



Bhakti Movement and Other Important Religious Movements

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Abstract

The Bhakti Movement was a significant religious and social reform movement in medieval India that emphasized devotion (bhakti) to a personal god, transcending caste and ritualistic practices. Originating in South India around the 7th century and spreading across the subcontinent, it was championed by saints like Ramanuja, Kabir, Mirabai, and Guru Nanak. The movement fostered inclusivity, promoted vernacular languages, and challenged orthodox Brahmanical traditions.

Parallel to the Bhakti Movement, other religious movements also shaped India's spiritual landscape. The Sufi movement, an Islamic mystical tradition, emphasized love, unity, and direct connection with God, influencing Hindu-Muslim interactions. Jainism and Buddhism, although much older, continued to evolve, emphasizing non-violence and ethical living. Sikhism, founded by Guru Nanak in the 15th century, integrated Bhakti and Sufi ideals, advocating equality and community service. These movements collectively contributed to India's religious and cultural synthesis, promoting harmony and social reform.

Keywords: Bhakti Movement, Sufi Movement, Sikhism, Medieval India, Devotion, Social Reform, Religious Harmony, Vernacular Languages, Mysticism

INTRODUCTION

Religious Movements are organised efforts by a group of people to promote, reform, or establish particular religious beliefs and practices. These movements can emerge in response to social, political, or economic conditions, often seeking to address perceived moral or spiritual crises. Religious movements can be categorised into various types including reformist movements, revivalist movements, sectarian movements and syncretic movements.

The scope of religious movements is broad, covering theological, ritualistic and social dimensions. Some movements focus on doctrinal changes, while others emphasise community organisation, political activism, or humanitarian efforts. In India, religious movements have played a crucial role in shaping societal norms and governance structures, influencing everything from laws to cultural expression.

An important landmark in the cultural history of Medieval India was the silent revolution in the society known as the Bhakti Movement. "Devotion" or "passionate love for the Divine" are symbolised by the phrase BHAKTI. Its meaning has, however evolved with time, along with the concept of Bhakti itself. The process of "adoration of a personal god" started during the course of the 6th century BCE, with the rise of the heterodox movements of Buddhism and Jainism.

For example, in Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha's avalokita (gracious) form was the first to be worshipped. The worship of Vishnu too started around the same time, which was popularised to a great extent by the Gupta kings, who supported the pantheon of gods through the worship of divine images, the Puranas. The Gupta rulers also supported the numerous devotional groups and constructed temples devoted to these deities.

Religious movements have often been linked to **political transformations**. For example:

- **Buddhism and Jainism** influenced Emperor Ashoka's policies, leading to state-sponsored welfare programs.
- The **Bhakti movement** was seen as a reaction to **Turko-Islamic rule**, which introduced Persian and Sufi influences in Indian spirituality.
- The **Khalistan movement** emerged as a political expression of Sikh identity in the 20th century.

Today, political parties often use **religion as a mobilising force**, influencing electoral behaviour and policymaking. The **Ram Janmabhoomi movement**, for instance, has had significant political repercussions in modern India.

THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT – ORIGINS AND PHILOSOPHY

The Bhakti Movement which emerged as a powerful religious and social force between the 7th and 17th centuries BCE, transformed Hindu spirituality by emphasising personal devotion to a deity, over ritualistic practices and caste-based hierarchies. It originated in South India with the Alvars (devotees of Vishnu) and Nayanar's (devotees of Shiva) and later spread to North India, influencing the religious and philosophical landscape.

Bhakti in Early Hindu Scriptures

The Vedas and Upanishad primarily emphasise jnana (knowledge) and karma (ritual actions) as means of liberation. However, the concept of Bhakti can be traced back to:

- The Bhagavad Gita (5th- 2nd century BCE)

Considered the foundational text for Bhakti philosophy, the Gita advocates devotion to Krishna as a path to liberation (moksha).

Krishna states (Bhagavad Gita 9.22)- “ To those who are constantly devoted and worship me with love , I grant them what they need”.

- The Puranas (4th century BCE)

The texts like the Bhagavad Purana elaborate on devotional worship of Vishnu (Krishna,Rama) and Shiva through stories (Leelas), hymns and moral teachings.

- The Narada Bhakti Sutras and Sandilya Bhakti Sutras (10th century BCE)

The texts define nine forms of devotion (Navadha Bhakti), including singing , praying and meditating on the divine

Bhakti Movement in South India

The Bhakti Movement had its genesis in Southern India in the 7th and 12th century BCE. Bhakti evolved from a religious tradition to a popular movement in South India, founded on the ideas of social inclusion and religious equality. It is characterised by the writings of its poets saints, the **Shaivaite Nayannars** and the **Vaishnavite Alvars**, who preached the Bhakti cult under the Pallavas, Pandyas and the Cholas. They disregarded the austerities preached by the Jains and the Buddhists along with rejecting their fatalistic and atheistic traditions and preached that personal devotion to god was the only means of salvation.

They extolled passionate devotional love for the divine and stressed on the fact that Moksha (liberation from the cycle of birth) could be attained not by following rules, but by a simple devotion to the holy. It is pertinent to note that the compositions of Alvars and Nayannars at times commanded equal significance as the Vedas.

For instance, “ the Nalayira Divyaprabandham”, a well known compilation of Alvars’ writings is frequently referred to as the Tamil Veda. The Bhakti saints typically hailed from lower castes, advocating a faith that was non-ritualistic and inclusive of everyone, regardless of caste or creed, communicated in the regional vernaculars, and welcomed women to participate in the gatherings. For example, Karaikal Ammaiyar was a devout Nayannar who followed the road of extreme asceticism, whereas Andal, a woman named Alvar, was well-known for her compositions. Scholars and saints alike brought these Bhakti concepts northward.

Nevertheless, the Bhakti movement in south India has limitations because it never explicitly addressed caste and varna or Brahmanism on a societal basis. While it still suffered from a number of societal disadvantages, it merely emphasized the idea that Bhakti as a form of worship should be available to everyone or that it offered the Shudras an alternative route of prayer. Even though Bhakti is emphasized as the ultimate object of devotion, brahmanical practices like idolatry, reciting Vedic mantras, and pilgrimages to holy sites are still practiced.

Influence on Temple Traditions

The Alvars and Nayannars played a crucial role in shaping temple traditions in South India . Their devotional hymns and intense personal expressions of faith transformed temple culture, making it more accessible and inclusive for common people rather than being controlled solely by Brahman priests. Their influence can be seen in temple architecture, rituals, festivals and the emotional expressions of devotion in Hindu worship practices.

- Shift from Ritualistic worship to Personal devotion

Before the Bhakti Movement, Hindu worship was primarily sacrificial and ritualistic with elaborate Vedic ceremonies conducted by priests. The Alvars and Nayannars redefined temple worship by emphasising bhajans, kirpans inside the temples. Encouraging the direct personal connection with deities rather than relying on priests and democratising temple access by allowing people from all castes to participate in worship and temple events.

- Impact on Temple Architecture

The emotional and devotional spirit of the Bhakti Movement led to grand temple constructions to serve as sacred spaces for communal devotion. Like large temple complexes, tall gopurams, temple corridors and special mandapas.

- Introduction to devotional Music and Dance in Temples

The Alvars and Nayannars incorporated musical and poetic expressions of devotion into temple worship. This practices evolved into structured temple rituals such as Bhajans and Kirtans, temple dance traditions such as Bharatnatyam. This transformation made worship a deeply emotional and participatory experience rather than just a mechanical following of rituals.

- Breaking Caste Barriers in Temple Worship

The Alvars and Nayannars challenged caste based discrimination in temple worship, emphasising that God is accessible to all, regardless of caste or social status. The practice of allowing non-Brahmins to participate in temple activities gained momentum. Devotional songs and hymns were written in Tamil, rather than Sanskrit making temple worship more inclusive for the common people.

Salient Features of Bhakti Movement:

- The Bhakti reformers preached the principles of Monotheism (oneness of God) and criticised idol worship.
- They believed in freedom from the cycle of life and death and advocated that the salvation could be attained only by deep devotion and faith in God.
- They emphasized that for obtaining the bliss and grace of God, one should self-surrender while they believed in the importance of “Gurus” who acted as guides and preceptors.
- They advocated the principle of universal brotherhood.
- They conducted ritualism, pilgrimages, and fasts. Arguing that all living beings, including humans, were god’s children, they also strongly denounced caste system which divided people according to their birth.
- They stressed the singing of hymns with deep devotion and without considering any language as sacred, they composed poems in the language of the common people.

Role of Advaita, Dvaita and Vishishtadvaita Schools

The Bhakti Movement was deeply influenced by different schools of Vedantic philosophy, particularly Advaita (Non-Dualism), Vishishtadvaita (Qualified Non-Dualism) and Dvaita (Dualism). These philosophies shaped the way Bhakti saints interpreted devotion (Bhakti), the relationship between the soul (Atman) and the God (Brahman), and the path to salvation (Moksha). Each school contributed to the development of Bhakti by offering unique perspectives on the role of devotion, surrender and the divine force.

Advaita Vedanta (Non-Dualism):

It was founded by Adi Shankaracharya teaches that the individual soul (Atman) and the supreme reality (Brahman) are ultimately one and the same. The world we perceive is an illusion (Maya) and liberation (Moksha) is achieved through self-realisation and knowledge rather than devotion.

Bhakti Interpretation in Advaita Vedanta-

- Although Advaita emphasized Jnana (Knowledge) over Bhakti, it does not reject devotion completely.
- Bhakti is considered a tool (means to an end) rather than the final goal-it helps purify the mind and prepare it for higher knowledge.
- Shankara wrote hymns in praise of deities like Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi showing that devotion could be used as an initial step toward enlightenment.
- Devotional worship is useful for those who are not yet ready for the intellectual path of Jnana Yoga.

Influence on Bhakti Movement:

Shankaracharya promoted temple worship and pilgrimages, reinforcing the role of temples as centre's of Bhakti. His commentaries on the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Brahman Sutras influenced later Bhakti thinkers who used his interpretations while modifying them to emphasise devotion. Adopted the concept of Saguna Brahman (God with attributes) for practical worship, allowing Bhakti saints to promote a personal connection with deities. Although Advaita Vedanta did not directly promote Bhakti as the highest path, it influenced later Bhakti saints who integrated devotion with philosophical depth.

Advaita is explained using the well-known snake and rope analogy. In the dark, we might mistake a rope for a snake and believe it to be one for a while. We quickly discover, however, that it is really a rope. We stop seeing the snake once we realise it's a rope. The rope was only in our imaginations; it had never been real. Likewise, the world and body illusions will disappear if one attains knowledge of Brahman.

Vishishtadvaita Vedanta (Qualified Non-Dualism):

Ramanuja rejected the strict non-dualism of Advaita and proposed Vishishtadvaita. According to this philosophy God (Brahman) is supreme and possesses both personal and impersonal aspects. The individual soul is distinct from God but entirely dependent on him. Liberation is achieved through Bhakti and surrender to God's grace rather than just knowledge or rituals.

Bhakti Interpretations in Vishishtadvaita Vedanta-

- Ramanuja strongly emphasized devotion to Vishnu as the ultimate path to salvation.
- Surrender to God is the easiest and most accessible path for all people, including lower castes and women.
- The Bhagavad Gita was reinterpreted by Ramanuja to highlight Bhakti as the highest path,, above Jnana and Karma.

Key influence on Bhakti Movement:

Promoted the emotional and personal aspect of Bhakti, which became the foundation of many later Bhakti Movements. It inspired Sri Vaishnavism, a sect that popularised Vishnu devotion in Tamil Nadu and beyond. Encouraged temple worship, pilgrimage and communal recitation of hymns, making Bhakti accessible to common people. His ideas were adopted by later Bhakti saints like Annamacharya, Tyagaraja and the Haridasa tradition in Karnataka. Ramanuja's philosophy gave Bhakti a philosophical foundation, making it the central means to attain salvation, which later influenced Bhakti Movements across India.

According to the well-known analogy, Brahman is the sea, and all of the world's objects—both living and non-living souls—are like waves on this sea. As long as we can see the wave, we perceive it as distinct from the sea, even though all waves are ultimately just the sea. It's only a name and form wave. Additional comparisons made for this include the spider and his web, clay and clay pots, gold and gold jewellery, etc.

Dvaita Vedanta (Dualism)

Madhvacharya proposed Dvaita Vedanta which strongly opposed Advaita philosophy. According to Dvaita God (Brahman) and the individual soul are eternally separate. The soul can never become one with God, and there is a clear hierarchy among souls, some are destined for liberation while others remain bound to the cycle of birth. Moksha is only possible through pure devotion and god's grace.

Bhakti Interpretation in Dvaita Vedanta:

- Madhvacharya placed Bhakti at the centre of religious practice, arguing that only devotion to Vishnu can lead to salvation.
- Service to God and detachment from material desires are emphasized in his teachings.
- God's grace is selective, not everyone attains moksha, and only those with deep devotion are liberated.

Key influence on Bhakti Movement:

Madhav's philosophy heavily influenced the Haridasa Bhakti Movement in Karnataka, inspiring saints like Purandara Dasa (father of Carnatic Music), Kanaka Dasa (poet saint from a lower caste). Introduced the concept of "Dasya Bhakti" which later influenced the North Indian Bhakti saints like Surdas and Tulsidas. His teachings contributed to Krishna Bhakti traditions, particularly in Udupi (Karnataka) and later in North Indian Vaishnavism. Madhvacharya's strong emphasis on dualism and complete dependence on god's grace helped shape the devotional practices of many later Bhakti sects.

"The Madhava holds that the universe and Brahman are two equally genuine things that are unrelated to one another. The God of dualism is the Hindu God, Vishnu who has created the universe, and the universe stands separate from God and in an inferior position to God with no link between the two. Vishnu controls the universe and all world events, and the duty of all persons is to worship and pray to God".

BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN NORTH INDIA

The development of the Bhakti Movement in medieval India accelerated in certain regions between the 12th and 17th centuries BCE. Interestingly, though, it was very different from the Bhakti Movement in the south. Socio-religious groups associated with one of the southern acharyas were part of the northern Bhakti Movement. As a result, the Bhakti Movement in northern India is occasionally regarded as an extension of the southern movement.

For example, similar to the Bhakti movement in South India, the Vaishnava Bhakti movements in North India never condemned the caste system, the authority of Brahmanical texts, or Brahmanical advantages in general, despite being egalitarian in the religious realm. The concept of Bhakti differs according to the teachings of each saint, even if the two regions' traditions are similar. The introduction of Islam in India had an impact on the Bhakti movement in the northern medieval period. The Bhakti movement of this century was profoundly affected by important aspects of Islam, including the rejection of rituals and class distinctions, equality and brotherhood of man, and monotheism, or belief in a single god.

Additionally, the teachings of Sufi scholars influenced the ideas of Bhakti reformers such as Ramanand, Kabir, and Nanak, since the Bhakti movement also brought about certain social reforms. There are several reasons why the Bhakti movement started. The anti-feudal tone in the poetry of various Bhakti saints, including as Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya, and Tulsidas, suggests that the Bhakti movement emerged as a response to feudal oppression and conformist Rajput-Brahman dominance, according to some researchers. Another school of thought believed that the rise of this movement was caused by socioeconomic shifts in the early medieval era.

The Bhakti movement is also divided into two different ideological streams of SAGUNA and NIRGUNA:

Saguna-

Saguna represent those poet-saints who composed verses extolling a god with attributes or form. Major proponents are Tulsidas, Surdas, Chaitanya, and Meera. The Saguna poet saints upheld the caste system and supported the supremacy of the Brahmins.

Nirguna-

Nirguna represent those poet saints who extolled god without and beyond all attributes or form. Major proponents are Kabir and Nanak. On the other hand, the Nirguna poet saints rejected the varnashrama and the authority of the Brahmins and all conventions based on caste distinctions along with the practice of idolatry. They gave more importance to the personal experience with god and even though they called their god using different names and titles, yet their god was non-incarnate, formless, eternal and ineffable. It seemed that their ideas were a synthesis of the three traditions, the Vaishnava concept of Bhakti, the Nathpanthi movement and Sufism.

Also while, the differences between these two branches are indeed important, their overarching similarities cannot be minimised:

- Both focused on a personal relationship with the divine and believed in singular devotion and love for God.
- Both were highly critical of ritual observances as were fostered by the Brahmin priests and as a matter of fact, many poet saints specially in northern areas were themselves of lower caste lineages.
- Another commonality between the two was their usage of the vernacular or regional languages of the masses, as opposed to the sacred language 'Sanskrit' of the elite priests. They composed their poems in popular languages and dialects spoken across India which further enabled them to transmit their ideas among the various lower classes and masses.

Ramanand and the inclusive approach to devotion

Ramanand (14th-15th century) was a pioneering Bhakti saints in North India who expanded the Bhakti Movement beyond the rigid caste and religious structures of his time. He was instrumental in popularising Rama Bhakti and making devotion accessible to all people regardless of caste, gender or religious background.

Ramanand is believed to have been born in South India and was initially trained in the Sri Vaishnavism tradition of Ramanuja. He later moved to Varanasi where he began modifying Ramanuja's teachings to emphasise personal devotion to Lord Rama instead of strict theological debates. Unlike traditional Vaishnavites who worshipped both Vishnu and Lakshmi, Ramanand focused on Rama and Sita, making their worship central to his Bhakti teachings.

Kabir: Rejection of Religious Orthodoxy

Kabir was one the most influential Bhakti saints of North India, known for his sharp criticism of religious orthodoxy in both Hinduism and Islam. He emphasized a formless, all-pervading God and rejected idol worship, caste distinctions and ritualistic practices. Kabir's teachings conveyed through his Dohas and songs, were deeply spiritual yet socially revolutionary, challenging both Hindu Brahmanical orthodoxy and Islamic dogmatism.

Kabir's origins are debated, but he is widely believed to have been born into a family of Muslim weavers in Varanasi. Some legends claim he was raised by Hindu parents, while others suggest he was a disciple of the Bhakti saint Ramanand. He lived during the time of Sufi and Bhakti interactions, absorbing both Hindu and Islamic mystical elements into his teachings.

OTHER HINDU RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

Hinduism has evolved through various religious movements, emphasising devotion, mysticism, ascetic practices and philosophical insights. Among them, Vaishnavism , Shaivism played a significant role in shaping India's spiritual landscape. These movements influenced regional cultures, literature, temple traditions and social structures contributing to the diversity of Hindu religious practices.

Vaishnavism and its regional variations

Vaishnavism is one the oldest and most prominent traditions within Hinduism, centred on the worship of Vishnu as the Supreme Being and its various avatars especially Rama and Krishna. The tradition traces its origins to the Vedic period and evolved over centuries through sacred texts, devotional movements, temple traditions and philosophical schools.

The roots of Vaishnavism can be found in the Rigveda where Vishnu is mentioned as a minor solar deity associated with cosmic order. Over time, Vishnu gained prominence especially in the Brahmanas and Aranyakas, where he was

associated with dharma and cosmic preservation. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana played a crucial role in popularising Vishnu's avatars as divine figures.

By the Gupta period (4th-6th century BCE) Vishnu worship became widespread, leading to the rise of Vaishnavism temples, sects and philosophical schools. The Alvars (Tamil Vaishnavite saints) played a major role in spreading Bhakti towards Vishnu and his incarnations in South India.

Core Beliefs of Vaishnavism

➤ Concept of Vishnu as the Supreme God

Vishnu is the Preserver and Protector of the universe in the Hindu Trinity (Trimurti), alongside Brahma (the creator) and Shiva (the destroyer). He is omniscient, merciful, embodying divine compassion and righteousness.

➤ Doctrine of Avatars

A unique feature of Vaishnavism is the Dashavatara, where Vishnu incarnates on Earth to restore dharma.

The ten major avatars are:

Matsya
Kurma
Varaha
Narasimha
Vamana
Parashurama
Rama
Krishna
Buddha
Kalki

➤ Bhakti as the path to Liberation

Unlike ritualistic Vedic traditions, vaishnavism emphasizes Bhakti yoga as the easiest and most effective path to Moksha. Devotees express Bhakti through kirtans, puja and Archana, samarana through meditation.

➤ Philosophical schools of Vaishnavism

Dvaita by Madhvacharya- Vishnu and the soul are eternally separated.

Vishishtadvaita by Ramanuja- The soul is distinct but dependent on Vishnu.

Role of Pushtimarg Tradition

Pushtimarg also known as the Path of Grace, is a devotional tradition within Vaishnavism that was founded by Sri Vallabhacharya during the Bhakti Movement. It is primarily centred on the worship of Lord Krishna in his child form and emphasizes divine grace over rituals, knowledge and asceticism.

The Pushtimarg tradition is based on the teachings of Sri Vallabhacharya, who developed the doctrine of Shuddhadvaita. It holds that the world is real and an expression of Krishna's divine play. The soul is an eternal part of Krishna and can attain liberation through divine grace (Pushti) rather than through personal effort.

In Pushtimarg, Krishna is worshipped as Sri Nathji, a form of Bala Krishna. The tradition focuses on Krishna's divine Leela's and the Gopis of Vrindavan. Devotees engage in Seva to Krishna, treating him like a beloved child rather than performing elaborate Vedic rituals. Daily offerings include intimate devotion and personal attachment to Krishna.

Pushtimarg challenged caste barriers by teaching that Krishna's grace is available to all, regardless of birth or background. It played a key role in preserving and promoting Vaishnava festivals, including Janmashtami, Holi. The tradition continues to flourish in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra where its temples, music and devotional practices remain vibrant parts of Vaishnavism. Pushtimarg inspired the Ashtachhap poets, a group of 8 devotional poets who composed bhajans glorifying Krishna.

Shaivism and its Mystical Practices

Shaivism is one of the oldest and most influential sects within Hinduism, centred on the worship of Shiva as the supreme God. Unlike Vaishnavism, which emphasises preservation and devotion, Shaivism often focuses on renunciation, asceticism, and mystical experiences. Shaivite traditions have evolved across different regions of India, incorporating a wide range of Philosophical doctrines, rituals and spiritual practices.

Core beliefs of Shaivism

a. Shiva as the Supreme God

Shiva is regarded as Mahadeva (the great God), symbolising both destruction and transformation. He is often depicted as Nataraja, Ardhnarishwara, Pashupati.

b. Philosophy of Shaivism

Many Shaivite traditions believe in Advaita where Shiva and the soul are one. Liberation is achieved through self-realisation and direct experience of Shiva.

c. Sacred symbols and practices

Lingam- a symbolic representation of Shiva, worshipped in temples and shrines.

Rudraksha shrines- used for meditation and chanting Shiva's names.

Ash- shaivites smear sacred ash on their bodies as a mark of renunciation.

Social and religious influence of Shaivism

Shaivism played a crucial role in shaping Indian society, religious thought and cultural identity. Beyond India, Shaivism has left a lasting impact on South and Southeast Asia, where Shiva is revered in various forms.

Social influence-

- Influence on caste and social hierarchy

Shaivism particularly through the Nath Yogis and other ascetic traditions, challenged the rigid caste system by promoting spiritual equality. Shaivite saints and sects like the Nayannars and Lingayats rejected Brahmanical dominance, allowing lower caste and marginalised groups to participate in religious practices.

- Promotion of Asceticism and Monastic orders

Shaivism played a major role in the development of monastic and ascetic traditions, influencing groups like- Nath Yogis and Dashanami Sanyasis. These groups emphasized renunciation, meditation and self-discipline contributing to India's rich ascetic traditions.

- Impact on Gender and Women participation

Some Shaivite traditions, such as the Lingayat sect, promoted women empowerment by allowing female saints and spiritual leaders. The concept of Ardhanarishwara symbolises gender equality and the balance of masculine and feminine energies.

Religious influence-

- Influence on Hindu Philosophy and Vedanta

Shaivism contributed to the development of various of Hindu philosophy, including Advaita Vedanta and Kashmir Shaivism. Concepts like Om, Kundalini energy and chakras have their roots in Shaivite mystical traditions.

- Influence on Bhakti Movement

The Nayannars pioneered devotional poetry in Tamil Nadu, influencing later Bhakti movements across India. Shaivite Bhakti traditions helped made religion more accessible to the common people, shifting focus from rituals to the personal faith.

- Interaction with other religions

Shaivite practices, especially Tantra influenced Tibetan Buddhism and Jainism meditation techniques. Some Shaivite mystical ideas merged with Sufi traditions, particularly in Kashmir and Punjab, where Sufi saints and Shaivite mystics shared similar ideas of divine love and meditation.

Concept of Sufism and its spread in India

Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam, emphasising inner spirituality, divine love and a personal relationship with God (Allah). Unlike orthodox Islamic traditions that focus on legalism (Shariah), Sufism stresses direct spiritual experience through meditation, devotion and self-purification.

The word “Sufi” is derived from the Arabic word “Suf” meaning wool, referring to the simple wooden garments worn by early Sufis as a sign of renunciation. Sufism traces its roots to early Islamic ascetics like Rabia al-Basari, Hasan al-Basari and Junaid Baghdadi who emphasized love for god over materialism. The goal of a Sufi is to achieve “Fana” and experience “Baqa” (eternal union with the divine).

Sufism entered India around the 12th century CE through Persian and central Asian Sufi saints, coinciding with the establishment of Islamic rule in the subcontinent. The Delhi sultanate played a crucial role in patronising Sufis, who settled across India and attracted followers through their teachings of universal love, tolerance and devotion.

The Chishti, Suhrawardi, Qadiri and Naqshbandi orders were the major Sufi orders that spread across India. Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer was among the first prominent Sufi saint to establish a strong following.

Role Prominent Sufi Saints in India

The success and widespread appeal of Sufism in India can be attributed to several charismatic and influential Sufi saints who dedicated their lives to spread the message of divine love, compassion and spiritual unity. These saints established Sufi Khanqahs (hospices), and Dargahs (shrines) where people of all backgrounds, regardless of caste or creed, gathered for spiritual guidance, meditation and communal worship.

1. Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti (1142-1236): The founder of Chishti order in India

He was born in Iran and later traveled to various Islamic learning centres before coming to India. He settled in Ajmer during the reign of the Ghurid rulers, where he established the Chishti Sufi order in India.

He advocated love for all, humility and service to the humanity. Rejected materialism and power, focusing instead on compassion for the poor and marginalised. He encouraged Zikr (remembrance of God) and Sama (spiritual music and qawwali) as a means of connecting with the divine.

2. Nizamuddin Auliya (1238-1325): The saint of Delhi

He was born in Badayun (U.P), he became a disciple of Baba Farid and later he settled in Delhi. He established the Chishti Sufi tradition in the capital, making it a centre of Sufi learning.

He preached love, brotherhood and service to the poor. Opposed political involvement, refusing to associate with Delhi Sultans. Promoted vernacular languages in spiritual literature. His teachings influenced both Hindus and Muslims, strengthening India's syncretic culture.

3. Amir Khusrau (1253-1325): The poet of love and devotion

He was a disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya, and was a poet, musician and scholar. He was known as the father of Hindustani classical music, and invented musical forms like Qawwali and Tarana.

He wrote in Persian, Hindavi and Braj bhasha blending Indian and Persian cultures. Created qawwali which became a central element of Sufi gatherings.

4. Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624): The Reformer of Naqshbandi order

Unlike other Sufi saints, he emphasized strict adherence to the Islamic law. Opposed emperor Akbar's religious policies (Din-I-ilahi), advocating Mughal rulers revivalism. His teachings influenced Mughal rulers like Aurangzeb. His ideas influenced conservative Islamic movements in later centuries.

SIKHISM- A UNIQUE RELIGIOUS TRADITION

The late 15th century saw the emergence of the monotheistic religion known as Sikhism in the Indian state of Punjab. Founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1599), it developed as a distinct faith that emphasized devotion to one God (ik Onkar), equality, service, and righteous living. Sikhism was further shaped by ten successive Gurus, culminating in the formation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699.

Sikhism emerged as a response to the social inequalities and religious divisions of its time, advocating a universal, inclusive and just society. It played a major role in social and political movements in India, particularly during the Mughal era, British rule and the struggle for Indian independence.

Teachings of Guru Nanak and early Sikh philosophy

Guru Nanak laid the foundations of Sikhism based on three fundamental principles-

- 1) Naam Japna - constant remembrance of God
- 2) Kirat Karni – earning a livelihood through righteous work
- 3) Vand chakna - sharing with others and performing selfless service

Guru Nanak rejected caste discriminations, idol worship and ritualistic practices. He emphasized inner devotion rather than eternal rituals. He criticised the oppression of both Hindus and Muslims by religious authorities.

Sikhism believes in one formless God. God is beyond gender and human attributes. God can be realised through love, devotion and righteous action.

Formation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh

By the late 17th century, the Mughal Empire intensified persecution of Sikhs. Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th and last human guru, created the Khalsa to protect Sikh values and resist oppression.

On Vaisakhi (13th April, 1699), Guru Gobind Singh gathered his followers at Anandpur Sahib and initiated the first five Sikhs into the Khalsa.

The first five K's (Khalsa symbols) are-

- 1) Kesh (uncut hair)
- 2) Kangha (wooden comb)
- 3) Kara (steel bracelet)
- 4) Kirpan (sword)
- 5) Kachera (cotton undergarment)

Khalsa Sikhs follow a strict code of conduct. They must live fearlessly, honestly, and protect the weak. Guru Gobind Singh gave Sikhs the surname "Singh" (lion) for men and "Kaur" (princess) for women, removing caste-based identities.

CONCLUSION

Religious movements in India have played a transformative role in shaping society, politics and cultural identity. While some movements have worked towards social reform and inclusivity. The Bhakti movement, Sufism, Sikhism and other religious movements have challenged caste- hierarchies promoted social equality and influenced governance. Understanding these movements is crucial for grasping the complex relationship between religion, society and politics in India.

Bhakti movement revolutionised Hindu spirituality, shifting the focus from ritualistic worship and caste hierarchy to personal devotion and social inclusivity. The contribution of Alvars, Nayannars and Acharyas laid the foundation for the widespread Bhakti movement traditions in India. Surdas, Tulsidas and Mirabai were three of the most influential people of the Bhakti Movement.

Sufi movement transformed Indian Islam into a deeply spiritual and inclusive tradition influencing not only religion but also poetry, music and architecture. Figures like Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti, Nizamuddin Auliya emphasized universal love and inclusivity.

These all movements emerged as powerful responses to ritualistic orthodoxy, social inequality and the rigid-caste hierarchy that dominated religious life. These movements continue to inspire millions today, offering a message of Unity, love and devotion that transcends religious, social and linguistic orders.

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