

Bhaktism and Dalit in India: A Case Study

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Abstract:

Since centuries, the human rights violation is one of the major problems of India. It is the caste based Indian society that promotes violation of Dalit human rights. Manu, the Hindu law giver laid down the rule that there are only four Varnas of the Hindus. They are Brahmins, Kahatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. People outside these four Varnas are untouchables. These untouchables are known as the Dalits, who are economically, socially, politically exploited from centuries. The inhuman and barbaric practices committed against the Dalits, led them to protest against the caste –based hierarchical system of India that has divided Indian society on the basis of caste and gender. Dalit movement in India has its roots in the reformative Bhakti Movement. The Bhakti Movement was anti-caste, anti-elite, pro -women, pro-poor, anti-Sanskrit, and affirmed that genuine love of God was sufficient to find solutions to social problems. The movement attracted large numbers of the lower castes and poor, including women. Among the Bhakti saints, there were some who belonged to the Brahmin caste, who raised their voice against the social discrimination. Eknath was one of the Bhakti saints, who belonged to the Brahmin caste. Ramananda was the pioneer of Bhakti movement in India, who opened the door for religions for all sections of the society. Among his followers were Raidas, Kabir, Dhanasena, Pipa, Ghanna. All Bhakti saints aimed to established social inequality for the untouchables. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the role of the Bhakti movement in establishing a pattern of questioning the Hindu social order which later provided a platform for an organised Dalit Movement with a strong voice for social reforms.

Key words: Dalit, Bhakti, Discrimination, social, saints

People who constitute the last category of castes in the Varnasrama are Dalits. This is the traditional definition of the term Dalit as is given by different scholars. According to the Indian Constitution the Dalits are the people coming under the category Scheduled Castes. With slight changes, however, the term Dalit would mean not only one category of caste; it means the human who is exploited economically, socially, politically and from all the spheres of life, by the traditions of the country. By tradition would mean the Brahmanical Indian tradition prevailing in the country for centuries. The Dalits , called by different names like Dasyu, Dasa, Atisudra, Panchama, Tirukulattar, Adikarnataka, Adi Dravida, are actually the —Depressed Classes.

The Dalits-the submerged communities of India, began their movement in India with their basic demand for equality because they struggle to combat inequality in society as having firm belief in the ideal of equality. The inhuman and barbaric practices committed against the Dalits, led them to protest against the caste –based hierarchical system of India that has divided Indian society on the basis of caste and gender. Dalit movement in India has its roots in the reformative Bhakti Movement. The Bhakti Movement thrived in pockets across the country over several centuries. The Bhakti Movement was not an organised movement but a conglomeration of the individual efforts of various saints and social reformers who pursued their ideas through their writings, folk culture and belief in one divine power. The Bhakti Movement was anti-caste, anti-elite, pro -women, pro-poor, anti-Sanskrit, and affirmed that genuine love of God was sufficient to find solutions to social problems. The movement attracted large numbers of the lower castes and poor, including women. Bhakti movement has established a pattern of questioning the Hindu social order which later provided a platform for an organised Dalit Movement with a strong voice for social reforms. The

present paper will focus on the role of Bhakti movement in establishing social equality. There were many Bhakti saints who raised their voice against the social inequality and tried to bring the outcastes or the untouchables in the main stream of the society. In this regard names of many Bhakti saints come, but we would discuss some selected ones for convenience of our discussion.

The Bhakti movement originated in South India during the seventh to eighth century AD and spread northwards from Tamil Nadu through Karnataka and gained wide acceptance in fifteenth-century Bengal and northern India. The movement started with the Saiva Nayanars and the Vaisnava Alvars, who lived between 5th and 9th century AD. Their efforts ultimately helped spread *bhakti* poetry and ideas throughout India by the 12th–18th century.

The Alvars, which literally means "those immersed in God", were Vaishnava poet-saints who sang praises of Vishnu as they travelled from one place to another. They established temple sites such as Srirangam, and spread ideas about Vaishnavism. Their poems, compiled as Alvar Arulicheyalgal or Divya Prabandham, developed into an influential scripture for the Vaishnavas. The Bhagabata Purana's references to the South Indian Alvar saints, along with its emphasis on *bhakti*, have led many scholars to give it South Indian origins, though some scholars question whether this evidence excludes the possibility that *bhakti* movement had parallel developments in other parts of India. Like the Alvars, the Saiva Nayanar poets were influential. The *Tirumurai*, a compilation of hymns on Shiva by sixty-three Nayanar poet-saints, developed into an influential scripture in Shaivism. The poets' itinerant lifestyle helped create temple and pilgrimage sites and spread spiritual ideas built around Shiva. Early Tamil-Siva *bhakti* poets influenced Hindu texts that came to be revered all over India.

Among the saints who carried the message of Bhakti to the people, who were strongly critical of the religion of works, and of image worship and of the caste system the names of Kabir and Nanak stand pre-eminent. There is a good deal of uncertainty about the dates and early life of Kabir. Legend has it that he was born in a Brahmin widow who abandoned him, and that he was brought in the house of a Muslim weaver. He learned the profession of his adopted father, but while living in Kanshi, he came into touch with both the Hindu saints and Sufis. He was strongly influenced by the Nathpanthis. He emphasised the unity of God whom he calls by several names. He strongly denounced idol-worship, pilgrimage, bathing in holy rivers or taking part in formal worship like *namaz*. He believed in oneness of God. He was against any social discrimination. He considered the differences between the Hindus and the Muslims to be meaningless.

Guru Nanak (1469-1539) was born at Talwandi (Nankana Sahib in Pakistan), he travelled widely before establishing a centre at Kartarpur. A regular worship that consisted of the singing of his own hymns was established there for his followers. 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. It is now known as Gurdwara. He emphasized the importance of the worship of one God. 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 isnan for the essence of his teaching, which actually meant right worship, welfare of others and purity of conduct. 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. 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.

Saint Ravidas was a great Saint, philosopher, poet, social reformer and follower of the God in India during 15th century. He was one of the most famous and leading star of the nirguna sampradaya lead the North Indian Bhakti movement. He has given a variety of spiritual and social messages through his great writings of poetry to his lovers, followers, community people and society people to reform their mind and show their boundless love towards God. He was the vision of people as a messiah in order to complete the social and spiritual needs. He was a spiritually rich person worshipped by the people.

Chaitnya Mahaprabhu was born in 1543. His father was Jaggannath Mishra, who was a staunch Brahman and his mother Shachidevi was a noble and very affectionate person. Chaitnya Mahaprabhu's parents did not have happy experience as far as their progeny was concerned. Their eight daughters had died and the elder brother of Chaitnya Mahaprabhu, Vishvaroop had taken Sanyas. The birth of Chaitnya was, therefore, a very happy occurrence for them. He was a great scholar of jurisprudence. He used to visit towns along with his disciples and used to explain them the intricacies of jurisprudence at the bank of the river Ganges. Later for the sake of his mother, Nimai married Vishnupriya. She was the daughter of an affluent and well-known Brahman of Navdweep. The marriage was performed with great festivity. Vishnupriya was a noble and divinely beautiful person. Her presence made their home like a heaven.

Chaitnya decided to visit the Southern part of the country. During this journey he met Ramanand Roy at the bank of the river Godavari and Shankaracharya of Shringeri. In Udipi he visited the temple of Nartak-Gopal erected by Madhvacharya, where he started dancing before the Lord in ecstasy. In Pandharpur he visited Lord Vitthal. Later he returned to Puri where the then ruler Maharaja Pratap Rudra desired to meet him but Chaitnya refused saying that he does not meet kings.

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.

So we can see that Bhakti movement had immense contribution on the society. Their aim to establish social equality, though, not fully but to some extent was successful. If we look at the present day scenario, we can see the condition of the Dalits has not changed. Though there are laws and rules and human rights act to protect the rights of the Dalits, the situation is still pathetic and awful.

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