

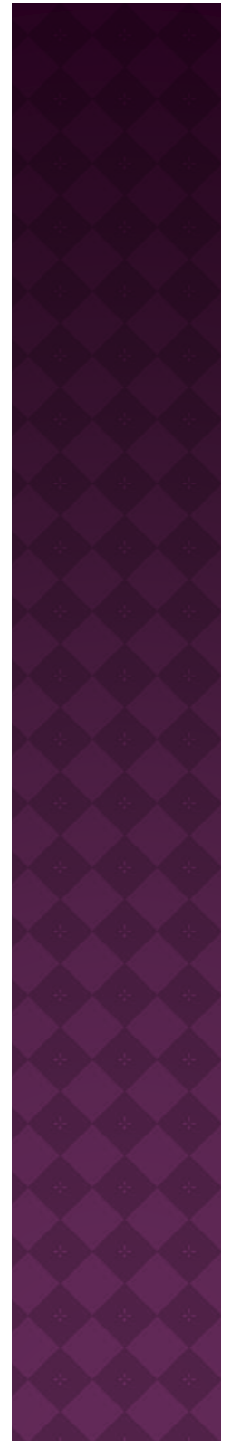
BHAKTI MOVEMENT (PART-1)

B.A (HONS) PART-3 PAPER-5

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INTRODUCTION

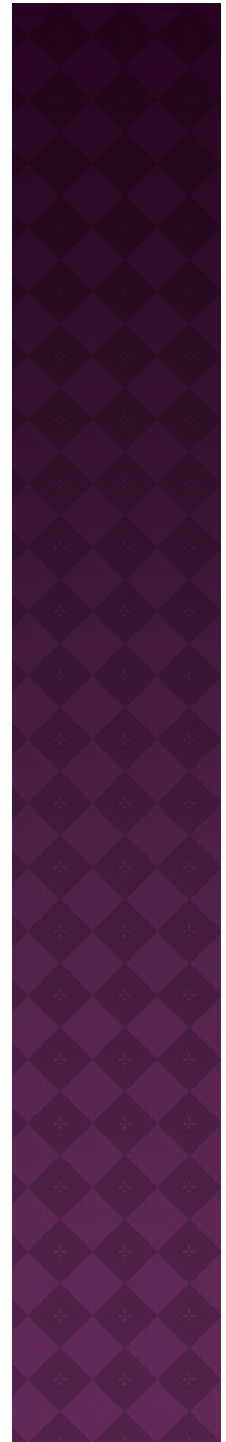
The medieval Bhakti movement has undoubtedly been the most widespread, far ranging and multi-faceted movement to have affected the Indian subcontinent. Indian culture and civilization had wielded an immense assimilative power and the Greeks, Sakas and Hunas were easily absorbed within the fold of her population. This power did not happen with the Turk-Afghan invaders who maintained their distinct identity . But the long association of the two groups and the demand for peace and security coupled with broad outlook of a number of people did create an interaction and synthesis. Therefore, without undergoing any radical changes in their beliefs , ground was prepared by the



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Bhakti movement where the two could meet.

The Bhakti movement is treated chiefly as a literary movement or at best an ideological phenomena which had religion at the basis of its inspiration. This has mainly happened due to lack of emphasis on social history and hence the socio economic factors which aimed at bringing in a change have been generally ignored. Every religious reform movement has a certain purpose. It rises out of certain socio-economic conditions and aims at the upliftment of the unprivileged and oppressed sections of the society. This is also the case with Bhakti movement.



BACKGROUND

During the rule of the Gupta dynasty in Northern India from 4th to 6th centuries AD, the Hindu culture came to be firmly established. They called themselves the *bhagvatas*– *devotees of God* – and identified themselves with the lineage of *Lord Vishnu*; thus establishing the precedent of a royalty blessed by divinity and kingship by heredity. Sanskrit became the Official language of the state. These ideas were instantaneously lapped up by the Dravidians, who called themselves the descendants of Lord Brahma and became the upholders of the Vedic tradition. The inception of Bhakti in the sixth century South India was thus the logical result of its interaction with the North which led to the emergence of a rigidly caste ridden society with oppressing policies towards the

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lower caste *Shudras* and *Malecchas*.

The presence of reformative and humanitarian religions like Jainism and Buddhism, which had provided an opportune escape for the oppressed masses, also led to the transformation of Vedic ideology into sympathetic religions of Shaivism and Vaishnavism to discourage people from converting. Although Shiva bhakti was more popular in the agrarian setup, it subsumed under its fold the various Shakti cults (i.e. primitive local deities) as continuing forms of worship. Emerging from Tantriks and Nathpanthi Sadhus (under Gorakhnath) which existed in the northern and western parts of India, these movements began the protests

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against caste and gender barriers which prohibited the people from worshipping their personal gods in their vernacular. The temple gates were forced open and the lower castes were allowed to join in the worship rituals. This marked a radical step towards the departure from institutionalized religion. While the southern movement of Bhakti was fundamentally egalitarian in spirit, it hardly denounced the caste system or Brahmanical privileges. Thereafter it developed in 11th and 12th century Karnataka as the Virashaivas (developed from the Shaiva cult, also known as Lingayats), the out rightly iconoclastic sect, questioning the conventions of Brahmanical orthodoxy, deconstructing sacrificial rituals, inducing social reform, and propagating the Puranic religion.

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They particularly appealed to the 'non privileged class'. In the 13th and 14th century, the movement swiftly spread upwards. In Maharashtra, under the aegis of Jyandev and Namdev, it took the form of Vithoba cult (an offshoot of the Warkari group) which preached exemplary standards of casteless and a non-hierarchical life of fellow humanism, spread the message of love and unity, and urged people to shed their slough of rituals and superstitions. Namdev further carried the ethos of Warkari Panth to North India (Punjab) in the latter half of fifteenth century.

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Various changes taking place in the society on several fronts greatly facilitated the rise of Bhakti movement.

- ❖ 14th and 15th century saw the decline of powerful state and rise of a number of provincial and regional states which undermine the authority of Sultanate. Rise of number of feudal states like Bengal, Khandesh, Jaunpur, Malwa, Bihar, Kashmir, Sindh, Multan and in the Deccan the Bahmani kingdom split into small feudal states.
- ❖ On the economic front the Delhi Sultanate created an economic organization considerably superior to the previous one. By the beginning of 14th Century there was a considerable growth in towns and expansion in craft production and commerce.

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- ❖ The increase in commerce can be seen in the increase of coinage. There was also increase in the slave market to provide cheap reserve of labour for the various crafts which in turn played important role in the urban economy and was a major channel for the growth of the urban muslim artisan class.
- ❖ The increase in craft production and commerce had created unstable conditions for the artisan and merchant classes. Their condition became worse day by day. They were not accepted as equals among the Indian artisans organized along hereditary custom bound caste. On the other hand while the merchants and tradesmen had attained a lot of wealth they had no place in the social hierarchy. The city had produced its own social stratification where the

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artisans and merchants were most powerful. Yet the Brahmanical literature did not include the trader and artisans among the superior groups.

- ❖ There was also change in social front. Complex rites and rituals were practiced by the Brahmans and those who did not fit into the traditional four castes were termed outcastes or chandalas. Only the Brahmans understood Sanskrit in which the ancient religious texts were produced and this made the performance of various rites and rituals their monopoly.
- ❖ The Indian Muslims were also divided into '*Sharif Zats*' or high castes and '*Ajlaf Zats*' or low castes.

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The different classes of Muslim communities also began to live aloof from one another, even in separate quarters in the same city. At the time of prayer and worship the caste and class differences were ignored, but outside they were again *ajlafs* and *sharifs*. Ignorance, blind faith and meaningless habits and customs had dotted the religious scene.

(To be continued)

