

BHAKTI MOVEMENT: AS A SOCIAL FORCE

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“Each culture of the past possesses enormous semantic potential, which was neither realised nor throughout the historical life span of the given culture. Antiquity itself did not know the antiquity that we now now”¹. This quotation amply brings out the difficulties in the perception of a “cultural phenomenon”.

The spiritual content of the Bhakti literature (Alvars and Nayanmars) is multivalued and multistructured. As for the study of “Sociology”, it is subject to a unitary theoretical principle (unless of course it is a merely electric description). It is to be remembered that historical facts are complex integral wholes which are to be considered as terms of different relationships. The movement is a historical fact and comprises, interconnections between religion (faith and social structure and forms of social consciousness. The present study of the movement aims at clarifying certain parameters of social life-if one might it put it so, a social portrait of the times. This functions as a sub discipline of sociology which integrates the diverse fields of knowledge in men’s social activity. The process of comprehending the great spiritual values produced by mankind is infinite. Here lies the difficulty of working out a proper methodology corresponding to the subject matter “Sociology of the Bhakti movement”.

The history of a religious movement not only represents the history of social tasks and orders or of individual attempts at and possibilities of expression and does not consist only in the construction of relationships between Samayacharyas and patrons, supply and demand- It is “History of Form” and corresponds to a regularity of formal development. A historical movement ever takes place where there is a tradition. Development and progress only acquire meaning and significance in connection with continuity of tradition. “The tradition of all dead generations lies like a nightmare on the mind of the living”².

‘Religion played a predominant role in early Medieval Tamilakam. It unquestionable served as a social force’. The era that witnessed the Bhakti movement gave birth to a new

orientation to the traditional social-structure. Social scientists have tried to estimate the impact of Religion on Society. For instance, Burton Stein voices concern over the forms that Religion took in South India³. Several such themes have been the concern of scholars like Arjun Appadurai. Carol Breckenridge, Nicolas Dirks. The relationship that existed in early medieval and per modern Vaishnavism between sectarian leaders, landowners and kings, the role of temples as investment and storage centres; the relationship between “gift-giving and ritual especially as reflected in the role of kings and similar themes have been handled with skill and caution.

Tamil Bhakti is primarily a religious phenomenon. The theistic system of Bhakti consists in the worship of a personal god who is the creator and Lord of the Universe. The period of five centuries commencing from A.D.500 is generally characterised as and “Age of religious revival”. The Devaram trio (four Samayachariyas actually) preached and practiced a new variety of dynamic Saivism based on bhakti. The Alwars (Vaishnava) draw inspiration from the principal avatars of Vishnu and the ithihasic and puranic literature on them. They hagiology of Saivism and Vaishnavism consists of lives of Saints, hailing from various sections of society.

V. Kanaka Sabhai writes “A study of the Bhakti movement suggests that it had its origin on the east-coast, in and around such famous temples as Tiruppati and Kanchi, the seat of Tirumal or Vishnu. Tirupati, otherwise known as Venkatam was ruled by Cheiftain pulli during the Sangam days, probably an ancestor of the Pallavas, was seems to have used a Sanskrit tribal name as their dynastic title⁴. The claim that Pulli of Venkatam is an ancestor of the Pallavas is to be ignored⁵. M.G.S. Narayanan had effectively countered the claims of Kanaka Sabhai⁶.

Narayanan refers to certain “Parallel and related development⁷. He also observes that on gets the impression that Bhakti as a distinctive movement had manifested itself in the north. According the him “it must have probably originated in the post – Mauryan period⁸. He suggests that it took root in the Tamil soil, by creating its own mythology and legends⁹. These views are overdrawn generalisations. The ideology in Tamilakam, could be traced

back to the Sangam times. Hence the need to draw attention to certain specific characteristics of the movement in Tamilnadu.

Unlike in the north, the Brahmins in Tamilakam did not hold the honour of indispensable priesthood¹⁰. Religion is not merely a collection of faiths. It has its roots deeply watered by social relations governed by gastric injunctions and has economic stakes too. Puranic works consider Bhakti as a female child born in Tamilnadu that became very old when she reached Gujarat¹¹. Three waves seem to have strengthened the bonds of the movement. The earliest wave spread from Kanchipuram, the second wave from Kaladi (Kerala); and the third spear-headed by the Ramanuja with the result that heterodox religions lost ground. South India is the home of the Bhakti movement. Despite hurdles in determining chronological sequence of events, the claim of claim of Tamil savants as pioneers of the movement can hardly be disputed¹².

Though mainly a religious phenomenon judged by the results, the movement had patently influenced social behaviour and economic realignment. The scholar Saints denoted their lives in the service of their fellowmen and the success of each in his mission is in direct proportion to the respect commanded from his fellowmen. Their untiring efforts converted the Bhakti cult into a silent yet purposeful reform movement. The Tamils at this point of time were free to pursue careers of material, political and cultural advancement and the fact remains they sought solace in Bhakti. In spite of its novel principles of social equality and brotherhood, the movement struck root in the soil of Tamilakam.

It is therefore, not surprising to find that the teachings (message) show differences in the contents and methods of approach adopted by them for eradicating social evils. Essentially indigenous, it turned out to be a mass movement “social condition and “social needs” interact. Society is seen developing through contradictions. Society is not certainly a haphazard conglomeration of diverse social phenomena but a coherent system whose elements interact and are fundamentally interconnected. In the historical evolution of Tamilnadu, we recognise concrete societies- Sangam, Pallava and Cholas.

“Ancient Tamil society (Sangam) is essentially a tribal organisation. It is remarkable that even when ‘caste’ had become a distinctive feature of that society its tribal nature has

persisted¹³. The ancient society moves slowly but steadily towards agriculture (dry\wet). Since Sangam anthologies are not acceptable stratified, the evolution is elusive to trace. The ethical works of post Sangam age give a totally different picture¹³. Religion and ethics behave as strange bed-fellows. The Varna Dharma continues in different from during the Pallava rule. The ethical works seem to have fertilized society for rearing Varna Dharma.

In the transition of society (Sangam to Pallavas), burton stein perceives “Orthogenic elements including Tamil language, territorially segmented people under tribal Chieftains, folk religious beliefs and practices reflecting territorially segmented culture and a certain degree of urbanisation in a few widely separated core areas of advanced agrarian and commercial organisation¹⁵. Sangam society is Priest dominated, there is considerable mobility among castes. This is attested by the fact that Nayanmars and Alvars belonged to all castes¹⁶.

If history is an unending dialogue between the past and present, the unrest witnessed in the post Bhakti era is a fitting example to the list suggested by E.H.Carr¹⁷. In the post Pallavan period (a) “Vedic oriented Sanskrit aided, Brahmanic coined, Canonic framed, Pallava ushered and Nayanmar nurtured Saivisms sores powerfully under later Cholas. K.A. Nilkanta Sastri feels that in ahistorical argument, “the only thing that matter is the contemporary view of the course of events”. In his well known work the Colas, Sastri harps on the theme of social harmony. The theological wrangles; the crusades of the Alvars and Nayanmars; the reformist movement spearheaded by Sankara, Ramanuja and Madva and the polarisation of Tamil society into varnas do not vouchsafe “social harmony”. (b) The land gets filled with temples houses deities. Priesthood is instituted to provide the massed with spiritual sustenance in the sacraments to lead worship and provide advice on spiritual matters. Evidently, contemporary motivations, ideologies and faith had alerted the situation.

(c) Tension is manifested in the *Valankai* and *Idankai* conflict, that plagued Chola society. K.R. Hanumanthan writes... “...a large number of castes which could not be accommodated in the Varna system, began to align themselves artificially with two groups

called “*Valankai*” and “*Idankai*” whereby they claimed certain distinct privileges for themselves¹⁹”.

(d) By the ninth century AD. various sub divisions among Vellalas appear²⁰.

(e) Caste concept perpetuates itself-a fourth caste comes to be designed as Vellalar. In the classification of people under Tinai (Sangam) some seem to have been outside the fourfold geographical land – visions. Functions of agriculture and trade were shared by Vanikar and Vellalar. Another point to be noted is the giving of the rank of primacy to Arasar (Kshatriyar).

All these suggests the susceptibility of human beings to react to strong currents of economic and religious contingencies.

The special socio-historical significance of the Alvars and Nayanmars seems to lie in the fact that in the ideological confrontation with non-Vedic religions, they speak for the first time as man to man as such. They have allied themselves with the interest of a broader and more influential stratum. The paradox of Love hate relationship comes from the fact that the relationship undermines its own existence. There is something unconvincing about the cult surrounding each one of them. There has been a romantic disillusionment the justification of life as a religious experience. We notice change in the relationship between creators of icons²¹, pictures of the god and priesthood. Nothing significant alters in the social role of the religious dogmas preached caste is certainly man made.

State, family and kin had not only been social groups but prove to be cultural associations and religious communities as well. The gravest objection to the ideological interpretations of Bhakti movement is based on the fact, that characteristics and formal elements often appear at different times juxtaposed in different social circumstances. The less markable forms seem to limp along behind, the more flexible and mobile one. A common process trailing the envisaged postulates. Temporal and spiritual phenomena do not have identical consequences in all societies at all times.

It needs to be reminded that the activities were confined to the framework of earlier dogmas. Temple worship becomes an important feature of religion. To what extent the

scholar Saints took up socio religious reforms is a moot question. It seems necessary to remember in the context that research output regarding Jainism and Buddhism in the South (particularly Tamilnadu) is inadequate. These spheres have been under explored. Study of religious art forms is a desideratum.

The Alwars and Nayanmars did not openly proclaim that they would reform society. Spiritually speaking it was an escape of certain god conscious and god saturated individuals who gave vent to their ecstatic excess through their lyrical out pourings in the language of the people. Alwars and Nayanmars are not revolutionaries. What we could note in the canonic literature are some specifics of social life.

Everything that happens has natural causes. Men act under the influence of passion, reflection or at worst whim. What is to be noted is the relationship between the general and the individual as applied to history. Every individual is connected with definitive culture, which moulds his cast of mind and activity and which remains relatively unchanged over centuries and even millennia. Each culture is original and warrants particular attention. History of mankind is co-herent with people going through a number of law governed stages in its historical advance.

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