

Revision Notes
Chapter – 8
Devotional Paths to the Divine

- Intense devotion or love of God is the legacy of various kinds of Bhakti and Sufi movements that have evolved since the eighth century.

The Idea of a Supreme God:

- (i) Before large kingdoms emerged, different groups of people worshipped their own gods and goddesses.
- (ii) As people were brought together through the growth of towns, trade and empires, new ideas began to develop. The idea that all living things pass through countless cycles of birth and rebirth performing good deeds and bad came to be widely accepted.
- (iii) Similarly, the idea that all human beings are not equal even at birth gained ground during this period. The belief that social privileges came from birth in a “noble” family or a “high” caste was the subject of many learned texts.
- (iv) However, many people were uneasy with such ideas and turned to the teachings of the Buddha or the Jainas according to which it was possible to overcome social differences and break the cycle of rebirth through personal effort.
- (v) Others felt attracted to the idea of a Supreme God who could deliver humans from such bondage if approached with devotion (or bhakti). This idea, advocated in the Bhagavadgita, grew in popularity in the early centuries of the Common Era.
- (vi) Shiva, Vishnu and Durga as supreme deities came to be worshipped through elaborate rituals. At the same time, gods and goddesses worshipped in different areas came to be identified with Shiva, Vishnu or Durga.
- (vii) In the process, local myths and legends became a part of the Puranic stories, and methods of worship recommended in the Puranas were introduced into the local cults.
- (viii) Eventually, the Puranas also laid down that it was possible for devotees to receive the grace of God regardless of their caste status. The idea of bhakti became so popular that even Buddhists and Jainas adopted these beliefs.

A New Kind of Bhakti in South India – Nayanars and Alvars:

(i) The seventh to ninth centuries saw the emergence of new religious movements, led by the Nayanars (saints devoted to Shiva) and Alvars (saints devoted to Vishnu) who came from all castes including those considered “untouchable” like the Pulaiyar and the Panars.

(ii) They were sharply critical of the Buddhists and Jainas and preached ardent love of Shiva or Vishnu as the path to salvation.

- They drew upon the ideals of love and heroism as found in the Sangam literature (the earliest example of Tamil literature, composed during the early centuries of the Common Era) and blended them with the values of bhakti.
- The Nayanars and Alvars went from place to place composing exquisite poems in praise of the deities enshrined in the villages they visited, and set them to music.

(iii) Between the tenth and twelfth centuries, the Chola and Pandya kings built elaborate temples around many of the shrines visited by the saint-poets, strengthening the links between the bhakti tradition and temple worship.

(iv) This was also the time when their poems were compiled. Besides, hagiographies or religious biographies of the Alvars and Nayanars were also composed. Today we use these texts as sources for writing histories of the bhakti tradition.

Philosophy and Bhakti:

(i) Shankara, one of the most influential philosophers of India, was born in Kerala in the eighth century.

(ii) He was an advocate of Advaita or the doctrine of the oneness of the individual soul and the Supreme God which is the Ultimate Reality. He taught that Brahman, the only or Ultimate Reality, was formless and without any attributes.

(iii) He considered the world around us to be an illusion or maya, and preached renunciation of the world and adoption of the path of knowledge to understand the true nature of Brahman and attain salvation.

(iv) Ramanuja, born in Tamil Nadu in the eleventh century, was deeply influenced by the Alvars.

(v) According to him, the best means of attaining salvation was through intense devotion to Vishnu. Vishnu in His grace helps the devotee to attain the bliss of union with Him.

(vi) He propounded the doctrine of Vishishtadvaita or qualified oneness in that the soul even when united with the Supreme God remained distinct.

(vii) Ramanuja's doctrine greatly inspired the new strand of bhakti which developed in north India subsequently.

Basavanna's Virashaivism:

(i) The connection between the Tamil bhakti movement and temple worship led to a reaction that is best represented in the Virashaiva movement initiated by Basavanna and his companions like Allama Prabhu and Akkamahadevi. This movement began in Karnataka in the mid-twelfth century.

(ii) The Virashaivas argued strongly for the equality of all human beings and against Brahmanical ideas about caste and the treatment of women. They were also against all forms of ritual and idol worship.

The Saints of Maharashtra:

(i) From the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, Maharashtra saw a great number of saint-poets, whose songs in simple Marathi continue to inspire people.

(ii) The most important among them were Janeshwar, Namdev, Eknath and Tukaram as well as women like Sakkubai and the family of Chokhamela, who belonged to the "untouchable" Mahar caste.

(iii) This regional tradition of bhakti focused on the Vitthala (a form of Vishnu) temple in Pandharpur, as well as on the notion of a personal god residing in the hearts of all people.

(iv) These saint-poets rejected all forms of ritualism, outward display of piety and social differences based on birth. In fact they even rejected the idea of renunciation and preferred to live with their families, earning their livelihood like any other person, while humbly serving fellow human beings in need.

(v) A new humanist idea emerged as they insisted that bhakti lay in sharing others' pain. As the famous Gujarati saint Narsi Mehta said, "They are Vaishnavas who understand the pain of others."

Nathpanthis, Siddhas and Yogis:

(i) A number of religious groups that emerged during this period criticized the ritual and other aspects of conventional religion and the social order, using simple, logical arguments.

(ii) Among them were the Nathpanthis, Siddhacharas and Yogis.

- They advocated renunciation of the world.
- To them the path to salvation lay in meditation on the formless Ultimate Reality and the realisation of oneness with it.
- To achieve this they advocated intense training of the mind and body through practices like yogasanas, breathing exercises and meditation.

(iii) These groups became particularly popular among “low” castes. Their criticism of conventional religion created the ground for devotional religion to become a popular force in northern India.

Islam and Sufism:

(i) The saints had much in common with the Sufis. Sufis were Muslim mystics. They rejected outward religiosity and emphasised love and devotion to God and compassion towards all fellow human beings.

(ii) Islam propagated strict monotheism or submission to one God. It also rejected idol worship and considerably simplified rituals of worship into collective prayers.

(iii) At the same time, Muslim scholars developed a holy law called Shariat. The Sufis often rejected the elaborate rituals and codes of behaviour demanded by Muslim religious scholars. They sought union with God much as a lover seeks his beloved with a disregard for the world.

(iv) Like the saint-poets, the Sufis too composed poems expressing their feelings, and a rich literature in prose, including anecdotes and fables. Among the great Sufis of Central Asia were Ghazzali, Rumi and Sadi.

(v) Like the Nathpanthis, Siddhas and Yogis, the Sufis too believed that the heart can be trained to look at the world in a different way.

- They developed elaborate methods of training using zikr (chanting of a name or sacred formula), contemplation, sama (singing), raqs (dancing), discussion of parables, breath control, etc. under the guidance of a master or pir.
- Thus emerged the silsilas, a genealogy of Sufi teachers, each following a slightly different method (tariqa) of instruction and ritual practice.

(vi) A large number of Sufis from Central Asia settled in Hindustan from the eleventh century onwards. This process was strengthened with the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate, when

several major Sufi centres developed all over the subcontinent.

(vii) The Chishti silsila was among the most influential orders. It had a long line of teachers like Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti of Ajmer, Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki of Delhi, Baba Farid of Punjab, Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi and Bandanawaz Gisudaraz of Gulbarga.

(viii) The Sufi masters held their assemblies in their khanqahs or hospices. Devotees of all descriptions including members of the royalty and nobility, and ordinary people flocked to these khanqahs.

(ix) They discussed spiritual matters, sought the blessings of the saints in solving their worldly problems, or simply attended the music and dance sessions.

(x) Often people attributed Sufi masters with miraculous powers that could relieve others of their illnesses and troubles. The tomb or dargah of a Sufi saint became a place of pilgrimage to which thousands of people of all faiths thronged.

New Religious Developments in North India:

(i) The period after the thirteenth century saw a new wave of the bhakti movement in north India. This was an age when Islam, Brahmanical Hinduism, Sufism, various strands of bhakti, and the Nathpanths, Siddhas and Yogis influenced one another.

(ii) When new towns and kingdoms were emerging, people were taking up new professions and finding new roles for themselves. Such people, especially crafts-persons, peasants, traders and labourers, thronged to listen to these new saints and spread their ideas.

(iii) Some of them like Kabir and Baba Guru Nanak rejected all orthodox religions. Others like Tulsidas and Surdas accepted existing beliefs and practices but wanted to make these accessible to all.

(iv) Tulsidas conceived of God in the form of Rama. Tulsidas's composition, the Ramcharitmanas, written in Awadhi (a language used in eastern Uttar Pradesh), is important both as an expression of his devotion and as a literary work.

(v) Surdas was an ardent devotee of Krishna. His compositions, compiled in the Sursagara, Surasaravali and Sahitya Lahari, express his devotion.

(vi) Also contemporary was Shankaradeva of Assam (late fifteenth century) who emphasised devotion to Vishnu, and composed poems and plays in Assamese. He began the practice of setting up namghars or houses of recitation and prayer, a practice that continues to date.

(vii) This tradition also included saints like Dadu Dayal, Ravidas and Mirabai. Mirabai was a Rajput princess married into the royal family of Mewar in the sixteenth century. Mirabai

became a disciple of Ravidas, a saint from a caste considered “untouchable”. She was devoted to Krishna and composed innumerable bhajans expressing her intense devotion. Her songs also openly challenged the norms of the “upper” castes and became popular with the masses in Rajasthan and Gujarat.

(viii) A unique feature of most of the saints is that their works were composed in regional languages and could be sung.

- They became immensely popular and were handed down orally from generation to generation.
- Usually the poorest, most deprived communities and women transmitted these songs, often adding their own experiences.
- Thus the songs as we have them today are as much a creation of the saints as of generations of people who sang them. They have become a part of our living popular culture.

A Closer Look: Kabir:

(i) Kabir, who probably lived in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, was one of the most influential saints. He was brought up in a family of Muslim julahas or weavers settled in or near the city of Benares (Varanasi).

(ii) We get to know of his ideas from a vast collection of verses called sakhis and pads said to have been composed by him and sung by wandering bhajan singers. Some of these were later collected and preserved in the Guru Granth Sahib, Panch Vani and Bijak.

(iii) Kabir’s teachings were based on a complete, indeed vehement, rejection of the major religious traditions. His teachings openly ridiculed all forms of external worship of both Brahmanical Hinduism and Islam, the pre-eminence of the priestly classes and the caste system.

(iv) The language of his poetry was a form of spoken Hindi widely understood by ordinary people. He also sometimes used cryptic language, which is difficult to follow.

(v) Kabir believed in a formless Supreme God and preached that the only path to salvation was through bhakti or devotion. Kabir drew his followers from among both Hindus and Muslims.

A Closer Look: Baba Guru Nanak:

- (i) We know more about Guru Nanak (1469-1539) than about Kabir. Born at Talwandi (Nankana Sahib in Pakistan), he travelled widely before establishing a centre at Kartarpur (Dera Baba Nanak on the river Ravi). A regular worship that consisted of the singing of his own hymns was established there for his followers.
- (ii) Irrespective of their former creed, caste or gender, his followers ate together in the common kitchen (langar). The sacred space thus created by Guru Nanak was known as dharmsal.
- (iii) It is now known as Gurdwara. Before his death in 1539, Guru Nanak appointed one of his followers as his successor. His name was Lehna but he came to be known as Guru Angad, signifying that he was a part of Guru Nanak himself.
- (iv) Guru Angad compiled the compositions of Guru Nanak, to which he added his own in a new script known as Gurmukhi. The three successors of Guru Angad also wrote under the name of "Nanak" and all of their compositions were compiled by Guru Arjan in 1604.
- (v) To this compilation were added the writings of other figures like Shaikh Farid, Sant Kabir, Bhagat Namdev and Guru Tegh Bahadur. In 1706 this compilation was authenticated by his son and successor, Guru Gobind Singh. It is now known as Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture of the Sikhs.
- (vi) The number of Guru Nanak's followers increased through the sixteenth century under his successors. They belonged to a number of castes but traders, agriculturists, artisans and craftsmen predominated. They were also expected to contribute to the general funds of the community of followers.
- (vii) By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the town of Ramdaspur (Amritsar) had developed around the central Gurdwara called Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple). It was virtually self-governing and modern historians refer to the early seventeenth century Sikh community as 'a state within the state'.
- (viii) The Mughal emperor Jahangir looked upon them as a potential threat and he ordered the execution of Guru Arjan in 1606.
- (ix) The Sikh movement began to get politicized in the seventeenth century, a development which culminated in the institution of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. The community of the Sikhs, called the Khalsa Panth, became a political entity.
- (x) The changing historical situation during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries influenced the development of the Sikh movement. The ideas of Guru Nanak had a huge impact on this development from the very beginning. He emphasized the importance of the

worship of one God.

(xi) He insisted that caste, creed or gender was irrelevant for attaining liberation. His idea of liberation was not that of a state of inert bliss but rather the pursuit of active life with a strong sense of social commitment. He himself used the terms nam, dan and insan for the essence of his teaching, which actually meant right worship, welfare of others and purity of conduct.

(xii) His teachings are now remembered as nam-japna, kirt-karna and vand-chhakna, which also underline the importance of right belief and worship, honest living, and helping others.

(xiii) Thus, Guru Nanak's idea of equality had social and political implications. This might partly explain the difference between the history of the followers of Guru Nanak and the history of the followers of the other religious figures of the medieval centuries, like Kabir, Ravidas and Dadu whose ideas were very similar to those of Guru Nanak.