophy of Sankra and propagated the religion of Bhakti through his works. He believes that this world is not an illusion but it is real and is of three-fold nature *Ishwara*, *Chitta* (Conscious), and *Achitta* (Unconscious). The latter two identities abide in the first, *Ishwar*, who is *Antaryami*. In the views of Ramanuja, through Bhakti we can have perfection but it doesn't mean that he ignores *Jnan*, in reality, his *Jnan* is not the same as that of Shankra. Ramanuja also explained the difference between *Prapatti* and Bhakti. His Bhakti rests upon the purity of mind with awakened faculties of reasoning.

Now Nimbarka with his mystical experiences and logical observation propounded the theory of *Bheda-Abheda* (Dualism in Non-Dualism) in which God is accepted absolute but is relative also. The whole universe has emerged from His Self. He is absolute and transcendental-being and, in this way, is above all this cosmic world. Broadly, the philosophy of Nimbarka is not much different from that of Ramanuja. He believes that the creation is not different from the creator, as a particle is not different from its source in nature, though it can differ in quality. Nimbarka preached the method of salvation is a type of Bhakti, though he too like Ramanuja never ignored the importance of *Jnan*.

Another important exponent of the *Vedanta* philosophy was Madhava, who too propounded his philosophy based on *Vedanta Sutra*. His theory regarding the nature of the Supreme Being is identical with the theory of *Bhagwat Purana*, which restores the individuality of *Bhagwan* as distinct from the world. Like Shankara, he does not build his philosophy on *Maya* and the self-luminous *Jnan*, but he believes that the world is real as it is perceived by us and the nature of *Jnan* is relative, i.e. distinctive. His dualism advocates that God is different from a man and the best method for salvation is Bhakti. He favours the Bhakti unfixed with any motive behind it. The definitive spiritual emancipation is the inevitable result of Bhakti. In his views, dualism divides human beings into three divisions. The first category is that of the human beings who remain absorbed in the worldly things and does not devote themselves to God and it remains un-emancipated. The second category is that of the human beings who do not get salvation but who are subject to rebirth and miseries of this

world. The third category is that of human beings who are entirely devoted to God and enjoy ultimate peace and blessings.

Another important philosopher of this series of Bhakti movement is Vallabhacharya who propagated his philosophy of *Vedanta* in the sixteenth century. He is the exponent of pure monism. In his views, God is thoroughly competent to assume the nature of Personal and Impersonal being. In his pure monism, he has divided this universe into two parts, *Jagat* and *Sansara*, which can be translated Universe and World respectively. He believes that *Jagat* is eternal whereas World changes. He accepts Bhakti as a practical method. He presumes and preaches two kinds of Bhakti, which he terms *Maryada* (conditioned by tradition) and *Pushti Marga* (depending upon His kind will). In *Maryada* Bhakti the *Bhakta* has to perform several religious ceremonies in correspondence with the prescription of the reliable scriptures. In *Pushti-Marga* *Bhakta* is not to face any ritualistic pressure except to dedicate himself for His grace. Many times *Pushti-Marga* of Vallabhacharya is considered just like a name ascribed to the *Prapatti Marga* of Ramanuja as both the systems declare their inability to attain perfection with their efforts in respective schemes and surrender themselves to His grace.

The torch of Bhakti traveled from South to the North through Ramananda, a disciple of Ramanuja's *Sri Sect*. With time, the followers of various philosophers of the Bhakti movement phase were divided into various schools and the two important amongst them is *Nirguna* and *Saguna*. *Nirguna* Bhakti accepts the impersonal God as their Deity. The *Saguna* Bhakti adores His forms or manifestations. The important *Bhakats* who advocate *Nirguna* Bhakti are Tulsi Das, Meera Bai, Surdas, and Kabir. Though Ramananda brought this torch of Bhakti to the North from the South it was Kabir, his disciple, who is responsible for its spread in the North. Guru Ravidas was also the disciple of the famous Sant Ramananda of Varanasi. He was a friend of his disciple brothers saint Kabir, saint Pipa, saint Dhanna and saint Sain. Many a time, saint Kabir has paid homage to Guru Ravidas's greatness, spiritual attainments, devotion, and steadfastness.⁷

⁶ Darshan Singh, Indian Bhakti Tradition and Sikh Gurus, p. 32

⁷ G.S. Chauhan, Bani of Bhagats Hemkunt Publications, p. 41