



UNIT

13

Cultural Syncretism: Bhakti Movement in India

Learning Objectives

To acquire knowledge in

- Adi Sankara's counter to the traditions of Jainism and Buddhism
- Religious renaissance and the impact of devotional movement in south India
- Conflicts between Saivism and Vaishnavism
- Conflicts with sramanic sects of Jainism and Buddhism
- Trends in Bhakti Movement of north India, due to the impact of Sufism and the influence of Vaishnavite movement in Bengal
- Monotheistic movement represented by Kabir, Guru Nanak and Ravidas and the reformist approach of the Ramanujar school of thought



Introduction

Like all cultural traditions, religion too does not exist in isolation. It adapts to existing situations and meets both social and spiritual needs of the people. As a country with a long history, religion in India developed by interacting with various traditions. Vedic religion, which came with the advent of Aryan-speaking peoples to India, absorbed many elements from the Indus civilization. Mother goddess worship had its origins in Harappa. Similarly an image found in the Indus script has been identified as that of Siva. The prime Vedic gods were Indra, Varuna, Agni, etc. and it was only later that the worship of Siva and Vishnu developed. In the mid-first millennium before the Common Era (B.C.) two great religions emerged in the Indo-Gangetic valley: Buddhism and Jainism (apart from other heterodox religions such as Ajivika) which challenged the orthodox Vedic religious practices.

Similarly, in the mid-first millennium of the Common Era, in the southern country, a great religious tradition flourished in the form

of a devotional or bhakti movement. Bhakti as a religious concept means devotional surrender to a supreme god for attaining salvation. Even though texts such as the Bhagavad Gita talk about the path of *bhakti*, or *bhakti-marga*, the movement gained force only in this period. Historians argue that this emerged in opposition to the ethical, fatalistic and atheistic traditions of Jainism and Buddhism. Vedic theism incorporated certain features from both. While Adi Sankara provided Hinduism with a philosophic doctrine of Advaita to counter the heterodox religions it remained at the intellectual level. It was the great Saiva Nayanmars and Vaishnava Azhwars, with their moving verses, gave form to the Bhakti doctrine and won the support of the people. Historians refer to this as the Bhakti movement. This movement, supported by the ruling kings, made a deep and lasting impact on all aspects: social, political, religious, cultural and linguistic. Thus south India became the home of religious renaissance from the 7th to the 10th century. With theologians like Ramanuja it turned into a philosophical and ideological movement in the



eleventh century. Inspired by many poet-saints the bhakti cult became widespread from 14th century in the whole of India. We analyze here the general features of the bhakti movement, its main proponents, the two different trends of the movement and its impact on social and cultural life of the people.

13.1 Bhakti Movement in the South

The transformation of a tribal society into a well-structured social order and the emergence of a powerful monarchical system of governance necessitated patronizing one religion or the other to legitimize authority. Buddhism and Jainism were predominantly patronized by the merchant class and they were also supported by the States. The Bhakti movement originated among the landholding castes, and it was critical of Buddhists and Jains. This also led to a fight for royal patronage.



Conflict with Buddhism & Jainism

Sources: The bhakti literature, mostly puranas and hagiographical texts, provide information about the religious conflicts in Tamilnadu. Thevaram consists of the hymns by the three Nayanmars: Appar (Thirunavukkarasar), Sambandar (Thirugnanasambandar) and Sundarar. Together these constitute seven of the twelve Saiva Thirumurai. The Eighth Thirumurai consists of the hymns of Manickavasakar. Many of these hymns articulate their criticism of Jainism and Buddhism. Periyapuram by Sekkizhar which narrates the stories of the sixty-three Nayanmars is an important source for the study of the Bhakti movement. The hymns of the Vaishnava saints, Azhwars, are compiled as Nalayira Divya Prabandham. The importance of the bhakti poems lie in the fact that they are still read, sung and revered by people, and they also form an important part of Tamil literary tradition. Epigraphical sources and iconography also provide much information.

Early Conflicts

The earliest instances of conflict between Saivism and Vaishnavism on the one hand and the Sramanic sects of Buddhism and Jainism on the other hand occurred during the Pallava period.

Mahendravarma Pallava I, a Jain by faith, persecuted those belonging to other religions. Appar, a Jaina in his early life, called Darmasena, later turned to Saivism under the influence of his sister. Mahendravarma at the instance of his Jaina advisers tried to reconvert Appar first by persuasion and then by persecution. But eventually it ended in the king himself conversion to Saivism.

According to tradition, Sambandar defeated the Jains in a theological debate and consequently his opponents were impaled. Maravarman Arikesari (640-670), also known as Koon Pandyan, who converted from Saivism to Jainism, was later re-converted under the influence of Sambandar. According to a Saivite legend, after his re-conversion, he ordered a massacre of Jains in Samantham, a village in Madurai district.

The philosophical treatises such as the Saiva Siddhanta texts contain elaborate disputations of Buddhist and Jain philosophies. Some of the Saiva Siddhanta texts, such as Sivagnana Sithiyar, contain a separate section called 'parapakkam' which essentially refute Buddhist and Jain theological arguments. Bhakti literature and hagiography narrate instances of conflict and the defeat of heterodoxy. Inscriptions indicate that such conflict was accompanied by violence with the impaling of many monks.

Despite the sophisticated philosophical disputation, it was the nature of the Bhakti movement and the royal patronage that it received that ultimately led to the downfall of Buddhism and Jainism. By the eleventh century, both these religions were effectively defeated. While Buddhism was wiped out in the Tamil country as in much of India Tamil-speaking Jain communities have survived in pockets in



Tamilnadu to this day. Temples and shrines were destroyed or fell into disuse while many artefacts were lost due to neglect and vandalism. To this day one can see decapitated statues of Buddha and the Jain thirthankaras in many parts of Tamilnadu.

Despite this, the orthodox and heterodox interacted with each other and they have left a mark. The idea of renunciation, which is central to Buddhism and Jainism, was adopted by Saivites and Vaishnavites. In response to the simplicity and life negation of the heterodox sects bhakti movement celebrated life with festivals and rituals. Similarly, the high value accorded to vegetarian food habits and the prohibition on killing of animals may be traced to this influence. The supremacy accorded to the Tamil language was a response to the fact that the heterodox religions used north India Prakrits. Most importantly, bhakti exponents posited that, unlike the fatalistic religions of Buddhism and Jainism, devotion to Vishnu and Siva could overcome fate.

Thus Vedic Hinduism was transformed by the conflict with Buddhism and Jainism.

13.2 Spread of Bhakti Movement to the North India

When the popularity of the bhakti movement in south India reached its peak, the doctrine of bhakti was expounded at the philosophical level by a series of Vaishnava scholars and saints. Ramanujar expounded the philosophy known as Vishistadvaita, or qualified monism. His teaching qualified Adi Sankara's emphasis on absolute monism or the oneness of the 'supreme' and the 'souls'.

If the Bhakti movement flourished in the Tamil country from the seventh century, it was only from the fifteenth century that there was an extraordinary outburst of devotional poetry in north India. The society had degenerated into a caste-ridden community with practice of segregation, polytheism and idolatry. The religious minded saints raised their voice

of protest against rites and ceremonies, superstitions, and unwanted formalisms. A popular monotheistic movement along with Vaishnava Bhakti movement came to be launched. The monotheists followed a path which was independent of dominant religions of the time, Hinduism and Islam. They denied their allegiance to either of them and criticized superstitious and orthodox elements of both the religions.

The advent of Islam with the Turkish conquest posed a challenge to Vedic scholars and priests. By the end of the fourteenth century Islam had spread to large parts of India. A considerable section of the Indian population had taken to Islam. Combined with state power, the universal message of Islam with emphasis on equality attracted the lower sections of society.

The new political and social situation created conditions for the growth of non-conformist movements with anti-caste, anti-vedic and anti-puranic traditions. The resultant changes in the cultural sphere were development of regional languages, the evolution of Hindustani, and of Indo-Muslim music and architecture.

The Hindu response to Muslim political power was complex. While there was considerable hostility to the new religion there was also a tendency to internal reform to strengthen Hinduism so as to face the challenge. An important outcome of the encounter was the rise of syncretic sects and major poets and Saints such as Kabir, Guru Nanak, and Ravidas.

13.3 Impact of Sufism

In parallel with the Bhakti movement in Hinduism, Sufism played a similar role in Islam. The terms Sufi, Wali, Darvesh and Fakir are used for Muslim saints who attempted to develop their intuitive faculties through ascetic exercises, contemplation, renunciation and self-denial. By the 12th century, Sufism had become an influential aspect of Islamic social life as it extended over almost the entire Muslim community.

Sufism represents the inward or esoteric side and the mystical dimension of Islam. Sufi saints transcended religious and communal distinctions, and worked for promoting the interest of humanity at large. The Sufis were a class of philosophers remarkable for their religious catholicity and tolerance. Sufis regarded God as the supreme beauty and believed that one must admire it, take delight in His thought and concentrate his attention on Him only. They believed that God is 'Mashuq' (beloved) and Sufis are the 'Ashiqs' (lovers). Sufism crystallized into various 'Silsilahs' or orders. The most popular Sufi orders were Chishtis, Suhrawardis, Qadiriya and Naqshbandis.

Sufism took root in both rural and urban areas, and exercised a deep social, political and cultural influence on the masses. It rebelled against all forms of religious formalism, orthodoxy, falsehood and hypocrisy, and endeavoured to create a new world order in which spiritual bliss was the ultimate goal. At a time when struggle for political power was the prevailing trend, the Sufi saints reminded people of their moral obligations. In a world torn by strife and conflict they tried to bring peace and harmony. The most important contribution of Sufism is that it helped to blunt the edge of Hindu-Muslim conflicts and prejudices by forging the feelings of solidarity and brotherhood between these two religious communities.

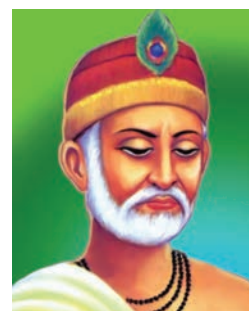
13.4 Salient Features of Bhakti Movement

1. The bhakti reformers preached the principles of monotheism (oneness of God)
2. They believed in freedom from the cycle of life and death. They advocated that the salvation could be attained only by deep devotion and faith in God.
3. They emphasized the self-surrender for obtaining the bliss and grace of God.
4. Gurus could act as guides and preceptors.
5. They advocated the principle of Universal brotherhood.
6. They criticized idol worship.
7. They stressed the singing of hymns with deep devotion.
8. Arguing that all living beings, including humans, were God's children, they strongly denounced caste system which divided people according to their birth.
9. They condemned ritualism, pilgrimages and fasts.
10. They did not consider any language as sacred and composed poems in the language of the common people.

13.5 Proponents of Bhakti Movement

Kabir

Kabir is probably the most important cultural figure of medieval India. His iconoclastic poetry which ridiculed ostentatiousness and ritual, and emphasized the universality of God won many adherents.



Kabir

Little concrete historical evidence is available on his life. He was probably a weaver. Said to be a disciple of Ramananda, he learnt Vedanta philosophy from him. According to the popular Tazkirah-i-Auliya-i-Hind (Lives of Muslim Saints), he was a disciple of the Muslim Sufi, Shaikh Taqi. Kabir was a religious radical who denounced with equal zest the narrowness of sectarianism, both Hindu and Islam. His message appealed to the lower classes of Hindu community. The most salient features of his teachings is denunciation of polytheism, idolatry, and caste. He was equally unsparing in his condemnation of Muslim formalism. He was a true seeker after God, and did his best to break the barriers that separated Hindus from Muslims. What appealed to the millions of his followers through the ages, however, is his

passionate conviction that he had found the pathway to God, a pathway accessible to the lowest as well as the highest. His poetry is still recited across large parts of India.

Ravidas

Ravidas was a poet saint of the bhakti movement during the 15th to 16th century. Venerated as a guru (teacher) in the regions of Punjab, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, the devotional songs of Ravidas made a lasting impact upon the bhakti movement. The life details of Ravidas are uncertain and contested. Most scholars believe he was born in a family of tanners. Ravidas was one of the disciples of the bhakti saint-poet Ramananda. Ravidas' devotional songs were included in the Sikh Scriptures. Ravidas spoke against social divisions of caste and gender, and promoted unity in the pursuit of personal spiritual freedoms



Ravidas

Guru Nanak (1469–1539)

The saint with the biggest institutional influence was Guru Nanak who founded the Sikh religion which shows undoubted syncretic influence. As a monotheistic religion Sikhism emphasized the oneness of god and adherence to a strict morality. Over two centuries, under the leadership of its ten gurus, Sikhism expanded swiftly in the Punjab region winning numerous adherents. Sikh teachings resulted in the creation of a strong sense of community. The politics of the times created conflicts with the Mughal empire leading to persecution which resulted in the martyrdom of its gurus. Guru Govind Singh was the last guru. After him the Granth Sahib was considered the guru. While the teachings of Guru Nank is the *Adi Granth*. The Guru Granth Sahib, part from



Guru Nanak

the teachings of its other gurus, incorporates the writings of many Bhakti poets and Sufi saints such as Ramananda, Namadeva, Kabir and Sheikh Farid.

Chaitanya (1485–1533)

Chaitanya of Bengal represents an aspect of the bhakti movement that is very different from that seen in the lives and teachings of Kabir and his successors. Chaitanya's concern, unlike that of Kabir, was not with bringing people to an understanding of a God, beyond all creeds and formulations; it was to exalt the superiority of Krishna over all other deities. It was, in other words, a revivalist, not a syncretic movement, a return to a worship of Vishnu under one of his most appealing forms, the loving ecstatic Krishna.



Chaitanya

The Bengal Vaishnavites did not try to reform Hinduism. Instead, they emphasized devotion to Krishna. Chaitanya, however, made disciples from all classes. He popularised the practice of group devotional singing accompanied by ecstatic dancing. His movement became popular in Bengal and Orissa.

Namadeva

Namadeva, a son of a tailor and an inhabitant of the village of Naras-Vamani in Satara district of Maharashtra, under the influence of Saint Janadeva, was converted to the path of bhakti. A staunch devotee of Vithala (avatar of Vishnu) of Pandarpur, Namdeva spent much of his time in worship along with his followers, chanting mostly in his own verses. He wrote many *abhangs* (songs composed and sung by saints in Maharashtra in praise of God's glory) in Marathi and Hindi. He travelled as far as Punjab where his teachings became so popular that they were later absorbed



Namadeva

in the *Guru Granth*. Love god with all your heart to lead a pious life surrendering everything to him with steadfast devotion is the essence of his message.

Ramananda (1400-1470)

While Chaitanya of Bengal belonged to the philosophical school of Madhavacharya (a chief advocate of Dvaita school of vedhanta), Ramananda was of Ramanuja's philosophical thought. Ramananda was born at Prayag (Allahabad) and received his higher education in Hindu religious philosophy at Banaras and joined the school of Ramanuja as a preacher. He visited the holy places of North India and preached Vaishnavism. Ramananda introduced radical changes in Vaishnavism by founding his own sect based on the doctrine of love and devotion to Rama and Sita. He preached equality before God. He rejected caste system, particularly the supremacy of Brahmins as the sole custodians of Hindu religion. The people from the lower strata of the society became his followers. His twelve disciples included Ravidas, Kabir and two women. Ramananda was the first to preach his doctrine of devotion in Hindi, the vernacular language. It gained him a good deal of popularity among the people of all classes. His followers were divided into conservative and radical schools.



Ramananda

Mirabai (1498-1546)

Mirabai was born in Kudh of Merta district of Rajasthan. She was the great granddaughter of Rana Jodhaji, founder of Jodhpur. She was married to Bhoj Raj, son of Rana Sanga of Mewar. She became a devotee of Lord Krishna, left the palace and began singing her songs (bhajans) and preaching



Mirabai

the path of love on God. Mirabai preached the worship of God in the name of Krishna and stressed that no one should be deprived of His divine grace on the ground of birth, poverty, age and sex. Her devotional songs and lyrics constitute a rich cultural heritage. Her *bhajans* are sung with fervour to this day. Her teachings carried the message of divine worship to almost every Hindu household.

Sur Das

Sur Das lived at the court of Akbar and was popularly known as the blind bard of Agra. Sur Das is believed to have been a disciple of Vallabacharya who was a Vaishnava preacher in the Sultanate period.



Sur Das

Vallabhacharya was the founder of Pushtimarga (way of grace). Sur Das preached religion of love and devotion to a personal God. He wrote inspiring and moving poems, Hindi poems about Lord Krishna. Krishna's *bal lila* constitutes the first great theme of Sur Das poetry. According to him, love is a sublimated theme representing the irresistible attraction of the *gopis* of Brindavan towards Krishna. The intensity of passion displayed by the *gopis* is an expression of the natural attraction of the human spirit towards the divine soul. His popular works are Sur Sagar, Sur Saravali and Sahitya Lahari. His monumental work Sur Sagar or Sur's Ocean is a story of Lord Krishna from the birth to the departure for Mathura.

Tuka Ram

Tuka Ram was born in 1608 in a village near Poona, Maharashtra. He was a contemporary of Maratha Shivaji and saints like Eknath and Ramdas. After his early life as a trader he started spending his time singing devotional songs in praise of his favourite deity Lord Vithoba of Pandarpur.



Tuka Ram believed in a formless God. According to him, it was not possible to enjoin spiritual joy with worldly activities. He stressed the all-pervasiveness of God. He rejected Vedic sacrifices, ceremonies, pilgrimages, idol worship, etc. He also preached the virtue of piety, forgiveness and peace of mind. He spread the message of equality and brotherhood. He tried to foster Hindu-Muslim Unity. Some of his verses are devoted to this theme. He wrote his *abhangas* in Marathi



Tuka Ram

13.6 Impact of the Bhakti Movement

Salvation which was previously considered attainable, only by people of the first three orders in the social hierarchy became available to everyone. Bhakti movement provided women and members of the lower strata of the society an inclusive path to spiritual salvation. Literature on devotional songs in regional languages became profuse. The poet-saints of this movement championed a wide range of philosophical positions, ranging from theistic dualism of Dvaita, to absolute monism of Advaita. Much of the regional practices such as community singing, chanting together of deity names, conducting festivals, going on pilgrimages, performing rituals relating to Saivism, and Vaishnavism have survived to this day.

SUMMARY

- The protest and resistance of Jains and Buddhists to the authority of Orthodox Vedic religion by making religion accessible to all, without caste or gender bias is dealt with
- The persecution of Jains and Buddhists by Saivites with royal patronage is discussed
- The transformation of Vedic religion while conflicting with Jainism and Buddhism is explained
- The spread of bhakti cult to north India and its salient features are examined

- Impact of Sufism on Islam and its influence in the evolution of a monotheistic religion especially Sikhism are analyzed
- The major proponents of bhakti movement and the impact of their work in the north India are highlighted



EXERCISE



S6I2K9

I. Choose the Correct Answer

1. _____ provided Hinduism with a philosophic doctrine of Advaita.
(a) Adi Sankara (b) Ramanuja
(c) Ramananda (d) Chaitanya
2. _____ refers to the conflict between the orthodox Vedic sects and Shramanic sects.
(a) Ramayana (b) Bagavatha purana
(c) Hagiographies (d) Bal lila
3. _____ was known as Koon Pandyan.
(a) Mahendravarman I
(b) Maravarman Arikesari
(c) Narasimhavarman
(d) Sundara Pandyan
4. Appar as a Jaina was known as _____.
(a) Harisena (b) Theerthankara
(c) Sivagnana Sithiyar (d) Dharmasena
5. Fakir is the term used for _____.
(a) Muslim saint (b) Buddhist
(c) Hindu ascetic (d) Sikh guru
6. Madhavacharya belonged to the philosophical school of _____.
(a) Dwaita (b) Advaita
(c) Visistadvaita (d) Pushti marga
7. _____ was one of the disciples of the Bhakti saint-poet Ramananda.
(a) Chaitanya (b) Mirabai
(c) Guru Nanak (d) Kabir



8. _____ was the first to preach his doctrine of devotion in Hindi.

- (a) Ravidas (b) Ramananda
(c) Kabir (d) Namadev

9. _____ was known as 'the blind bard of Agra' at the court of Akbar.

- (a) Surdas (b) Tukaram
(c) Ramananda (d) Mirabai

10. _____ was the contemporary of the Maratha ruler Shivaji.

- (a) Ramananda (b) Mirabai
(c) Surdas (d) Tukaram

11. Find out the correct statement

- (a) Appar, a Saiva in his early life, later persuaded by his sister, turned to Jainism.
(b) Sufis regarded god as the supreme beauty.
(c) The Bengal Vaishnavites tried to reform Hinduism by promoting Ram bhakti.
(d) Devotional songs of Ravidas were included in the Buddhist Scriptures.

12. **Assertion (A):** The bhakti reformers preached the principle of monotheism.

Reason (R): They criticized idol worship

- (a) A is correct, R is not the correct explanation of A
(b) A and R are wrong
(c) A is correct, R is the correct explanation of A
(d) A is wrong, R is correct

13. Match the following

- (A) Kabir - 1. Sahitya Lahari
(B) Sur Das - 2. Shaik Taqi
(C) Sufism - 3. Sambandar
(D) Koon Pandyan - 4. Weaver
(a) 2, 3, 4, 1 (b) 4, 1, 2, 3
(c) 2, 4, 3, 1 (d) 3, 4, 2, 1

II. Write Brief Answers

1. Highlight the services rendered by Ramanujar for Bhakti cult ?

2. What do you know about the contribution of Ravidas to the Bhakti movement?

3. What were Ramananda's teachings?

4. Mirabai's songs and lyrics constitute a rich cultural heritage - Explain.

5. What were the two different attitudes of the Hindu saints towards Islam?

III. Write Short Answers

1. South India became the home of religious renaissance. Explain.

2. Analyse the teachings of (a) Sur Das (b) Tuka Ram.

3. Kabir's teachings.

4. How did Chaitanya differ from Kabir?

5. Point out the impact of the Bhakti Movement.

IV. Answer the following in detail

1. Explain the impact of Sufism.

2. List out the salient features of the Bhakti Movement.

Activity

1. Prepare a biographical sketch of Kabir.

2. Highlight the impact of Bhakti Movement on music and art.

Assignment with Teacher's Guidance

1. Prepare an album by collecting pictures of Bhakti Saints.

2. Visit some of the birth places of Bhakti saints in Tamilnadu and collect the details of sthalapuranas of temples they served.



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GLOSSARY

Syncretism	Amalgamation of different religious and cultures	கலாச்சாரப் பரிமாற்றம்
Hagiographical	Excessive flattering account about the lives of saints	திருத்தொண்டர் வாழ்க்கை பற்றிய புராணங்கள்
Intuitive	Feeling to be true even without conscious reasoning	உள்ளுணர்வு
Bard	Poet	பாணர்
Sublimate	Purify	புனிதமாக்கு: விழுமியதாக்கு
Pervasiveness	Presence felt throughout a place or thing	எங்கும் நிறைந்ததாக: நீக்கமற நிறைந்த
Ecstatic	Joyful, blissful	பேரானந்த / அநுபூதி நிலை



ICT CORNER

Cultural Syncretism: Bhakti Movement in India

Let us know the Social and Religious Movements through questions and answers.



Procedure

- Step 1: Use the URL or scan the QR code to open the activity page.
- Step 2: On "Social Reforms and Religious Movements" activity page. The questions are given in the form of objective types. Select the answer for that.
- Step 3: If the answers are correct, the green hand symbol will appear on the right.
- Step 4: If the answer is wrong, click 'Show answer' to know the correct answer.

URL:

<https://civilserviceaspirants.in/gk/History/Social-reforms-and-religious-movements-1.html>

<http://www.gyanjosh.com/test/modern-india/socio-religious-movements/0>

* if browser requires allow Flash Player or Java Script.

