



Bhakti in Indian Culture

SWAMI LAKSHMIDHARANANDA

The Flow of Bhakti

'As oil poured from one vessel to another falls in an unbroken line, so, when the mind in an unbroken stream thinks of the Lord, we have what is called Para-Bhakti or supreme love,' says the *Devi Bhagavatam*.

The nectar of Bhakti or devotion not only flowed from the devotee towards the Lord, but also flowed into the hearts of millions of Indians down the centuries. Right from the seed of Bhakti in the fervent prayers of the seers in the Vedic period to Vedic gods, through the more articulate conception in the Shvetasvara Upanishad, the emotion of Bhakti coursed through the centuries of Indian history. It went on widening its influence through the epics like Ramayana and the Mahabharata, deepening its intensity through the Puranas like the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Vishnu Purana*, and rationalizing its approach through the works like *Narada Bhakti Sutras* and *Sandilya Bhakti Sutras*. Although the flow seemed to have ebbed, the passion of love can never dry out of the Indian heart. Thus arose a great movement in the religious and cultural history of India—the Bhakti Movement.

The Spread of Bhakti

Sometime during the third to sixth century A.D., two groups of mystic poets, the Alvars and the Nayanmars, arose in Tamil Nadu at different times and at different places. One group promoted the worship of Vishnu and the other, Shiva. The Alvars were twelve in number. The prominent among them were Nammalvar, Periya Alvar, Andal and Tirumangai Alvar. The Nayanmars were sixty-three in number. The prominent among them were Appar, Sundarar, Tirugnanasambandar and Manickavacakar.



The author is a monk of the Ramakrishna Order at Vivekananda Vidyapith, Mylapore, Chennai. □

Some of them travelled extensively and even visited the Northern states of India. Many of the Alvars and Nayanmars were



Nayanmars

not Brahmins by birth, and hailed from communities of peasants, traders, washermen, potters, fishermen, hunters and even toddy tappers. These mystics, immersed as they were in the deepest emotion of devotion and surrender to the Lord, expressed their mystical experiences and realizations in songs that countered the atheistic and even monistic ideas prevalent in the society then.

While the lives and teachings of the Nayanmars infused new enthusiasm into the Shaiva tradition, the lives and teaching of the Alvars influenced great Acharyas like Nathamuni (9th century), Yamunacharya (10th century) and Ramanujacharya (1017-1137) who codified and systematized their teachings into what is called the Vishishtadvaita philosophy. Later philosopher-saints like Madhvacharya (1238-1317), Vallabha (1479-1532) and Chaitanya (1485-1533) formulated their own philosophies of devotional theism. All these schools of thought are collectively called the Bhakti Schools of Vedanta, which gave

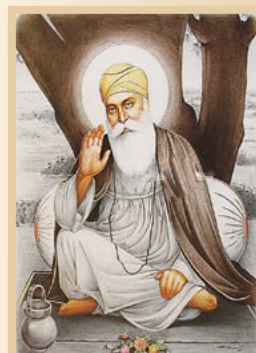
immense philosophical and legendary impetus to the Bhakti Movement.

The devotional fervour of the Alvars and the Nayanmars and the philosophical legacies of the Acharyas travelled north in due course of time and gave momentum to the Bhakti Movement that swept throughout North India between the 14th and the 17th centuries. Unlike the Bhakti Movement of the South which was centered on Vishnu and Shiva, the Bhakti Movement of the North rallied around Rama and Krishna. Ramananda (1400-1470) emerged as a popular Vaishnava Bhakti saint in North India. Initiated into the Sri Vaishnava tradition of Ramanujacharya and intensely devoted to Sri Rama, he extensively spread the path of Ram-bhakti throughout North India. He accepted his disciples irrespective of their caste and social status. Among them were Kabir (a Muslim), Raidas (a shoemaker), and Sena (a barber). He had women disciples too.

Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh tradition, counted as one of the great poet-saints of Hindu Bhakti tradition, emphasized the chanting of



Alvars



Guru Nanak

the names of God and the singing of bhajans, which he called *shabad*, for achieving union with God. The songs of Ramananda, and those



Sri Shankaracharya



Sri Ramanujacharya



Sri Madhvacharya

These traditions focused on esoteric and emotional aspects of devotion. Chaitanya was the most popular and influential saint of Bengal. He held the most enjoyable aspect of God before the people who generally had a hankering for beauty, sweetness, love and pleasure.

On the western side of Indian devotional canopy, appeared great mystic poets like Jnanesvar (1275-1296), Namdev (1270-1350), Tukaram (1598-1649) and Eknath (1533-1606) who ushered the Varkari tradition with passionate devotion to Lord Vittala of Pandarpur.

of Kabir and Jayadeva, who came later, are included in the Guru Granth Sahib.

Vallabhacharya (1473-1531), the philosopher saint of Andhra Pradesh, popularized Krishna Bhakti. Among those who followed in his footsteps in the North were Surdas (1483-1563) and Mira Bai (1503-1573) who flooded the entire North India with their songs and devotional fervour. Tulasidas (1532-1623), one of the greatest poet-saints, reformer and philosopher in North India, immersed the masses with devotion to Sri Rama through his classic *Rama Charita Manas*.

On the eastern horizon, the Bhakti movement was spearheaded by Jayadev (13th century), Chandidas (15th century) and Chaitanya in Bengal and Shankaradeva (1449-1568) in Assam. The Vaishnava Bhakti Movement in Bengal was very different from its counterparts in North India and the South. It was influenced by the Vaishnava Bhakti tradition of the Bhagavata Purana and the Sahajiya Buddhist and Nathpanthi traditions.

Revolutionary saints like Samartha Ramdas (1608-81) also appeared on the Maratha soil.

And in the South, Annamacharya (1408-1503), Vyasaraaya (1460-1539) and his illustrious disciples Purandaradasa (1484-1564) and Kanakadasa (1509-1609), Bhadrachala Ramadas (1620-1680) and Thyagaraja (1767-1847) flooded the land with their devotion and music.

Salient Features of Bhakti Movement

However the Bhakti Movement was neither organized nor was it centrally controlled by any religious leader. The innate potential of Hinduism produced these mystics and saints, philosophers and poets, to inspire people through their God-intoxicated lives and to teach the people to cast aside the heavy burdens of rituals and customs, hair-splitting logic and vain polemics, and to simply and wholly express their overwhelming love for God. They opened the gates of religion, particularly devotion, to all, irrespective of

caste, community, gender, social status or language, and encouraged everyone to directly and intensely experience God. Even though their teachings were not always similar, yet the essence of what they preached was common.

Some of these commonalities may be briefly stated as follows:

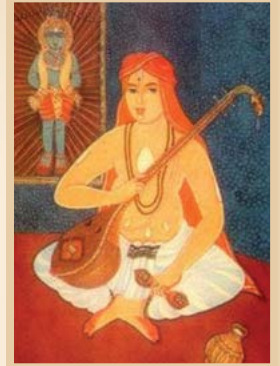
- ❖ Belief in one Supreme God—the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the universe
- ❖ Emphasis on devotion to God as the way to attain salvation
- ❖ Necessity of Guru to attain Bhakti
- ❖ Complete surrender of one's ego and taking refuge in God
- ❖ Stress on noble life and conduct
- ❖ Equal accessibility of God to all
- ❖ Disapproving excessive rites and rituals without devotion
- ❖ Disapproving vain scholarship

The Bhakti Movement peacefully coexisted with other schools of Hinduism. And if Hinduism has survived in spite of external aggressions and internal upheavals, it is largely due to the galaxy of these mystics and Acharyas of the Bhakti Movement.

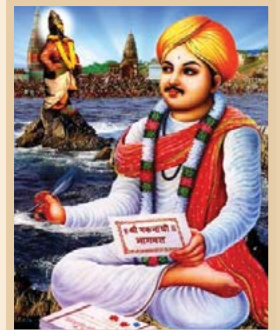
Historians have their own theories for the rise of Bhakti Movement.

Some say the advent of Islam and the spread of Sufism is the cause of the Bhakti Movement. Some others say the Movement was a reaction to the feudal oppression. The anti-feudal tone in the songs of saints like Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya and Tulsidas are pointed as illustrations. One may very well say that the very Bhakti Movement was a natural and spontaneous response of

Hinduism to directly or indirectly address the social and religious issues, without however dislocating or distorting the allegiance of the Hindus towards their religion or their scriptures. They taught the masses the core and essence of Hindu religion according to their understanding and experience, and encouraged and motivated everyone, irrespective of caste, creed, gender or social status, to strive to attain God and lead a God-centered life here and now. However, Islam may have influenced a few Bhakti saints like Kabir and Nanak who may have taken up some of their ideas from Islam, prompting them to lean towards the formless aspect of Personal God, rejection of doctrine of divine incarnation, and the concept of *nirguna bhakti upasana*. But these ideas too were very much part of the Hindu thought even then.



Tyagaraja



Eknath

Bhakti's Influence on Indian Culture

Culture is the reflection of an individual's or a nation's values, beliefs, outlook of life and mode of living. Culture is the external expression of the inner philosophy of life the person or nation abides by. And in India, philosophy is deeply influenced by religion, and therefore culture is also deeply influenced by religion. In fact, not only the themes of cultural forms like art, music, dance etc are predominantly religious in flavor, but the very essence and



Meera Bai

mode of cultural form is permeated and percolated with religious values. Any change or enrichment in the religious values will therefore change or supplement the texture of Indian culture. Bhakti Movement has had a profound influence on the Indian culture. It not only enriched various aspects of culture, but also initiated new modes of cultural expressions.



Kabir

Perhaps the most profound influence and contribution of the Bhakti Movement to the Indian Culture is in composing of songs and poetry and in revitalizing music and group singing. The intertwining of Bhajan and Bhakti, song and devotion, is largely due to the fact that the path of Bhakti from its very beginning was preached through songs. The intense emotional attachment the Bhakti saints had towards their Divine inspired copious volumes of excellent religious poetry and played a major role in propagating



Surdas

religious aspirations and sentiments through these songs. Meerabai composed more than 1200 songs conveying her surrender to Krishna and her longing to unite with Him in simple rhythm and repeating refrain that encouraged millions to repeat the songs and relive the moods of intense longing. In many parts of North India, especially Rajasthan, her Bhajans have become part

of religious gathering and folk culture. Surdas is said to have composed more than a hundred thousand songs (though only about 8000 is available now), collectively called Sur-Sagar, apart from writing *Sur-Saravali* and *Sahitya-Lahiri*.

In Vrindavan near Delhi, Swami Haridas promoted music and is considered to have taught Tansen who was at the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar. Tansen is regarded as an important exponent of the Hindustani classical music and is credited with introducing ragas as the Miyan ka Malhar, Miyan ki Todi and Darbari.

Eknath initiated in Maharashtra a movement called Vasudeva Sanstha, which involved visiting house to house and spreading religious messages through Bhajans. He introduced a new form of religious song called Bharood, apart from composing a few hundred Abhangas. Namdev and Tukaram composed several thousand Abhangas that were very popular and which helped in uniting people spiritually during the difficult days of foreign aggressions.

The Vallabha tradition directly contributed to the theory and practice of music. The religious and musical procedures of the followers of this tradition were systematized by Vallabha's son Goswami Vitthalnathji (1516-1698). The 'Ashtachap' stream of music was thus established. It was named after the eight musical Acharyas or preceptors who composed the music of the tradition. The tradition created a rich tapestry of temple-based music called 'Haveli Sangeet'.

Purandaradasa composed more than thousand songs, mostly in Kannada and some in Sanskrit. He is considered to be the father of Carnatic music. He was a performer, a musicologist, and the founder of musical pedagogy. His classification of *swaravali*,

jantivarase, *alamkara*, and *lakshana* factors are the standards even today throughout South India. He was the first composer to include daily events in his compositions. He set his lyrics to folk tunes so that even a common man

can learn and sing them. He had great influence on Hindustani music also. Kanakadasa contributed more than 240 Kirtanas and Ugabhogas to Carnatic music.

Annamacharya is said to have composed as many as 36,000 songs on Lord Venkateswara of Tirupati, though only about 12,000 songs are available today. Thyagaraja revolutionized and gave direction to Carnatic music. He was so creative that he could turn

simple tunes into ragas like Kharaharapriya, Harikambhoji and Devagandhari. He contributed more than 24000 kritis (though only 700 kritis are available now). His musical genius is reflected in every song of his, but his immortal Pancha Rathna Kritis, with each song set in different raga and tala reveal the mastery he had over musical techniques.

Chaitanya popularized the Sankirtan (group devotional singing accompanied with ecstatic dancing) in the homes, in the temples, and even on the streets. One should also mention the Baul movement in Bengal with following both among the Hindus and Muslims. Later, Bengal produced saints like Ramprasad and Kamalakanta who left a legacy of songs to the Divine Mother.

The Influence on Language and Literature

Another profound cultural enrichment through the Bhakti Movement, closely related

to Indian music, was to Indian literature. Indian literature had always commanded the deepest attention of any inquisitive student of Indian Culture with its overwhelming volume, profundity and sublimity. Since the earliest sacred writings of the Vedas, there had been a dynamic development of literature through the ages, especially in Sanskrit. The Bhakti Movement has its own contributions to the Sanskrit literature through the learned theological and devotional works of the Acharyas and rapturous masterpieces like *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva (12th century). However, the Bhakti Movement had something more to contribute to the Indian literary heritage—the development of regional languages in India.

Alvars and Nayanmars composed their mystical songs in Tamil. Ramananda initiated philosophical and theological discussions in Hindi through his works like *Matanbuj Bhaskar*, *Sri Ramarachan Padhti* and *Anandabhashya*. Surdas and Meera enriched Hindi literature through their entreating songs. Tulsidas, though attempted to compose songs in Sanskrit, ended up writing his classics in Awadhi and Braja dialects, thereby giving scope for these dialects to develop and flourish.

Kabir's compositions were in a pithy and homely style, replete with imageries and similes. He expressed his poems orally in Hindi, freely mixing it with expressions of dialects like Awadhi, Braj and Bhojpuri. A considerable number of songs and poetry of Kabir have been passed on to the next generation through oral traditions. Thus oral traditions were revitalized.

Jnaneswar composed his masterpiece *Jnaneswari* and *Abhangas* in Marathi, which are reckoned as very original and priceless compositions in their literary evaluation. Eknath, apart from rediscovering and



Chaitanya Mahaprabhu

popularizing Jnaneswari, wrote a voluminous and detailed commentary on eleventh canto of the Bhagavatam in Marathi. Tukaram's abhangas, which run into thousands, were all in Marathi.

Chaitanya Charitamrita, the celebrated biography of Chaitanya written by Krishnadas Kaviraj, and *Chaitanya Bhagabata*, the hagiography of Chaitanya, both written in Bengali, are literary classics in that language.

Shankaradeva who introduced Vaishnavism in Assam also stimulated the growth of Assamese poetry. His disciple, Madhavadas, wrote in Assamese the *Bhakti-ratnavali* dealing with aspects of Bhakti and the Baragitas that depicted the life of Krishna in Vrindavan. There were also translations of the Puranas into Assamese. Vidyapati wrote his songs on Radha and Krishna in Maithili language.

Arunagirinathar (15th century), the famous devotee of Lord Muruga (Karthik) in Tamil Nadu, composed his *magnum opus* 'Tiruppugazh', which consisted of 16,000 songs, blending literature and devotion harmoniously. His poems coupled elegant lyricism with complex rhymes and rhythmic structures and are known for its poetical and musical qualities, as well as for its religious, moral and philosophical content.

The compositions of Annamacharya, Bhadrachala Ramdas, and Thyagaraja were all in Telugu. Apart from the famous kritis, Thyagaraja authored two musical plays in Telugu, *Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam* and *Nauka Charitam*, using some of the best and beautiful literary expression in Telugu language. Vyasaraya, Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa's works were in Kannada.

In short, rendering the intricate doctrines of religion and truths of highest spirituality in a simple and familiar language so that even the most illiterate person can understand them

has been the most important contribution of the Bhakti Movement to literature. Apart from the direct contributions of the Bhakti saints to the regional literary enrichment, the Bhakti Movement acted as a source of inspiration for subsequent regional literary developments. Volumes of Bhakti and other religious literature were composed and written in regional languages thenceforth.

The upsurge of Bhakti in society influenced the themes and forms of dances prevalent in India. Indian dance and drama, as a whole, including folk dance and street plays, became popular by taking devotional themes which were rich in emotional content, sentiments and values, thereby enriching its own cultural value.

Temples and Architecture

One more important influence of the Bhakti Movement was the intense urge to establish magnificent temples as an expression of devotion. The Rajarajeshwara Temple at Tanjore, the Udayeshvara Temple at Udaipur, Lingaraj temple at Bhubaneshwar, and the Jagannath Temple at Puri represent the best of the devout architectural urge. Several rock temples and massive temples built by Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras in Tamil Nadu and temples built by the Chalukyan and Vijayanagara dynasties in Karnataka, bringing in a new era of art and architecture, owe their influence to the Bhakti Movement.

Throughout India, the temples began to function as the nucleus of religious life and social congregation. They became the seats for disseminating religious and cultural values through discourses and discussions and acted as a stage for evolving collective dance and music art forms like *ghata-nibandhan*. They strengthened the theistic feelings and involved the people in a very intimate way. It was in

the temples that the Hindu ritualistic practices and theistic devotional aspirations met and achieved confluence thereby integrating Vedic traditions and Bhakti aspirations.

Promoting Social Inclusiveness

And finally, the Bhakti Movement redefined many social values.

Right from the Alvars and the Nayanmars, the Bhakti saints showed through their lives that saintliness and devotion is not dependent on caste or birth. They demonstrated and preached that anybody having intense passion of devotion can have immediate experience of God. So emphasis on caste or birth for religious living began to break. That the so-called untouchables like Tiruppanalvar, Nandanar, Ravidas, etc., sinners turned saints like Vipra Narayana (Tondaradipodialvar) and Arunagirinathar, 'uneducated' Kabir, Nanak or Tukaram, women like Andal, Meerabai, Karaikal Ammaiyar and Akka Mahadevi could turn into saints. That these saints were revered and followed even by the orthodox sections of Hindu society showing that saintliness was given more importance than caste, birth, education or gender.

Ramanuja, through his doctrine of *sharanagati* (self-surrender to God), opened the gates of salvation to all, even to the lowliest and the meek, and reinstalled confidence and dignity in their social living. He took revolutionary steps to allow the so-called untouchables into temples and even admitted Muslims into his fold. Imbibing this spirit of Ramanuja, Ramananda became an influential social reformer in Northern India and took a very radical approach to include

the poor and the downtrodden into a common fold. Kabir strived to interfuse ideas of Hinduism and Islam so that both Hindus and Muslims can tread the spiritual path harmoniously. For him, Bhakti not only transcended its caste boundaries but also the religious boundaries.

Eknath was one of the earliest reformers of untouchability in Maharashtra and Annamacharya initiated reforms in Andhra Pradesh. Saints like Samartha Ramdas not only inspired the people in devotionals, but also urged them to initiate and implement social and political reforms to establish a healthy and secure society. Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa addressed social issues through their compositions. Kanakadasa graphically portrays through allegories in his unique literary work, *Ramadhanyacharitre*, the conflict between the rich and the poor. Kanakadasa vociferously condemned the social evils and took great efforts in reforming the under privileged communities.

As a result, India's spiritual culture regained its strength to resist pressures from socio-political forces from abroad and the decadent atheistic reform movements within the nation, and marched on with its unparalleled adaptability to the needs of time and to inspire generation after generation to regain faith in their religion and spiritual heritage that was rightly theirs. □



Kanakadasa



Fix thy mind on Me only, place thy intellect in Me: (then) thou shalt no doubt live in Me hereafter. —*Bhagavad Gita*, 12.8