
UNIT 16 BHAKTI AND SUFI TRADITIONS*

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16.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you should be able to:

- understand the background of the bhakti movement,
- identify the main political and socio-economic factors for the rise of bhakti movement in north India,
- list the main popular branches and the saints of this movement,

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- know the main characteristic features of the bhakti movement,
- identify the salient features of sufism,
- describe its development in India during the period of Delhi Sultanate,
- comprehend the reasons for the popularity of Chishti *silsilah* in India, and
- analyze the character and philosophy of the Mahdavi movement.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

Bhakti as a religious concept means devotional surrender to a personally conceived Supreme God for attaining salvation. The origin of this doctrine has been traced to both the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions of ancient India and to various scriptures such as the Bhagvat Gita. But it was for the first time in South India between the 7th and 10th century that bhakti grew from a mere religious doctrine into a popular movement based on religious equality and broad-based social participation. The movement which was led by popular saint-poets reached its climax in the 10th century after which it began to decline. But it was revived as a philosophical and ideological movement by a series of wandering scholars or *acharyas*, beginning with Ramanuja in the 11th century. The establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in early 13th century witnessed great outburst of many diverse and widespread socio-religious movements in various parts of the country drawing upon the concepts of bhakti. These movements have been seen as a continuation or revival of the older South Indian bhakti movement. But each one of the later movements which grew in the Sultanate period had a historical context of its own and its own peculiarities. Moreover, one of them, namely, the non-conformist monotheistic movement which is associated with Kabir and other 'low-caste' saints bears only superficial resemblance to the variants of the movement. Its social roots, its ideology, social composition of its leadership and even its concept of bhakti and God set it fundamentally apart from the older bhakti movement of South India as well as from the rest of the later bhakti movements. In view of these wide and at times even basic differences among various bhakti movements, they must be discussed individually in order to clearly bring out the characteristics of each one of them and also to discover elements of unity and diversity among them.

Sufism or *tasawwuf* is the name for various mystical tendencies and movements in Islam. It aims at establishing direct communion between God and man through personal experience of mystery which lies within Islam. Every religion gives rise to mystical tendencies in its fold at a particular stage of its evolution. In this sense, sufism was a natural development within Islam based on the spirit of *Quaranic* piety. The sufis while accepting the *Shariat* did not confine their religious practice to formal adherence and stressed cultivation of religious experience aimed at direct perception of God. In this Unit, we will discuss the main features of sufism and its spread in India.

The religious milieu of India, when Islam reached this subcontinent, presents a phase where Buddhism had lost its supremacy; Brahmanism was trying to consolidate its position by compromising with Buddhist doctrines as well as with pre-Aryan practices. Islam, though altogether a new thing, had exercised an influence upon the Indians with its principles of universal brotherhood and human equality. In the words of Tarachand, 'Not only did Hindu religion, Hindu art, Hindu literature and Hindu Science absorb Muslim elements, but the very spirit of Hindu culture and the very stuff of Hindu mind were also altered, and the Muslim reciprocated by responding to the change in every development of life'. An everlasting process of give and take thus began. Among the Muslims, Al-Biruni,

Amir Khusrau, Abul Fazl, Dara Shikoh, etc. tried to understand Hinduism and made valuable attempts to enhance Muslim understanding of Hinduism by their own works and by translating Sanskrit works into Persian. Rulers like Firuz Shah Tughlaq, Zainul Abidin of Kashmir, Sikandar Lodi, Akbar and Jahangir, among others encouraged this trend with the result that scholars like Mirza Jan Janan rose in the 18th century to declare that both Rama and Krishna were 'prophets'.

Thus, during the period of our study one can identify two significant trends in the realm of religion, mainly bhakti and sufi, a detailed discussion on which follows in the subsequent sections.

16.2 BACKGROUND: BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN SOUTH INDIA

The Saiva Nayanar saints and **Vaishnava** Alvar saints of South India spread the doctrine of bhakti among different sections of the society irrespective of caste and gender during the period between the 7th and the 10th century. Some of these saints came from the 'lower' castes and some were women. The saint-poets preached bhakti in an intense emotional manner and promoted religious egalitarianism. They dispensed with rituals and traversed the region several times singing, dancing and advocating bhakti. The Alvar and Nayanar saints used the Tamil language and not Sanskrit for preaching and composing devotional songs. All these features gave the movement a popular character. For the first time bhakti acquired a popular base.

The South Indian bhakti saints were critical of Buddhists and Jains who enjoyed a privileged status at the courts of South Indian kings at that time. They won over many adherents of Buddhism and Jainism, both of which by now had become rigid and formal religions. At the same time, however, these poet-saints resisted the authority of the orthodox Brahmins by making bhakti accessible to all without any caste and sex discrimination. But the South Indian bhakti movement had its limitations as well. It never consciously opposed Brahmanism or the varna and caste systems at the social level. It was integrated with the caste system and the 'lower' castes continued to suffer from various social disabilities. There was no elimination of Brahmanical rituals such as worship of idols, recitation of the Vedic *mantras* and pilgrimages to sacred places in spite of the overriding emphasis on bhakti as the superior mode of worship. The Buddhists and Jains were its main targets, not the Brahmins. This perhaps was also the reason why the Brahman dominated temples played an important role in the growth of South Indian bhakti movement.

Since the ideological and social foundations of caste system were not questioned by the South Indian saint-poets, the bhakti movement of the South in the long run strengthened it rather than weakening it. Ultimately, after the movement reached its climax in the 10th century, it was gradually assimilated into the conventional Brahmanical religion. But despite these limitations, the South Indian bhakti movement in its heyday succeeded in championing the cause of religious equality and, consequently, the Brahmins had to accept the right of the 'low-caste' to preach, to have access to bhakti as a mode of worship and to have access even to the *Vedas*.

Bhakti and the South Indian *Acharyas*

When the popularity of the bhakti movement in South India was on the wane, the doctrine of bhakti was defended at the philosophical level by a series of brilliant Vaishnava Brahman scholars (*acharyas*). Ramanuja (11th century) was first

among them. He gave philosophical justification for bhakti. He tried to establish a careful balance between orthodox Brahmanism and popular bhakti which was open to all. Though he did not support the idea of the 'lower' castes having access to the *Vedas*, he advocated bhakti as a mode of worship accessible to all including the Sudras and even the outcastes. While propagating bhakti, he did not observe caste distinctions and even tried to eradicate untouchability. Nimbarka, a Telugu Brahman, is believed to have been a younger contemporary of Ramanuja. He spent most of his time in Vrindavan near Mathura in North India. He believed in total devotion to Krishna and Radha. Another South Indian Vaishnavite bhakti philosopher was Madhava who belonged to the 13th century. Like Ramanuja, he did not dispute orthodox Brahmanical restriction on the Vedic study by the Sudras. He believed that bhakti provided alternate avenue of worship to the Sudras. His philosophical system was based on the Bhagvat Purana. He is also believed to have toured North India. The last two prominent Vaishnava acharyas were Ramananda (late 14th and early 15th century) and Vallabha (late 15th and early 16th century). Since both of them lived mostly in North India during the Sultanate period and gave new orientation to the Vaishnava bhakti, they will be discussed in the section dealing with North India.

16.3 BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN NORTH INDIA

There arose during the Sultanate period (13th -15th century) many popular socio-religious movements in North and East India, and Maharashtra. Emphasis on bhakti and religious equality were two common features of these movements. As has been pointed out, these two were also the features of the South Indian bhakti movements. Almost all the bhakti movements of the Sultanate period have been related to one South Indian Vaishnava *acharya* or the other. For these reasons, many scholars believe that the bhakti movements of the Sultanate period were a continuation or resurgence of the older bhakti movement. They argue that there existed philosophical and ideological links between the two, either due to contact or diffusion. Thus, Kabir and other leaders of non-conformist monotheistic movements in North India are believed to have been the disciples of Ramananda who, in turn, is believed to have been connected with Ramanuja's philosophical order. Similar claims have been made that Chaitanya, the most significant figure of the Vaishnava movement in Bengal, belonged to the philosophical school of Madhava. This movement is also believed to have been connected with Nimbarka's school because of its emphasis on 'Krishna' bhakti.

There are undoubtedly striking similarities between the older bhakti tradition of South India and various bhakti movements that flourished in the Sultanate and Mughal periods. If we exclude the popular monotheistic movements of Kabir, Nanak and other 'low' caste saints, the two sets of movements can be shown to have possessed many more common features. For example, like the South Indian bhakti movement, the Vaishnava bhakti movements of North and Eastern India and Maharashtra, though egalitarian in the religious sphere, never denounced the caste system, the authority of Brahmanical scriptures and the Brahmanical privileges as such.

Consequently, like the South Indian bhakti, most of the Vaishnava movements of the later period were ultimately assimilated into the Brahmanical religion, though in the process of interaction, the latter itself underwent many changes. However, the similarities end here. Bhakti movement was never a single movement except in the broad doctrinal sense of a movement which laid emphasis on bhakti and

religious equality. The bhakti movements of medieval India differed in many significant respects not only from the older South Indian bhakti tradition but also among themselves. Each one of them had its own regional identity and socio-historical and cultural contexts. Thus, the non-conformist movements based on popular monotheistic bhakti contained features that were essentially different from various Vaishnava bhakti movements. Kabir's notion of bhakti was not the same as that of the medieval Vaishnava saints such as Chaitanya or Mirabai.

Within the Vaishnava movement, the historical context of Maharashtra bhakti was different from that of the Bengal Vaishnavism or North Indian bhakti movement of Ramanand, Vallabha, Surdas and Tulsidas. During the later period, when the Vaishnava bhakti movement crystallized into sects, there arose frequent disputes between them which sometimes even turned violent. Among all the bhakti movements of the period between the 14th and 17th century, the popular monotheistic movements of Kabir, Nanak, Raidas and other 'lower' caste saints stand out fundamentally different.

Popular Monotheistic Movement and Vaishnava Bhakti Movement

Both these movements arose in Northern India at the same time, that is, in the centuries following the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate and advent of Islam in that part of the country. For this reason, the rise of both the movements is quite often attributed to certain common causes such as the influence of Islam on Hinduism. However, the causes and sources of the two movements and the factors exerting influence on them were quite diverse. It will become clear from the following discussion that a cause which explains one movement may not do so in the case of the other. This is so because the popular monotheistic movements arose and reached their peak in the Sultanate period, while the Vaishnava movements began in the Sultanate period but reached their climax during the Mughal period.

16.4 EMERGENCE OF BHAKTI MOVEMENT

The bhakti movement which influenced large number of people during 14th-17th centuries in North India emerged due to a number of political, socio-economic and religious factors. We will discuss all these in this Section.

16.4.1 Political Factors for the Rise of Bhakti Movement

It has been pointed out that as the popular bhakti movement could not take root in Northern India before the Turkish conquest because the socio-religious milieu was dominated by the Rajput-Brahman alliance. The Turkish conquests brought the supremacy of this alliance to an end. The advent of Islam with the Turkish conquest also caused a setback to the power and prestige commanded by the Brahmans: Thus, the way was paved for the growth of non-conformist movements, with anti-caste and anti-Brahmanical ideology. The Brahmans had always made the people believe that the images and idols in the temples were not just the symbols of God but were gods themselves who possessed divine power and who could be influenced by them (i.e. the Brahmans). The Turks deprived the Brahmans of their temple wealth and state patronage. Thus, the Brahmans suffered both materially and ideologically. The non-conformist sect of the Nathpanthis was perhaps the first to gain from the declining power of the Rajput-Brahman alliance. This sect seems to have reached its peak in the beginning of the Sultanate period. The loss of power and influence by the Brahmans and the new political situation ultimately created conditions for the rise of the popular monotheistic movements and other bhakti movements in Northern India.

16.4.2 Socio-Economic Factors

It has been argued that the bhakti movements of medieval India represented sentiments of the common people against feudal oppression. According to this viewpoint, elements of revolutionary opposition to feudalism can be found in the poetry of the bhakti saints ranging from Kabir and Nanak to Chaitanya and Tulsidas. It is in this sense that sometimes the medieval bhakti movements are seen as Indian counterpart of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. However, there is nothing in the poetry of the bhakti saints to suggest that they represented the class interests of the peasantry against the surplus-extracting feudal state. The Vaishnava bhakti saints broke away from orthodox Brahmanical order only to the extent that they believed in bhakti and religious equality. Normally, they continued to subscribe to many basic principles of orthodox Brahmanism. The more radical monotheistic saints rejected orthodox Brahmanical religion altogether but even they did not call for the overthrow of the state and the ruling class. For this reason, the bhakti movements cannot be regarded as Indian variant of European Protestant Reformation which was a far greater social upheaval linked to the decline of feudalism and the rise of capitalism.

This, however, does not mean that the bhakti saints were indifferent to the living conditions of the people. They used images of daily life and always tried to identify themselves in one way or another with the sufferings of the common people.

Economic and Social Changes

The widespread popularity of the monotheistic movement of Kabir, Nanak, Dhanna, Pipa, etc. can be explained fully only in the context of certain significant socio-economic changes in the period following the Turkish conquest of Northern India. The Turkish ruling class, unlike the Rajputs, lived in towns. The extraction of large agricultural surplus led to enormous concentration of resources in the hands of the ruling class. The demands of this resource-wielding class for manufactured goods, luxuries and other necessities led to the introduction of many new techniques and crafts on a large scale. This, in turn, led to the expansion of the class of urban artisans in the 13th and 14th centuries.

The growing classes of urban artisans were attracted towards the monotheistic movement because of its egalitarian ideas as they were now not satisfied with the low status accorded to them in traditional Brahmanical hierarchy. It has been pointed out that some groups of traders like the Khatri in the Punjab, who benefited directly from the growth of towns, urban crafts production and expansion of markets, were also drawn into the movement for the same reason. The popularity of the monotheistic movement was the result of the support it obtained from one or more of these different classes of the society. It is one or more of these sections which constituted the social base of the movement in different parts of Northern India. In Punjab, the popularity of the movement did not remain confined to urban classes: it acquired a broader base by the incorporation of the Jat peasants in its ranks. The support extended by the Jats of the Punjab to Guru Nanak's movement ultimately contributed to the development of Sikhism as a mass religion.

16.5 MAIN POPULAR MOVEMENTS AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

In this Section, we will discuss some of the main monotheistic and Vaishnava movements in North India, including Maharashtra and Bengal during the period under review.

16.5.1 Monotheistic Movements of North India

Kabir (c. 1440-1518) was the earliest and undoubtedly the most powerful figure of the monotheistic movements that began in the 15th century. He belonged to a family of weavers (Julaha – who were indigenous converts to Islam). He spent greater part of his life in Banaras (Kashi). The monotheistic saints who succeeded him either claimed to be his disciples or respectfully mention him. His verses were included in the Sikh scripture, the *Adi Granth* in large numbers than those of other monotheists. All this indicates his pre-eminent position among the monotheists. Raidas (or Ravidas) most probably belonged to the generation next to Kabir's. He was a tanner by caste. He also lived in Banaras and was influenced by Kabir's ideas. Dhanna was a 15th century Jat peasant from Rajasthan. Other prominent saints of the same period were Sen (a barber) and Pipa. Dadu (c. 1544-1603) was also inspired by Kabir's doctrine. In his Bani, a collection of his hymns and poems, he regards Allah, Ram and Govind as his spiritual teachers. Dadu's cosmology and the stages of the soul's pilgrimage carry sufi influence. In the 18th century, with the decline of the Mughal Empire, the Dadu Panth got transformed into Nagas or professional fighters.

Sikhism

Guru Nanak (1469-1539) preached his ideas much in the same way as Kabir and other monotheists, but due to various developments later his teachings led to the emergence of a mass religion, Sikhism. The basic similarity of his teachings with those of Kabir and other saints and the basic ideological agreement between them makes him an integral part of the monotheistic movement. He belonged to a caste of traders called Khatri and was born in a village in Punjab now known as Nankana Sahib. In his later life he travelled widely to preach his ideas. Eventually he settled in a place in Punjab now known as Dera Baba Nanak. There he attracted large number of disciples. The hymns composed by him were incorporated in the *Adi Granth* by the fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan, in 1604.

The teachings and philosophy of Guru Nanak constitute an important component of Indian philosophy and thought. His philosophy comprised three basic elements: a leading charismatic personality (the *Guru*), ideology (*Shabad*) and organization (*Sangat*). Nanak evaluated and criticized the prevailing religious beliefs and attempted to establish a true religion which could lead to salvation. He repudiated idol worship and did not favour pilgrimage nor accepted the theory of incarnation. He condemned formalism and ritualism. He believed in the unity of God and laid emphasis on having a true *Guru* for revelation. He advised people to follow the principles of conduct and worship: *sach* (truth), *halal* (lawful earning), *khair* (wishing well of others), *niyat* (right intention) and service of the lord.

Nanak denounced the caste system and the inequality which it perpetrated. He said that caste and honour should be judged by the acts or deeds of the individuals. He believed in Universal brotherhood of man and equality of men and women. He championed the cause of women's emancipation and condemned the practice of *sati*. Nanak did not propound celibacy or vegetarianism. He laid stress on concepts like justice, righteousness and liberty. Nanak's verses mainly consist of two basic concepts: (i) *Sach* (truth) and *Nam* (Name). *Sabad* (the word), *Guru* (the divine precept) and *Hukam* (the divine order) form the basis of divine self-expression. He laid emphasis on *kirtan* and *satsang*. He introduced community lunch (*langar*).

Tarachand regards the influence of sufis upon the religious thought of Nanak of fundamental importance. The similarity of thought in the verses of Nanak and Baba Farid consisted of the following: the sincere devotion and surrender

before one God. But at the same time Nanak did not hesitate in criticizing the sufis for leading a luxurious life. Nanak made an attempt to unify the Hindus and Muslims and certainly succeeded in synthesizing within his own teachings the essential concepts of Hinduism and Islam. The religious book of the Sikhs the *Guru Granth Sahib (Adi Granth)* was compiled by Guru Arjan. After the death of the tenth *Guru*, Gobind Singh the divine spirit did not pass on to another *Guru* but remained in the *Granth* and the community of the *Guru's* followers.

The *Gurus* mostly belonged to the Khatri mercantile caste whereas their followers were mostly rural Jats. It was Guru Gobind Singh who inaugurated the *khalsa* (brotherhood) among the Sikhs. The Khatri and Aroras as well as Jats constituted important groups within the Sikh community. The artisan castes known as Ramgarhia Sikhs and converts to Sikhism from scheduled castes represented other groups within the Sikh *panth*. Caste consciousness did exist in the Sikh *panth* but was not so prominent.

16.5.2 Common Characteristic Features

The teachings of all the saints who are associated with the monotheistic movement have certain common features which give the movement its basic unity:

- i) Most of the monotheists belonged to the 'low' castes and were aware that there existed a unity of ideas among themselves. Most of them were aware of each other's teachings and influences. In their verses they mention each other and their predecessors in such a way as to suggest a harmonious ideological affinity among them. Thus, Kabir speaks of Raidas as 'saint among saints'. Raidas, in his turn, respectfully mentions the names of Kabir, Namdev, Trilochan, Dhanna, Sen and Pipa. Dhanna takes pride in speaking of the fame and popularity of Namdev, Kabir, Raidas and Sen and admits that he devoted himself to bhakti after hearing their fame. Kabir's influence on Nanak is also beyond dispute. It is, therefore, not surprising that the later traditions link Kabir, Raidas, Dhanna, Pipa, Sen, etc. together as disciples of Ramananda. The ideological affinity among the monotheists is also clear from the inclusion of the hymns of Kabir, Raidas, etc. along with those of Nanak by the fifth Sikh Guru Arjan in the *Adi Granth*.
- ii) All the monotheists were influenced in one way or another and in varying degrees by the Vaishnava concept of bhakti, the Nathpanthi movement and sufism. The monotheistic movement represents the synthesis of elements from these three traditions. But more often than not they did not accept the element of these traditions in their original form and made many innovations and adaptations which gave new meanings to old concepts.
- iii) For the monotheists, there was only one way of establishing communion with God: it was the way of personally experienced bhakti. This was also the way of the Vaishnava bhakti saints, but there was one fundamental difference of perceptions: they all have been called monotheists because they uncompromisingly believed in only one God. Then, God of Nanak was non-incarnate and formless (*nirankar*), eternal (*akal*) and ineffable (*alakh*). The monotheistic bhakti, therefore, was *nirguna* bhakti and not *saguna* – which was the case with the Vaishnavites who believed in various human incarnations of God. The monotheists adopted the notion of bhakti from the Vaishnava bhakti tradition but gave it a *nirguna* orientation. Quite often Kabir called God by the name, Ram. For this reason, he has been called Ram-bhakta. But Kabir himself made it clear in his utterances that the Ram he was devoted to was not the one who was born as an incarnation in the house of

king Dashratha of Ayodhya or who had killed Ravana, but a formless, non-incarnate God. In addition to the oneness of God and *nirguna* bhakti, the monotheists also emphasized the crucial importance of repetition of divine name, spiritual *guru*, community singing of devotional songs (kirtan) and companionship of saints (satsang).

- iv) The monotheists followed a *path* which was independent of both dominant religions of the time – Hinduism and Islam. They denied their allegiance to either of them and criticized the superstitions and orthodox elements of both the religions. They launched a vigorous ideological assault on the caste system and idolatry. They rejected the authority of the Brahmans and their religious scriptures. Kabir, in his harsh and abrasive style, uses ridicule as a powerful method for denouncing orthodox Brahmanism.
- v) The monotheists composed their poems in popular languages. Some of them used a language which was a mixture of different dialects spoken in various parts of North India. The monotheistic saints preferred this common language to their own native dialects because they considered it fit for the propagation of their non-conformist ideas among the masses in various regions. The use of common language is a striking feature of the movement considering that the saints belonged to different parts of North India and spoke different dialects. The monotheists also made use of popular symbols and images to propagate their teachings. Their utterances are expressed in short verses which could be easily remembered. Thus, for instance, Kabir's poetry is unpolished and has a rustic, colloquial quality but it is essentially a poetry of the people.
- vi) Most of the monotheistic saints were not ascetics. They led worldly life and were married. They lived and preached among the people. They had aversion to and disdain for professional ascetics. They frequently refer to professional caste groups in their verses which would suggest that they continued to pursue their family professions. They were also not like the medieval European Christian saints who were recognized as 'holy' by the Church. The expression which has been used for them and by which they themselves referred to each other is *sant* or *bhagat*. In the *Adi Granth*, Kabir, Raidas, Dhanna, Pipa, Namdev, etc. have been listed as *bhagat*.
- vii) The monotheistic saints travelled widely to propagate their beliefs. Namdev, a 14th century saint from Maharashtra travelled as far as Punjab where his teachings became so popular that they were later absorbed in the *Adi Granth*. Kabir, Raidas and other saints are also believed to have travelled widely.
- viii) The ideas of Kabir and other monotheists spread to various regions and became popular among the 'lower' classes. The popularity of the monotheists broke territorial barriers. This is clear from the high position accorded to Kabir in the Sikh tradition and in the Dadupanthi tradition of Rajasthan. Their continuing popularity even almost two hundred years after their time and in a distant region is clear from the way a mid-17th century Maharashtrian saint Tukaram looked upon himself as an admirer and follower of Kabir, Raidas, Sen, Gora, etc. A 17th century Persian work on comparative religion *Dabistan-i Mazahib* testifies to the continuing popularity of Kabir among the people of North India.
- ix) Despite the widespread popularity that the teachings of monotheists enjoyed among the masses, the followers of each one of the major figures in the monotheistic movement like Kabir, Raidas and Nanak gradually organized themselves into exclusive sectarian orders called *panths* such as Kabir

panth, Raidasi *panth*, Nanak *panth*, etc. Of all these *panths*, the Nanak *panth* alone eventually crystallized into a mass religion while most of the others continue to survive till today but with a vastly reduced following and a narrow sectarian base.

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) Give the salient features of the bhakti movement

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- 2) Write two lines on each of the following:

a) Ramanuja

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b) Nimbarka

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c) Vallabha

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d) Chaitanya

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e) Madhava

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f) Kabir

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g) Guru Nanak

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- 3) What were the chief tenets of Sikhism?

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- 4) Discuss the factors that led to the rise of the bhakti movement.

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- 5) What are the characteristic features of monotheistic bhakti movement? Give the names of three saints belonging to this movement.

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16.5.3 Vaishnava Bhakti Movement in North India

Ramananda was the most prominent scholar saint of the Vaishnava bhakti in Northern India during this period. Some of his ideas have already been mentioned in **Section 16.3**. He belonged to the late 14th and early 15th century. He lived in South India in the early part of his life but later settled in Banaras. He is considered to be the link between the South Indian bhakti tradition and North Indian Vaishnava bhakti. However, he deviated from the ideology and practice of the earlier South Indian *acharyas* in three important respects:

- i) He looked upon Ram and not Vishnu as object of bhakti. To him, Ram was the supreme God who is to be adored with Sita. In this sense he came to be regarded as the founder of the Ram cult in North India within the framework of Vaishnava bhakti tradition.
- ii) He preached in the language of the common people, and not in Sanskrit, to propagate the Ram cult.
- iii) The most significant contribution to Vaishnava bhakti, was that he made bhakti accessible to all irrespective of caste. He greatly relaxed the caste rules in respect of religious and social matters. Though himself a Brahman, he took food with his 'low' caste Vaishnava followers.

It is perhaps for the last mentioned point that some later Vaishnava traditions link Kabir and some other monotheists to him as his disciples. The innovations were probably due to the influence of Islamic ideas. It has also been suggested that he made these innovations in order to counter the growing popularity of the heterodox Nathpanthis, the 'lower' classes of the society. His followers are called Ramanandis. A hymn attributed to him was incorporated in the *Adi Granth*.

Another prominent Vaishnava preacher in the Sultanate period was Vallabhacharya, a Telugu brahman of the late 15th and early 16th century. He, too, was born in Banaras. He was the founder of *Pushtimarga* (way of grace). It also came to be known as Vallabha *sampradaya* (Vallabha Sect). He advocated Krishna bhakti. Famous Krishna bhakti saint-poet, Surdas (1483-1563) and seven other Krishna bhakti poets belonging to the *ashtachhap* were believed to have been the disciples of Vallabha. The sect later became popular in Gujarat.

In North India, however, the Vaishnava bhakti cult acquired a more popular base. Only in the Mughal period, Tulsidas (1532-1623) championed the cause of Rama bhakti while Surdas (1483-1563), Mira Bai (1503-73) and many others popularized Krishna bhakti.

16.5.4 Vaishnava Bhakti Movement in Bengal

In many significant ways the Vaishnava bhakti in Bengal was different from its North Indian and the older South Indian bhakti. The sources which influenced it can be traced to two different traditions – the Vaishnava bhakti tradition of the *Bhagavata Purana*, with its glorification of Krishna *lila* on the one hand, and Sahajiya Buddhist and Nathpanthi traditions on the other. The Vaishnava influence was transmitted by various bhakti poets, beginning with Jayadeva in the 12th century. Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* was composed in Sanskrit. He also wrote songs in Maithili dialect which were later absorbed in the Bengali Vaishnava bhakti tradition. Various non-Vaishnava cults such as those of Sahajiya Buddhists and Nathpanthis that survived in Bengal and Bihar influenced the growth of bhakti movement in Bengal.

These cults preached an easy and natural religion focusing on esoteric and emotional elements. Vaishnava bhakti poets such as Chandidas (14th century) and Vidyapati (14th to 15th centuries) came under the influence of these non-Vaishnava cults, though the *Bhagavata* tradition was always the major source of influence. The songs of Chandidas who was the first Bengali bhakti poet and those of Vidyapati who wrote in Maithili, highlighted the Krishna-Radha relationship. These songs became part of the growing Vaishnava movement in Bengal. Chaitanya himself did not come under the direct influence of Sahajiya doctrine. It is, however, possible that elements of esoteric cults entered into his movement through the influence of Chandidas and Vidyapati. But the most important source of inspiration was the *Bhagavata Purana*.

Chaitanya (1486-1533) was the most prominent Vaishnava saint of Bengal. He popularized Krishna-bhakti in many parts of Eastern India. His popularity as a religious personality was so great that he was looked upon as an *avatara* (incarnation) of Krishna. The advent of Chaitanya marks the shifting of the focus of the Bengal Vaishnava bhakti from devotional literary compositions to a full-fledged reform movement with a broad social base.

Chaitanya disregarded all distinctions of caste, creed and sex to give a popular base to Krishna-bhakti. His followers belonged to all castes and communities. One of his most favourite disciples was Haridas who was a Muslim. He popularized the practice of *sankirtan* or group devotional singing accompanied by ecstatic dancing.

However, Chaitanya did not give up traditional Brahmanical values altogether. He did not question the authority of the Brahmans and scriptures. He upheld the caste prejudices of his Brahman disciples against the 'lower' caste disciples. Six Sanskrit-knowing Brahman Goswamins who were sent by him to Vrindavan near Mathura established a religious order which recognized caste restrictions in its devotional practices and rituals. These Goswamins gradually distanced themselves from Chaitanya's teachings and from the popular movement that had grown around him in Bengal.

But Chaitanya's movement had a great impact on Bengali society. His disregard for caste distinctions in the sphere of devotional singing promoted a sense of equality in the Bengali life. In Bengal and in Puri, in Odisha, his movement remained popular. In these places, his followers were not always scholarly Brahmans but included common people. They wrote in Bengali, propagated his bhakti and looked upon Chaitanya as the living Krishna or as Radha and Krishna in one body.

Gaudia Vaishnavism

The Gaudia Vaishnava movement and the Chaitanya movement (neo-Vaishnav movement) which derived its inspiration from the life and teachings of Chaitanya had a tremendous impact on the social, religious and cultural life of the people of Assam, Bengal and Odisha. The people were not only influenced by his message but began to regard him as an incarnation of God. The social structure in the pre-Chaitanya Bengal and Orissa was based on *Varnashrama*. The Sudras and the lower castes suffered from various disabilities. Among the religious systems the Sakta-tantric creed predominated. The medieval Bhakti in Bengal was influenced by two streams – Vaishnav and non-Vaishnava (Buddhism and Hinduism). Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* written during the time of the Palas provided an erotic-mysticism to the love of Radha and Krishna. Buddhism was also on the decline and this decadent form of Buddhism influenced Vaishnavism which in turn

affected the Bengali Bhakti movement. The emphasis was on eroticism, female form and sensuousness. In the pre-Chaitanya Bengal and Odisha, oppression of lower castes by the Brahmins was rampant. Moral decadence was the order of the day.

16.5.5 Bhakti Movement in Maharashtra

Like other Vaishnava bhakti movements, the Maharashtra bhakti tradition drew its basic inspiration from that of the *Bhagavata Purana*. In addition, however, it was also influenced by the Saiva Nathpanthis who were quite popular in the 'lower' classes of the Maharashtrian society during the 11th and 12th centuries and who composed their verses in Marathi. Jnaneswar (1275-1296) was the pioneer bhakti saint of Maharashtra. He wrote an extensive commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, popularly called *Jnanesvari*. This was one of the earliest works of Marathi literature and served as foundation of the bhakti ideology in Maharashtra. He was the author of many hymns called *abhangs*. He taught that the only way to attain God was bhakti and in bhakti there was no place for caste distinctions.

Namdev (1270-1350) belonged to the tailor caste. He is considered to be the link between the Maharashtrian bhakti movement and North Indian monotheistic movement. He lived in Pandharpur but travelled to North India, including Punjab. His bhakti songs have also been included in the *Adi Granth*. In Maharashtra, Namdev is considered to be a part of the Varkari tradition (Vaishnava devotional tradition), but in the North Indian monotheistic tradition he is remembered as a *nirguna* saint. Other prominent bhakti saints of Maharashtra were Eknath (1533-99) and Tukaram (1598-1650).

Maratha Vaishnavism

The Maratha school of Vaishnavism or the *Bhagavata Dharma* has a long history. By the close of the 13th century, steady enrichment and vigour was imparted to the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra by a number of poet-saints. The most outstanding of these was Jnaneswar, a Brahmin who is considered to be the greatest exponent of the Maratha Vaishnavism. The main features of the Vaishnava religious devotion – anti-ritualism and anti-casteism in Maharashtra – were similar to those of other non-conformist movements in the North. The poet-saints tried to bring religion to the lowest strata of the society. By interpreting the *Bhagavad Gita* in melodious Marathi tunes, Jnaneswar laid the basis of the *Bhagavata Dharma* in Maharashtra by giving a fillip to the Varkari sect which had initiated and instituted regular popular pilgrimage to the shrine of Vithoba (the form of the great God Vishnu) at Pandarpur.

Vithoba was the god of the Varkari sect. Its followers were householders who performed pilgrimage twice a year to the temple. Its membership cut across caste boundaries. The movement in Maharashtra witnessed mass participation by different social groups such as Sudras, Atisudras, Kumbhera (potter), Mali, Mahar and *alute/balutedars*. Some of the saints belonging to lower strata of society were Harijan Saint Choka, Gora Kumbhar, Narahari Sonara, Banka Mahara, etc. In the post-Jnaneshwar period, Namdeva (a tailor by caste), Tukaram, and Ramdas, were important Marathi saints. Eknath (a Brahman) furthered the tradition laid down by Jnaneshwar. Tukaram and Ramdas (Shivaji's teacher) also raised anti-caste and anti-ritual slogans. Eknath's teachings were in vernacular Marathi. He shifted the emphasis of Marathi literature from spiritual text to narrative compositions.

Tukaram's teachings are in the form of *Avangas* or verses (*dohas*) which constitute the *Gatha*. It is an important source for the study of the Maratha Vaishnavism.

The Varkari Maratha saints developed a new method of religious instruction, i.e. *Kirtan* and the *Nirupana*. The Maratha movement contributed to the flowering of Marathi literature. These saints used popular dialect which paved the way for transformation of Marathi into a literary language. The literature of the Varkari school gives us some idea about the plebeian character of the movement. It addressed itself to the problems of the Kunbis (farmers), Vanis (traders) and the artisans, etc. M.G. Ranade points out that this movement led to the development of vernacular literature and upliftment of lower castes, etc.

16.5.6 Bhakti Movement in Other Regions

Saiva bhakti flourished in Kashmir in the 14th century. Most prominent of the Saiva bhakti saints was a woman, Lal Ded. In Gujarat, bhakti was preached by the Vallabha sect of Vallabhacharya and another important saint, Narsimha Mehta (1414-1481, or 1500-1580). He knew of Jayadeva and Kabir and was followed by a number of poet-saints. The Vallabha sect became popular among merchants and landowners of Gujarat. In Karnataka, the Saiva bhakti cult of the Kannad speaking Virasaivas developed during the 12th and 13th centuries. They preached a strongly radical and heterodox concept of bhakti by incorporating social criticism in their religious outlook.

In Assam, Sankaradeva (1449-1568) introduced bhakti both in the Brahmaputra valley as well as in Cooch-Bihar. He was born in the family of non-Brahman Bhuyan chiefs. He became an ascetic during the later part of his life and is believed to have visited many places of pilgrimage in North and South India. He preached absolute devotion to Vishnu or his incarnation, Krishna. He had to face persecution at the hands of orthodox Brahmanical priesthood of the Ahom kingdom and took shelter in the territories of the neighbouring Cooch-Bihar, where its king gave him the freedom to preach bhakti. Monotheistic ideas influenced his concept of bhakti which came to be known as the *eka-sarana-dharma* ('religion of seeking refuge in one'). He denounced the caste system and preached his ideas to the people in their language (an Assamese form of Brajaboli). He made some significant innovations in the devotional practice such as inclusion of dance-drama-music form in the preaching of bhakti. He also founded the institution of *satra*, which means a sitting during which people of all classes assembled for religious as well as social purposes. Later the *satras* grew into full-fledged monasteries. His sect is called *mahapurashiya dharma*.

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) What were the main features of the Maratha Vaishnavism?
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- 2) Discuss the background against which the Gaudia Vaishnava movement developed. What were its chief characteristics?
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