

Unit-I

(c) Bhakti movements and monotheistic traditions in South and North India; Women Bhaktas; Nath panthis; Kabir, Nanak and the Sant tradition: Saguna and Nirguna

1. Introduction: Religious and Social Background

- The period from the 13th to the mid-16th century witnessed important changes in the religious and social life of India.
- The expansion of the Delhi Sultanate, regional kingdoms, towns, trade networks and agrarian society created new social interactions.
- Religious life was not confined to temples, mosques or learned religious institutions.
- Several movements emphasized personal devotion to God, equality of human beings, rejection of excessive ritualism, importance of the spiritual teacher or guru, and use of regional languages.
- The Bhakti movement developed in different regions and did not constitute one single, centrally organized movement.
- It included diverse traditions such as Vaishnava Bhakti, Shaiva traditions, Saguna Bhakti, Nirguna Bhakti, Sant traditions and Nathpanthi traditions.
- Interaction between Bhakti and Sufi traditions also contributed to an atmosphere of religious dialogue and shared devotional vocabulary.

2. Bhakti Movement: Meaning and Main Features

- Bhakti is derived from the Sanskrit root bhaj, meaning to share, participate, worship or devote oneself.
- It refers to intense personal devotion to a deity or God.
- The concept has ancient roots in texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and Bhagavata Purana.
- Personal relationship with God: God could be approached directly through love and devotion.
- Emotional devotion: devotion could take the form of love, surrender, service, friendship, parental affection or the relationship of a lover and beloved.
- Importance of the guru: the spiritual teacher guided the devotee towards religious realization.
- Criticism of ritualism: many saints criticized empty rituals, excessive priestly mediation and pilgrimage without genuine devotion.
- Use of vernacular languages: saints communicated in languages understood by ordinary people.
- Social criticism: several saints questioned caste hierarchy, untouchability, religious exclusivism and social discrimination.
- Accessibility: Bhakti offered a relatively accessible form of religious expression to peasants, artisans, traders, women and lower-status groups.

3. Bhakti in South India

- South India played a crucial role in the development of devotional traditions.
- The **Alvars** were Tamil Vaishnava devotees who expressed intense devotion to Vishnu and his manifestations.
- Their devotional compositions were later collected as the Nalayira Divya Prabandham.
- Important Alvar saints included Periyalvar, Andal, Nammalvar and Tirumangai Alvar.
- The **Nayanars** were Tamil Shaiva devotees who expressed devotion to Shiva.
- Their hymns were collected primarily in the Tevaram and related Shaiva devotional literature.
- Important Nayanars included Appar, Sambandar, Sundarar and Karaikkal Ammaiyaar.
- The Alvar and Nayanar traditions made devotion emotionally powerful, used Tamil, encouraged devotional communities and contributed to regional religious cultures.

4. Ramanuja and the Development of Vaishnava Bhakti

- Ramanuja (traditionally dated c. 1017–1137) preceded the chronological core of this unit but is important for understanding later Bhakti developments.
- He developed Vishishtadvaita, or qualified non-dualism.
- Brahman is ultimately one but possesses real attributes.
- The individual soul is distinct but dependent upon God.
- Vishnu/Narayana occupies the central position.
- Salvation can be attained through devotion, surrender and divine grace.
- Ramanuja's ideas influenced later Vaishnava traditions and provided an intellectual foundation for subsequent Bhakti traditions.

5. Bhakti in Maharashtra and Western India

- Maharashtra became an important centre of devotional traditions.
- The **Varkari** tradition was particularly significant.
- Jnaneshwar (Dnyaneshwar), associated with the 13th century, wrote the Jnaneshvari, a Marathi interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita.
- Namdev, associated with the late 13th–early 14th century, expressed devotion to Vithoba of Pandharpur.
- Some hymns associated with Namdev are included in the Guru Granth Sahib.
- The Varkari tradition attracted people from different social backgrounds and connected devotion with community, singing, pilgrimage and ethical living.

6. Monotheistic Traditions in South India

- Medieval Indian religious traditions cannot always be divided rigidly into polytheism and monotheism.
- Certain devotional traditions emphasized the supremacy or unity of one God while accepting different manifestations or forms.

- The **Virashaiva/Lingayat** tradition in Karnataka is important in this context.
- Basava, associated with 12th-century Karnataka, emphasized devotion to Shiva, personal religious experience, criticism of caste hierarchy and ritualism, and ethical conduct.
- Vachanas provided a powerful medium for religious and social criticism.

7. Bhakti in North India

- Bhakti traditions became increasingly influential in North India from the 14th and 15th centuries.
- Important figures included Ramananda, Kabir, Ravidas and Guru Nanak.
- North Indian traditions emphasized personal devotion, the name of God, the guru, moral conduct, equality and criticism of caste and religious hypocrisy.
- The Sant tradition became particularly important in this environment.

8. Ramananda

- Ramananda is traditionally associated with the late 14th–early 15th century.
- He is associated with the Ramanandi tradition of Vaishnavism and devotion to Rama.
- Tradition associates him with disciples from diverse social backgrounds, including Kabir, Ravidas, Sena, Dhanna and Pipa.
- The exact historical relationship between Ramananda and all these figures is debated by historians.
- Students should distinguish hagiographical tradition from historically verifiable evidence.

9. Women Bhaktas

- Women played an important role in devotional traditions.
- Bhakti provided opportunities for women to express personal religious experiences and challenge conventional expectations concerning marriage, domestic roles and social hierarchy.
- **Andal** was a famous woman associated with the Alvar tradition. She composed Tiruppavai and Nachiyar Tirumoli and expressed intense devotion to Vishnu.
- **Karaikkal Ammaiyar** was an important Nayanar associated with Shiva. Her tradition emphasizes female religious agency and rejection of conventional domestic identity.
- **Mirabai**, associated with the 16th century, was devoted to Krishna and expressed spiritual longing, surrender and rejection of worldly attachments.
- Mirabai's devotional identity became more important than family status, marriage and social conventions.
- Historical caution: many stories about Mirabai come from later hagiographical traditions and should be distinguished from historical biography.

10. Nath Panthis

- The Nath tradition was an important religious and yogic tradition of medieval India.
- It is strongly associated with Matsyendranath and Gorakhnath.

- The tradition developed through interactions among Shaivism, yogic practices, Tantric traditions and ascetic traditions.
- It emphasized yoga, physical and spiritual discipline, control of the body, meditation and spiritual liberation.
- Nath traditions are closely associated with Hatha Yoga traditions.
- Nath yogis travelled widely and interacted with rural communities, artisans, traders and other ascetic groups.
- Their teachings circulated beyond elite Sanskrit institutions.
- Nath ideas influenced several later Sant poets, especially the emphasis on inner realization and the search for the divine within.

11. Kabir

- Kabir is generally placed in the 15th century and became one of the most influential figures of the Nirguna Sant tradition.
- Traditional accounts associate him with the weaving community of Banaras, although details of his life remain uncertain.
- Kabir emphasized a supreme divine reality beyond conventional religious images.
- He used different names for the divine, including Ram, Hari, Allah and Khuda.
- He criticized empty temple rituals, mechanical mosque rituals, blind adherence to religious authorities and pilgrimage without inner transformation.
- He rejected caste-based spiritual superiority.
- The guru was important for realizing the divine.
- True knowledge required inner transformation rather than mere book learning.
- Kabir's poetry appealed particularly to artisans, craftspeople, urban working communities and marginalized groups.
- Kabir should not simply be described as a Hindu-Muslim synthesis; his message challenged external religious boundaries and emphasized an inner and universal spiritual reality.

12. Sant Tradition

- Sant generally refers to a saintly or spiritually realized person.
- The Sant tradition developed prominently in North India.
- It included diverse poet-saints who emphasized Nirguna devotion, inner realization, the divine name, guru, equality and criticism of caste and ritualism.
- Major Sants included Kabir, Ravidas, Guru Nanak, Dhanna, Sena and Pipa; Dadu Dayal and others became important later.
- God was sought within the individual rather than only through external institutions.
- Vernacular expression and oral transmission made Sant teachings accessible to wider sections of society.

13. Ravidas

- Ravidas was a prominent Sant figure traditionally associated with a leather-working community.
- His teachings emphasized equality, devotion, rejection of caste discrimination and spiritual dignity.
- Begampura represents his vision of an ideal society without sorrow, oppression, caste discrimination and unjust hierarchy.
- Begampura is an important expression of social utopianism in medieval devotional literature.
- It demonstrates that Bhakti/Sant literature could contain social criticism as well as religious ideas.

14. Guru Nanak

- Guru Nanak (1469–1539) was the founder of the Sikh tradition.
- He emerged within the broader religious environment of North Indian Sant and devotional traditions.
- His teachings emphasized the unity of God and ethical living.
- God is formless, eternal and beyond religious divisions.
- Naam refers to remembrance and meditation upon God's name.
- Nanak rejected caste-based superiority and emphasized human equality.
- Kirat Karo: earn through honest work.
- Vand Chhako: share one's earnings and resources with others.
- Naam Japna: remember and meditate upon the divine name.
- Nanak criticized religious practices lacking moral conduct, compassion and genuine devotion.

15. Guru Nanak and Social Institutions

- Sangat refers to the religious congregation/community.
- It created a collective environment for prayer, devotional singing and spiritual learning.
- Langar became an important institution of collective community dining.
- People from different social backgrounds could eat together.
- Langar challenged caste hierarchy, social separation and notions of ritual purity and pollution.
- Religious principles were translated into social practices, making community an important expression of equality.

16. Guru Nanak and the Sant Tradition

- Guru Nanak shared several features with the Sant tradition: belief in one supreme God, criticism of ritualism, rejection of caste hierarchy, importance of the divine name and guru, and vernacular devotional poetry.

- At the same time, the Sikh tradition developed its own institutions, community identity, scriptural tradition and religious practices.
- Sikhism should not simply be described as a branch of the Bhakti movement.
- It emerged through interaction with Sant traditions, Bhakti traditions, Sufi traditions and the religious cultures of Punjab.

17. Saguna and Nirguna Bhakti

- Saguna means 'with attributes/form'. God is understood as possessing recognizable qualities and often a personal form.
- Major Saguna deities include Rama, Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva and Devi.
- Saguna Bhakti emphasizes personal God, divine form, stories of divine incarnations, emotional devotion, singing, recitation, temple and pilgrimage traditions.
- Devotees may relate to God as servant, friend, parent, lover or child.
- Major Saguna figures include Ramananda, Vallabha, Surdas, Tulsidas and Mirabai.
- Nirguna means 'without attributes/form'. God is conceived as formless, infinite and beyond physical representation.
- Nirguna Bhakti emphasizes inner realization, guru, divine name and ethical conduct.
- Major Nirguna figures include Kabir, Ravidas, Guru Nanak and, later, Dadu Dayal.
- The Saguna-Nirguna distinction should not be treated as an absolute division because medieval devotional traditions were internally diverse.

18. Bhakti and Sufi Traditions: Points of Interaction

- Bhakti and Sufi traditions developed in overlapping social environments.
- Both emphasized personal devotion, love of God, spiritual guidance, inner experience and moral conduct.
- The guru in many Bhakti traditions and the pir/shaykh in Sufi traditions provided spiritual guidance.
- Naam in Sant traditions and dhikr in Sufi traditions represent practices of remembrance.
- Similarities should not be mistaken for complete religious identity because Sufism remained rooted in Islamic theological traditions.

19. Bhakti and Social Change

- Several Bhakti saints questioned caste hierarchy.
- Saints from artisan and socially marginalized communities gained religious recognition.
- Kabir, Ravidas, Sena and Dhanna are commonly cited examples from different social backgrounds.
- Spiritual authority could be based on devotion, experience and moral character rather than birth.
- Sant traditions often found resonance among weavers, metalworkers, leatherworkers, barbers, traders and other groups.

- Women saints demonstrated that women could become devotional poets, religious personalities and spiritual authorities.
- Bhakti literature contributed greatly to regional literary cultures and strengthened the use of vernacular languages.

20. Bhakti and the Question of 'Reform'

- Bhakti is often described as a religious reform movement, but this description requires qualification.
- Bhakti did not uniformly reject temples, Brahmins, caste or rituals.
- Some traditions were closely connected with temple institutions, Brahmanical traditions and existing social structures.
- Bhakti is better understood as a diverse collection of devotional traditions rather than a single social revolution.
- Some traditions were socially radical, others relatively conservative, and many existed between these extremes.

21. Historical Sources for Studying Bhakti

- Literary sources include devotional hymns, bhajans, vachanas, biographies/hagiographies and regional literary works.
- Important texts include Nalayira Divya Prabandham, Tevaram, Jnaneshvari, attributed verses of Kabir, hymns of Ravidas and Guru Nanak's compositions.
- Guru Granth Sahib is a major source for the study of Sikh devotional traditions.
- Hagiographies often contain miracles and legendary encounters and should not automatically be treated as factual biographies.
- Oral transmission was important in spreading and adapting devotional compositions.

22. Major Themes for Historical Interpretation

- Religion and social equality: Bhakti questioned the monopoly of elite religious authority.
- Religion and language: vernacular languages became important vehicles of religious communication.
- Caste and social mobility: artisan and marginalized communities gained religious recognition, although caste did not disappear.
- Gender: women saints challenged conventional gender roles, although participation varied by region and social context.
- Religious interaction: Bhakti, Sant and Sufi traditions interacted in complex ways.
- Urban society: artisan and commercial groups were important audiences for Sant poetry.
- Regionalization: Bhakti encouraged the use of regional languages and contributed to regional identities.

23. Important Differences Within the Bhakti Tradition

- Temple-centred versus non-temple-centred devotion.

- Saguna versus Nirguna conceptions of God.
- Vaishnava versus Shaiva traditions.
- Elite theological traditions versus popular devotional traditions.
- Socially conservative versus socially critical tendencies.
- Institutionalized traditions versus wandering or ascetic traditions.
- Therefore, there was no single 'Bhakti movement' with one doctrine, organization or social programme.

24. Chronological Framework

- c. 6th–9th centuries: Alvar and Nayanar devotional traditions in South India.
- 12th century: Basava and Virashaiva/Lingayat traditions.
- 13th century: Jnaneshwar and the development of Marathi devotional traditions; Nath traditions continued to influence religious culture.
- 14th century: expansion of North Indian devotional traditions; Ramananda associated with Vaishnava devotional developments.
- 15th century: major flowering of Sant traditions – Kabir, Ravidas and Guru Nanak.
- Late 15th–16th centuries: increasing prominence of Mirabai, Surdas, Tulsidas and various regional Vaishnava traditions.

25. Key Terms for Examination

- Bhakti – devotional surrender or love toward God.
- Saguna – God conceived with form and attributes.
- Nirguna – God conceived as formless or beyond attributes.
- Sant – saintly/devotional tradition, particularly associated with North Indian Nirguna devotion.
- Nath Panthi – yogic/ascetic tradition associated particularly with Gorakhnath.
- Alvar – Tamil Vaishnava devotional saints.
- Nayanar – Tamil Shaiva devotional saints.
- Varkari – Maharashtra-based devotional tradition centred particularly on Vithoba.
- Sangat – religious congregation in the Sikh tradition.
- Langar – community kitchen/dining tradition.
- Naam – divine name/remembrance.
- Guru – spiritual teacher.
- Vachana – devotional compositions associated particularly with the Lingayat tradition.
- Begampura – Ravidas's vision of an egalitarian society free from suffering and oppression.