



The Bhakti Movement in India and Its Influence on Christianity: A Religious, Socio-cultural Phenomena

An Essay Submitted to the Institution
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Application of
Doctor of Philosophy (Religion and Society)
Submitted By Dinesha V
2024

Introduction

Ancient Indian traditions inspired the concept of Bhakti, which aimed to achieve redemption through complete surrender to a personal ultimate god. Socio-religious reformers such as Alvars, Nayanars, Ramanuja, Vallabha, Basavanna, Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Mira Bhai, Surdas, and Tulsidas led the Bhakti Movement, a significant religious and social transformation in medieval India. The movement initially focused on religious equality and social involvement in South India during the seventh and tenth centuries. *Acharyas* revived it as a philosophical and ideological movement alongside Ramanuja in the eleventh century. The Bhakti Movement in India has significantly influenced Christianity, highlighting its theological and societal characteristics. Bhakti, a religion characterized by allure, affection, and individual dedication, shares similarities with Christianity, promoting divine benevolence and selflessness. The relationship between Christianity and Hinduism has fostered a profound bond between devotees and their ancestral heritage. This essay examines how the Bhakti Movement significantly influenced Christianity, shaping its perspective on devotional practices in the Indian context and affecting daily life's religious, sociocultural, and politico-economic aspects.

1. Bhakti Concept and Interpretation

Bhakti originated from the fundamental principles of Indian culture and is universally recognized as part of Indian identity.¹ Bhakti is a hereditary phrase that refers to the state of devotion or affection. This term denotes an emotional state of mind, including feelings and sentiments. The term's significance becomes more precise when the intended recipient is explicitly identified.² The medieval period saw the evolution of the Vedic concept of Bhakti, which signifies religious devotion to a personal deity. Early manifestations of Bhakti involved Vedic mantras, rites, and sacrifices, originating from Vedic hymns. The emphasis moved from *Upasana* and *bhajan*—the formal aspects of religion—to *shraddha bhakti*, the early and most significant part of bhakti philosophy, which is a humble dependence on God.³ *Yaksha* and *Panini* are the first documented sacred scriptures to use *bhakti* as a form of theistic devotion. *Yaksha* used terms such as *Indra-bhakti* and *Agni-bhakti*, meaning devotion to *Indra* and *Agni*, respectively.⁴ Bhakti, derived from the Sanskrit word *bhaj*, denotes acts of serving, sharing, and participating in the holy experience, promoting a profound dedication to God and involving intimate engagement with a personalized understanding of the divine.⁵ *Bhaj* refers to actively engaging in one's growth and development, as well as serving, respecting, relying on, and turning to. Serving, honoring, and loving are its preferred modes of expression; it may also denote respect, love, and adoration, all of which point to a dedication to development and practice.⁶ Thus, Bhakti is a broad and subjective word that may be used in any of the aforementioned senses in many situations, but its specific purpose remains a changeable element. The Bhakti movement, a Hindu religious practice, emphasizes devotion to God as the ultimate reality. Despite differing beliefs and doctrines, devotion to God remains prevalent in various Hindu traditions. The Bhakti movement has identified various forms of devotion across diverse Hindu traditions, demonstrating a

1 G.M. Baily and I. Kesarcodi-Watson, eds., *Bhakti Studies* (New Delhi: Sterling Publication, 1992), 7.

2 Krishna Sharma, *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manohar Lal, 1987), 5.

3 Rekha Pande, *Religious Movement in Medieval India: Bhakti Creation of Alternative Spaces* (New Delhi: Gyan Publication, 2005), 10.

4 A.C. Chakravarti, "Bhakti Cult," in *The Bhakti Cult and Ancient Indian Geography*, ed. D.C. Sircar (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1970), 49.

5 Anjla Upadhyay, "Bhakti Movement in India: A Catalyst of Cultural Change," *Samvedana*, Vol. V, Issue-2 (2023):1.

6 E. W. Hopkins, "The Epic Use of Bhagavat and Bhakti," *JRAS* (1911): 727-738.

commitment to allistic religious-philosophical systems. This devotion to God is essential for expressing complete devotion to the ultimate reality.⁷ Radhakrishnan asserts that the *Gita* identifies *Nirguna bhakti*, which refers to the devotion to the qualityless, as the highest kind of devotion. He also agrees that absolute monism is the culmination of the dualistic nature that motivates devotional awareness.⁸ According to Peterson, people frequently use the Sanskrit word *Bhakti*, which originated from the root word *bhaj* and means “participating in, loving, and dedicating oneself to God,” to refer to both a type of religious devotion and the popular movements that spread devotional religion in India.⁹ *Bhakti*, therefore, is the condition of reciprocally participating in others’ lives. *Bhakti* is the act of allowing the other to delve deeply into one’s being, engendering reciprocal inhabitation and involvement. “Movement” refers to the cultural activity that exerts influence on a significant portion of a community. It is a sublime fusion, aware of the absence of dualism.¹⁰ According to Ramanuja, *Bhakti* is a manifestation of the *Upasana* described in the *Upanishads*, which involves the practice of sustained meditation on the ultimate soul.¹¹ Madhva asserts that *Bhakti* and *Jnana* are essentially interchangeable words. Vallabhacharya specifies that the combination of the root *bhaj* and the suffix *kti* forms *bhakti*, with the root signifying “service” and the suffix signifying “love.”¹²

2. Bhakti Movement: Origins and Development

The Bhakti movement, a notable medieval religious resurgence, represents a particular kind of devotionism characterized by belief in a personal God, a non-monistic perspective of reality, and an emotional rather than rational spiritual existence, but not in its most expansive interpretation.¹³ In the nineteenth century, H.H. Wilson coined the term “bhakti” to describe Vaishnava’s devotion to Krishna, while George Grierson conceptualized it as a religion, cult, and philosophy. Wilson was a pioneer of the Bhakti movement, which resurrected medieval Hindu poets’ works and linked them to the ancient Hindu religion of bhakti.¹⁴ According to R. Chandra and K.L. Chanchreek, the Bhakti cult has profound historical foundations and beginnings in the *Mohenjo-Daro* and *Harappan* civilizations.¹⁵ If *Bhakti*, according to Radhakrishnan, encompasses a belief in a personal deity, affection for him, wholehearted commitment to his service, and the achievement of *moksha*, or liberation via personal devotion, then it is evident that *Varuna* worship incorporates all of these concepts.¹⁶ Har Dayal defines *bhakti* as a Buddhist infant born after Gautama Buddha, the progenitor of Tibetan Buddhism, attains *mahaparinirvana*.¹⁷ Some contend that Vedic literature served as the source of Bhakti.¹⁸ In the development of Bhakti, John Carman highlights the convergence of ancient India’s *Vedas*, *Aryans*, and *Brahmana* priests. The *Vedas* were influenced by the sacrificial worship of *Aryans* and *Brahmana* priests’ meditations. Individuals and organizations, known as *Sramanas*, practiced physical death and spiritual seclusion, preserving the customs of previous Indian residents. According to pre-Aryan religions, spirits, and village goddesses were believed to reside in trees and rocks, protecting specific places or communities.¹⁹ The Vedic religion emphasizes an intuitive understanding of ultimate powers and the wonderful rewards of successful practice. It also advocates for unwavering devotion to a supreme god, Vishnu, who is central to the religion and ruler of sacrifice. This perspective highlights the importance of spiritual growth and devotion. *Vaishnavas* worship *Vishnu*, especially as Krishna and Rama, the Supreme Deity, while *Shaivas* give Shiva the highest position, and *Shaktas* are devotees of the Ultimate Power, conceived not as Shiva’s subordinate consort but as the Supreme Deity.²⁰ G.M. Baily and I.K. Watson believe that the Indus Valley civilization’s worship of tutelary deities—*yakshas*, *grama-devatas*, and mother-goddess in Buddhist literature—may have influenced *bhakti*. The tutelary deity may have addressed the community or devotees. This could have been the first group of Bhakti devotees to worship either *Vishnu* or *Shiva*.²¹ Since the ideas of *bodhisattva*—looking down on all creation with love and compassion—predated any comparable notion in Hinduism, A.L. Basham notes that Buddhism may have impacted Bhakti, which emerged in the medieval era.²² V. Raghavan argues that the Buddhist Siddhas of the *Sahaja* cult had a significant role in creating *acharya-getas*, short songs that potentially allowed Hindu Bhakti saints and their

7 Krishna Sharma, *Early Indian Bhakti: With Special Reference to Kabir, Historical Analysis & Re-Interpretation* (ProQuest, 2017), 99.

8 S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1923-27), 559.

9 Peterson, *Indra Viswanathan: Poems to Siva the Hymns of the Tamil Saints* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), 4.

10 V.S. Lalrinwan, *Major Faith Tradition in India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), 132-33.

11 R.G. Bhandarkar, *Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious System* (Strassburg: Verlag Von Karl J. Trubner, 1913), 28-29.

12 A.K. Majumdar, *Bhakti Renaissance* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan, 1979), 6-7.

13 Krishna Sharma, *Early Indian Bhakti: With Special Reference to Kabir, Historical Analysis & Re-Interpretation*, 160.

14 Rekha Pande, *Religious Movement in Medieval India: Bhakti Creation of Alternative Spaces*, 13.

15 R. Chandra and K.L. Chanchreek, *Dalit Identity: History and Tradition* (New Delhi: Ocean Books, 2002), 83.

16 S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1941), 108.

17 Har Dayal, *Bodhi Sattva Doctrine* (London: Kegan Paul, 1932), 32.

18 A.K. Majumdar, *Bhakti Renaissance*, 2.

19 B. John Carman, “Bhakti,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones 2nd edtn, Vol.2 (Detroit, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005), 857.

20 B. John Carman, “Bhakti,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, 857.

21 G.M. Baily and I. Kesarcodi-Watson, eds., *Bhakti Studies* (New Delhi: Sterling Publication, 1992), 4.

22 A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, 3rd rev. edtn, (London: Picador, 2004), 332.

songs in the local languages to flourish.²³ According to S. Jaiswal, the concepts of *bhakti* originated among the followers of Narayana, collectively referred to as the *Bhagavatas*.²⁴ However, it may be reasonably inferred that although the concepts of Bhakti existed before the *Bhagavadgita* period, it was only with the dissemination of *Bhagavadgita* that Bhakti became widely recognized and popular. The Bhakti concept was first introduced in the *Bhagavadgita*.²⁵ The *Gita* presents three primary *margas* (*karma*, *jnana*, and *bhakti*) for achieving *moksha*, and the author seems to prefer the *bhakti-marga*. According to Jan Gonda, Bhakti is among the three means of attaining salvation in the *Gita*, and the author himself increasingly empathizes with this route.²⁶ The foundation of the *bhakti* cult, as advocated in the *Bhagavadgita*, lies in the belief in the Supreme Spirit and its manifestation, along with the argument that a devotee might attain it by worshipping with “self-forgotten” devotion.²⁷ The fundamental fact that the oldest authentic devotional *bhakti* poetry of Tamil Nadu predates the arrival of Islam, according to J.T.F. Jordens, disproves the idea that medieval devotion emerged in either the northern or southern regions under the influence of Islam. In the Tamil region, during the early seventh century, the poetry of the *Nayanars*—devotees of *Shiva*—and the *Alvars*—devotees of *Vishnu*—presented the first obvious expression of the new *bhakti*, which is passionate and ecstatic.²⁸ The *Alvars* and the *Nayanars* see the Lord as *Narayana* and *Shiva*, respectively. Ramanuja’s (1017–37 CE) diligent efforts contributed to the *Alvars*’ popularity, while *Sambandar* and *Manikkavacagar*’s reigns saw the majority of the *Nayanars*’ accomplishments.²⁹ The *Alvars*, who were instrumental in reviving Vaishnavism in South India, occupy a paramount position in the historical progression of the Bhakti movement in India. Their religious compositions serve as the fundamental basis of South Indian theism. Their hymn anthology is called *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*, which denotes four thousand divine hymns.³⁰ The *Alvars* are situated between the teachings of Rishi Ramanuja and the *Bhagavadgita*.³¹

The *Alvars* numbered twelve,³² while the *Nayanars* numbered approximately sixty-three.³³ The process of “de Sanskritization,” implemented in Bhakti literature, was an essential contribution to the Bhakti movement in South India. Until that juncture, Sanskrit served as the predominant language for all essential literature, and even the temples performed religious rituals in the same language. Nath Muni, the first *Vaishnava Acharya* to pass away in 920 CE, created a school that integrated both Tamil and Sanskrit traditions.³⁴ Another notable achievement of the Bhakti movement, led by *Nayanars* and *Alvars*, was the dismantling of caste divisions among its adherents. In fact, *Alvars* sprang from several distinct castes. Carman posits, “Some were *brahmanas*, some *Shudras* and one was an outcaste.”³⁵

3. Spread of Bhakti in India

The new Bhakti movement extended from the southern regions to include Maharashtra, Bengal, and the northern plains. According to J.T.F. Jordens, this was the result of the process of “Sanskritization of the new spirit.” The *Vaishnavite* Brahmana scholars introduced this novel essence into the *Bhagavata Purana*, a book from the ninth century, which quickly became the most important scripture of *Vaishnavism* across India.³⁶ *Vaishnavites* and *Shaivites* influenced *Puranic* growth in India through their religious orders and monks. Ramanuja, the founder of the Sri Vaishnava school, was a key figure. Madhava founded the Madhva sect, whereas Nimbaraka preached Krishna and Radha. During its final phases, Buddhist *Siddhas*, *Sahajayan*, and *Nath yogis*, led by the *Sahajayan*, had a significant impact on *Bengali bhakti*. Bhakti, an Indo-Aryan vernacular language, originated in Maharashtra in the thirteenth century with *Jnanadevas*’ extensive Marathi commentary on the *Bhagavadgita*.³⁷ Ramanuja started the medieval Bhakti movement between 1017 and 1137 CE.³⁸ Many religious leaders, including Ramananda, Kabir, Nanak, and Tulsidas, have attributed their influence to the *Vishistadvaita* doctrine Ramanuja preached. According to legend, in Kanchi, a Shudra Kanchipurana taught Ramanuja the doctrine of Sri Vaishnavism, the sect to which he belonged. Ramanuja admitted Jains, Buddhists,

23 V. Raghavan, *The Great Integrators: The Singer Saints of India* (New Delhi: Publication Department GoI, 1966), 24-25.

24 Suvira Jaiswal, *The Origin and Development of Vaishnavism: Vaishnavism from 200 BCE to CE500*, 2nd edtn., (New Delhi: Munshiram Manohar Lal, 1967), 39.

25 A.K. Majumdar, *Bhakti Renaissance*, 4.

26 Jan Gonda, *Visnuism and Saivism: A Comparison* (London: University of London and The Athlone Press, 1970), 22.

27 V. Yasoda Devi, “Ramanuja and the Bhakti Movement in Andhradesa,” in *Social Contents of Indian Religious Reform Movements*, ed., S.P. Sen (Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies, 1978), 214.

28 J.T.F. Jordens, “Medieval Hindu Devotionalism,” in *A Cultural History of India*, ed. A.L. Basham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 266-267.

29 N. Subramanian, “Bhaktism in Medieval Tamilnadu,” in *Medieval Bhakti Movements in India: Sri Caitanya Quincentenary Commemoration*, Volume, 3d N.N. Bhattacharya (New Delhi: Munshiram Manohar, 1999), 184.

30 T. Dayananda Francis, *Aspects of Christian and Hindu Bhakti* (Madras: CLS, 1987), 38.

31 A.J. Appasamy, *The Theology of Hindu Bhakti* (Madras: CLS, 1970), 30.

32 R.G. Bhandarkar, *Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious System*, 49.

33 T. Dayananda Francis, *Aspects of Christian and Hindu Bhakti*, 39.

34 R.R. Sundara Rao, *Bhakti Theology in the Telugu Hymnal* (Madras: CLS, 1983), 25.

35 B. John Carman, *The Theology of Ramanuja* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 25.

36 J.T.F. Jordens, “Medieval Hindu Devotionalism,” in *A Cultural History of India*, 267.

37 J.T.F. Jordens, “Medieval Hindu Devotionalism,” in *A Cultural History of India*, 267-268.

38 A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, 3rd rev. edtn., (London: Picador, 2004), 334.

Shudras, and even untouchables to his school.³⁹ He laid a solid logical foundation for the *Vaishnava Bhakti* movement and strengthened its authority by connecting it to *Vedanta*. Ramanuja endeavored to demonstrate that the ultimate phase in an individual's spiritual development is in *Bhakti*, which encompasses a certain kind of *jnana* (knowledge).⁴⁰ Ramanuja expounded upon *Vaishnavism's* principles from a social and philosophical perspective.⁴¹ Ramanuja, a pioneer in *Vedanta*, combined Sanskrit literature, the *Upanishads*, and Tamil scholarship to create a philosophy that includes both Sanskrit and Tamil texts. He formulated his *Vedanta*, sometimes known as *Ubhaya-Vedanta*, from the *Bhagavata Purana*, *Panchatara Agamas*, and Alvar's works.⁴² He believed that devotion was the most effective method of attaining salvation, and *bhakti-yoga* was the most outstanding kind of *yoga*. Along with *bhakti*, he promoted *prapatti*, which refers to the act of relinquishing one's desires, having faith in God's intentions, and writing with assurance for God's blessings.⁴³ Barthwal posits that the medieval *Bhakti* movement sprang from the lower strata of Hindu society's connection with the demonic and the abyssal ocean. The recent Islamic monarchs were tyrannical, and the high-caste Hindus perpetuated caste disparities. Saints such as Kabir developed a movement that communicated religious doctrines and included traditions from both repressive regimes.⁴⁴ The *Bhakti* movement emerged in the thirteenth century and lasted until the sixteenth century. Yusuf Hussain categorized it into two eras, with the latter characterized by interactions with Islam, transforming it into a formal belief system. Hussain maintains that "like Reformation in Europe, the Reformation of Hinduism in the Middle Ages owed a great debt to Islam."⁴⁵ Walter Fernandes emphasizes that, in contrast to the caste system, which maintained social hierarchy by allocating a specific occupational responsibility to a certain caste, the *Bhakti* movement praised all forms of labor as integral to human's devotion to God and advocated that no social rank can be determined based on the nature of the work carried out.⁴⁶ The *Bhakti* movement incited animosity against the prevailing social structure at that time and provided a platform for the growing sentiments of newly formed social classes and castes. Therefore, according to J.R. Kamble, the primary objective of the *Bhakti* movement was to build a society that promotes equality.⁴⁷ According to R. Chandra and K.L. Chanchreek, the *Bhakti* movement originated as a religious movement primarily focused on the Hindu community. Under the leadership of Kabir, Ravidas, and Nanak, it evolved into a social reform movement throughout the medieval period. The *Bhakti* cult consistently exhibited religious devotion and commitment to God while also challenging societal injustices such as the caste system, untouchability, and other social obstacles.⁴⁸ R.S. Sharma emphasizes the influence of feudal social hierarchies on the *Bhakti* movement in the early medieval period. The movement developed an independent nature, with peasant followers pledging equal loyalty to their landowner and devotion to God. The late medieval period refined the concept of total submission to God, which was influenced by growing tax burdens.⁴⁹ He makes a connection between the tenants' total submission to their landlords and the *Bhakti* cult's beliefs and rituals. The tenants worked for the Lord and gave him a share of their harvest. In exchange for land and protection, he showered them with favors in the form of land and protection in exchange. This kind of bond was unparalleled in its intimacy. The individual formed a parallel bond with God.⁵⁰

4. Literature in the Bhakti Movement

Bhakti literature, which includes works like the *Bhagavadgita*, *Narayaniya*, *Bhagavata Purana*, *Bhakti-Sutra*, *Ahribudhnya Samhita*, and hymns, is the foundation of Sanskrit, an Indian language. *Bhakti* literature, originating from the *Vedas*, plays a crucial role in the historical progression of contemporary Indian languages, with Sanskrit originating from the *Vedas*.⁵¹ The *Vaishnava Alvars*, a prominent figure in the *Bhakti* tradition, originated in the south of India in the fifth century CE. Their influence on southern India's religious life began with the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*, a collection of 4000 stanzas. The *Alvars*, who primarily drew inspiration from Rama and Krishna's life stories, influenced the lineage of saint-poet traditions in the Sanskrit language.⁵² The *Nayanars* were a Shaiva saint-poet school that flourished in southern India. Their hymns embody the spiritual essence of the *Nayanars* and inspire deep spiritual feelings by focusing on God's majesty, humility, service, and self-denial. The *Alvars* were significant contributors to the advancement of the *Bhakti* movement and the widespread adoption of *Vaishnavism* beliefs. The *Alvars* had a significant impact on Ramanuja, and his

39 A.K. Majumdar, *Bhakti Renaissance*, 35-37.

40 V. Yasoda Devi, "Ramanuja and the Bhakti Movement in Andhradesa," in *Social Contents of Indian Religious Reform Movements*, 214-215.

41 D.R. Jatava, *Evolution of Indian Social Thought* (Jaipur: Bohra Publication, 1987), 87.

42 T. Dayananda Francis, *Aspects of Christian and Hindu Bhakti*, 35.

43 A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, 334-335.

44 Rekha Pande, *Religious Movement in Medieval India: Bhakti Creation of Alternative Spaces*, 51.

45 Yusuf Husain, *Glimpses of Medieval Indian Culture* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1957), 5-6.

46 Walter Fernandes, *Caste and Conversion Movements in India: Religion and Human Rights* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1981), 22.

47 J.R. Kamble, *In Pursuit of Equality in Indian History* (New Delhi: National Publication House, 1985), 108.

48 R. Chandra and K.L. Chanchreek, *Dalit Identity: History and Tradition* (New Delhi: Ocean Books, 2002), 86.

49 R.S. Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation* (Kolkata: Orient Longman, 2003), 232.

50 R.S. Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation*, 280.

51 A.K. Majumdar, *Bhakti Renaissance*, 52.

52 A.K. Majumdar, *Bhakti Renaissance*, 52-54.

four direct successors, Parasara Bhattarya, Vedanti Madhva, Nambudri Varadaraja, and Pillai Lokacharya, extensively discussed *bhakti* rooted in *divya-prabandham*.⁵³ Inanadeva, a prominent figure in Marathi literature, is known for his contributions to Bhakti literature, including the philosophical commentary *Amritanubhava* and the lyrical expression of his emotions, *Changadeva Prasasti*, and the *Abhangas*, which are integral parts of his literary legacy.⁵⁴ Among the renowned saints of northern India who authored works in Hindi were Kabir, Dadu, Mira, Surdas, and Tulsidas. Ramananda, considered to be Kabir's spiritual mentor, remains a significant Bhakti character. He was a student apprentice to Raghavandana, an instructor in Ramanuja's *Vishistadvaita* school. Only a single line from the revered Sikh scripture, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, preserves the contributions of Ramananda.⁵⁵ Ramananda led a significant shift in *Vaishnavism* by allowing brahmanas and *Shudras* to participate in communal meals as long as they were followers of *Vishnu* and accepted into his group, as well as pioneering the use of vernacular literature.⁵⁶ Tulsidas later became the most significant poet-saint. Although he did not form any religious institution, his *Ramacharitamanasa* influenced millions of North Indians to become his disciples. A crucial element of Tulsidas' work was the integration of *bhakti* with practical endeavors and the exaltation of domestic values.⁵⁷

5. Historical Background of the Mediaeval Bhakti Movement

The Bhakti movement in Indian religious traditions, marked by elaborate ceremonies and conflicting ideas, sought to simplify worship based on love. This movement challenged detrimental traditions such as the caste system, untouchability, witchcraft, and sacrifices that afflicted Indian civilization. The religion once prohibited untouchables and women from participating in sacrifice rituals. The Bhakti faith, a religious practice that included everyone, emerged in India in the thirteenth century CE. We have understudied the socio-religious, political, and economic backdrop of the Bhakti movement. Some view it as a response to Muslim persecution, while others see it as a Hindu reform movement against Islam's influence. The Bhakti movement also aimed to resist artisan organizations' dominance.⁵⁸ The caste system of early medieval India profoundly impacted society's beliefs and values. However, the Turkish monarchy made it impossible for the Muslim sovereign to endorse the quadripartite social structure and its proponents, known as the *brahmanas*. The situation at lower echelons improved due to the trustworthiness of local Hindu *rajās* and *zamindars*, who maintained political stability for Turkish monarchs. Caste remained the fundamental structure of Hindu society, but Turkish rulers avoided decisive measures to combat it due to political considerations.⁵⁹

5.1. Socio-Religious Context

In India, the rise of local landed elites who assumed significant administrative, economic, and political responsibilities during the seventh to twelfth centuries led to a decline in towns, a setback for long-distance trade, and a greater alienation of land to *brahmanas*. Acquiring a higher *Varna* position necessitated the *brahmanas*' endorsement and support, as well as control over land and governmental power.⁶⁰ The caste system remained an important ground for exploitation throughout the medieval period.⁶¹ During this period in northern India, the rise of the *Rajputs* symbolized an implicit connection between those who held land and political power and the *brahmanas*, who served as the source of legitimacy. In exchange for acknowledging the different governing factions as *Rajputs* or *Kshatriyas*, the *brahmanas* received substantial land and financial resources to support their livelihood and construct and maintain temples.⁶² The rise of new subcastes and the Hinduization of other tribes, which led to the creation of mixed castes, incorporated the *Varnashankara* thesis—an idea that promotes moral integrity—into the existing framework, which led to better social governance and higher moral standards. The *Rajput-Brahmana* alliance reinforced the socio-religious structure, the *varna* system, preventing disruptions from the *brahmana* class, who would face resistance and governmental suppression.⁶³ *Brahmanism* in the early medieval period reinforced caste divisions, racial pride, and feudal social ordering. Variations in nutrition, religious convictions, geographic location, and unique rituals divided factions within a single caste, reinforcing the feudal social order.⁶⁴ Additional characteristics of the religious concepts of this period were the emergence of image worship and the development of a religion centered on *karma*.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the Bhakti movement emerged in the thirteenth century, and Islam and *Sufism* arrived in India, particularly in the northern

53 A.K. Majumdar, *Bhakti Renaissance*, 55.

54 A.K. Majumdar, *Bhakti Renaissance*, 59-60.

55 R.G. Bhandarkar, *Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious System*, 67.

56 R.G. Bhandarkar, *Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious System*, 66.

57 A.K. Majumdar, *Bhakti Renaissance*, 67.

58 Ramachandra Tiwari, *Kabir Ki Vicaradara* (Kanpur: Sahitya Niketan, 2007), 9-14.

59 Savitri Chandra, "Dissent and Protest in Hindi Bhakti Poetry," in *Indian Movements: Some Aspects of Dissent, Protest and Reform*, ed. S.C. Malik (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1978), 140.

60 Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 290.

61 Debi Chatterjee, *Up Against Caste: Comparative Study of Ambedkar and Periyar* (Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publication, 2004), 4.

62 Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History*, 291.

63 Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History*, 292.

64 D.R. Jatava, *Evolution of Indian Social Thought*, 93.

65 Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History*, 292.

and northwest regions of the country.⁶⁶ The effects of Sufism on the Bhakti tradition have been the subject of much academic debate, with varying and even contradictory findings.⁶⁷ Although it may have been subtle, Romila Thapar believed that Sufism did indeed influence the philosophy of Bhakti in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century India.⁶⁸ D.R. Jatava noted that the existence of the Islamic social process in the nation propelled the *bhakti* cult, despite being an indigenous movement. The Islamic principles of fraternity, egalitarianism, repudiation of the hierarchical structure, and unity with God presented a formidable antithesis to Hinduism.⁶⁹ S.V. Desvik Char emphasizes the enduring history of the Bhakti movement, rooted in Islam, as a formidable influence. The Bhakti movement did not arise in response to Islamic challenges. The essential precepts of Islam became the central ideas of the “radical faction” of Bhakti religious leaders.⁷⁰ Islam and *Sufi* influence may have intensified the Bhakti movement, which emerged in northern India after the Turkish conquest of the *Rajaputs* in the late twelfth century. The dissolution of the Rajput-Brahmana alliance eroded a barrier for groups resisting the *Varna* system, leading to the rise of Bhakti as a widespread movement.⁷¹ Therefore, Satish Chandra contends that the decline in authority and sway of the *brahmanas*, along with the subsequent liberation for the expansion of the anti-caste movement, facilitated the emergence of the Bhakti movement. Initially, this movement grew more in urban areas than in rural regions.⁷² This period saw a prominent spread of *Tantrism* and *Shakti*, marked by notable developments in the *Nathpanthi* movement and the *Sahajayana*. *Siddhas*, often from lower social strata, espoused these religious concepts. *Tantric* or *Nathpanthi* orders could initiate anyone, regardless of caste, race, or sex, highlighting the diverse religious practices of this era.⁷³ Many scholars hold that saint poets like Kabir greatly benefited from the widespread adoption of the *Siddhas*’ ideas and customs, especially beginning in the eleventh century. Gorakhnath, a renowned *Siddha*, was among the *hatha-yoga* method’s originators. Both his personality and *yoga* gained widespread fame across India. The ownership of this institution originated with Jnanadeva of Maharashtra.⁷⁴ The *Sahajayani* and *Nath Siddhas*, *Buddhists*, and *Shaivas* disparaged intellectualism, ritualism, and traditional societal standards. Bhakti saints, renowned for their spiritual life, practiced a unique approach that included heart cultivation, rejection of Brahmanical rituals, and the inclusion of lower castes and outcasts. Their principles, such as *kundalini-nadi-nama-japa* and *ajapa-japa guru* worship, emphasized the importance of union with abstract spiritual principles.⁷⁵ Satish Chandra highlighted the growing dissatisfaction among Indian artisans with their traditional Hindu society, citing Bhakti saints’ advocacy for egalitarian causes. This dissatisfaction led the lower castes to support protests and dissident groups.⁷⁶ In India’s medieval period, the majority of the population lived in villages, where agriculture was their primary livelihood. Muslim sultans obligated individuals to provide land income to the state, resulting in a secluded, stagnant, and plain life characterized by stereotypes.⁷⁷ Despite being conquered, the Hindus maintained their social subordination. Indeed, they persisted in adhering to age-old traditions and establishments. Inside the village society, the *brahmanas* held a prominent position as a dominant social group and property owners.⁷⁸ The *brahmanas* were responsible for temple maintenance, supervised religious traditions, and provided services to Hindu society in many different capacities. They primarily benefited from the *agraharas* (land tenures) and donations given to the temples.⁷⁹ Most independent *rajas* and *zamindars* were members of the *Kshatriya* caste, which allowed them to maintain influence even when they lost power. This was especially true in the northern area. The *Vaishyas* were well-off merchants, bankers, transporters, and artisans. The *Vaishyas* exclusively ruled the trading and industrial sectors, catering to the indulgences of the wealthy through their commercial enterprises.⁸⁰ P.D. Barthwal highlighted the fact that the *Shudras* experienced dual oppression throughout the medieval period. Both Muslims and Hindus were subjected to oppression based on their Hindu and *Shudra* identities, respectively.⁸¹ In a society characterized by the dominance of the *brahmanas*, the merchants also expressed discontent with their social classification.⁸² Professions were categorized by caste,

66 M. Neeti Sadarangani, *Bhakti Poetry in Medieval India: Its Inception, Cultural Encounter, and Impact* (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2004), 56.

67 M. Neeti Sadarangani, *Bhakti Poetry in Medieval India: Its Inception, Cultural Encounter, and Impact*, X.

68 Romila Thapar, *A History of India*, Vol. I (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990), 308.

69 D.R. Jatava, *Evolution of Indian Social Thought*, 109.

70 S.V. Desika Char, *Caste, Religion, and Country: A View of Ancient and Medieval India* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1993), 103.

71 Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History*, 295.

72 Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History*, 299.

73 Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 293.

74 Susmita Pande, *Medieval Bhakti Movement: Its History and Philosophy* (Meerut: Kusumanjali Prakashan, 1989), 99-101.

75 Susmita Pande, *Medieval Bhakti Movement: Its History and Philosophy*, 101.

76 Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History*, 302.

77 P.N. Chopra, *India: Society, Religion and Literature in Ancient and Medieval Periods* (New Delhi: Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1988), 93.

78 Rekha Pande, *Religious Movement in Medieval India: Bhakti Creation of Alternative Spaces*, 78.

79 Rekha Pande, *Religious Movement in Medieval India: Bhakti Creation of Alternative Spaces*, 77.

80 P.N. Chopra, *India: Society, Religion and Literature in Ancient and Medieval Periods*, 95-96.

81 P.D. Barthwal, “The Times and Their Need,” in *Religious Movements in South Asia 600-1800*, ed. David N. Lorenzen (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 261.

82 Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History*, 302.

and the caste *panchayats* governed their internal affairs.⁸³ Hiuen-Tsang, a Chinese pilgrim, analyzed village life in India between 630 and 644 CE. He noted that butchers, fishermen, dancers, executioners, and scavengers lived on the outskirts, while *brahmanas* abstained from industrial activities. The *Shudra*, a group of farmers, dominated agriculture, as described by Hiuen-Tsang. Hiuen-Tsang reveals that Hindu culture had a caste system, with *brahmanas* fulfilling religious duties, *Kshatriyas* ruling the elite, *Vaishyas* participating in trade, and *Shudras* responsible for agricultural tasks. Craftsmen were the majority but had a subordinate position, living in thatched cottages outside towns and unable to interact with individuals.⁸⁴ Islam flourished in India's dispersed communities, especially along the southern coast, where members prayed and worshipped regardless of caste or financial status. Caste marked social interactions, yet Muslims from all socioeconomic backgrounds worshipped together. Muslims split into two groups, known as *Ajlaf zats* (poor caste) and *Sharif zats* (high caste).⁸⁵ The *Vaishnava*, *Shaiva*, *Shakta*, and *Tantric* sects controlled the Vedic religion, which preserved its sacrificial processes and governed the entire country. Minor groups, including the *Tantrics*, further divided the religion. The religious leaders known as *brahmanas* split Hindu society as they passed on the teachings of the *Vedas* and *Puranas*.⁸⁶ The orthodox *Vaishnava* religion faced opposition from *Nath Yogi* and *Kanaphata Tantric yoga* schools. The *Vaishnava* Bhakti school of thought first appeared in southern India and later reached Ramananda in northern India. Both Hinduism and Islam owe a debt to the *Sufi* schools of thought and practice.⁸⁷

5.2. Political and Economic Context of the Bhakti Movement

The fourteenth century was characterized by the prominence of Islam and Islamic culture. The emergence and dominance of Islamic invaders during their first century in India resulted in the Delhi Sultanate often shifting control among the Mongols, Afghans, and Turks, who continuously usurped power from one another.⁸⁸ The Turkish-Afghan raids in India opened up northern India to trade, and within India, the pattern of aristocratic living encouraged the exchange of goods. The incoming Turks and Afghans settled in towns, and this gave rise to a vigorous urban culture. Towns became the centers of trade. This led to a rapid growth in the number of artisans who lived and worked in the towns.⁸⁹ In the 14th century, Turkish technological developments led to urban growth and an increase in craft production, resulting in a rise in the craftsman class. This led to the development of new talents and crafts adapted by the indigenous populace, as well as new artisan vocations adopted by the lower castes, providing them with a new identity within the caste structure.⁹⁰ Outside the hereditary, custom-bound caste groups, new artisan and mercantile groups emerged. For these groups, the newly acquired wealth did not enable them to assimilate into the prevailing hierarchy or increase their status.⁹¹ Rekha Pande explains that the Bhakti movement emerged due to a series of changes in production patterns, affecting the religious sector and the political, cultural, and social domains. The emergence of new regional kingdoms facilitated widespread cultural developments, such as skill specialization and agricultural growth.⁹² The medieval Bhakti movement, according to many scholars, reflected popular feelings against feudal tyranny. Because the *Iqta*⁹³ system provided a transparent means of extracting the surplus and transferring it to the ruling class, feudal tyranny was greatly amplified with the arrival of the Turks, as pointed out by Pande. The urban Turkish nobility supported the Bhakti movement and local emotions by amassing riches from the countryside. Several regional governments emerged throughout the Middle Ages, with empires rising and falling. These included Bengal, Jaunapur, Malwa, Bihar, Golkonda, and Bijapur.⁹⁴

6. Shiva Bhakti and Vaishnava Bhakti in South India

Saivism is a Hindu school that draws on Shiva Bhakti's ideas, which are found in the *Shaiva Agamas* and the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*. Bhakti's '*Tirumari*' writings are more severe and exacting than the *Vaishnava* canon. *Tantric* groups' early autonomy is a likely explanation for the lack of sexual imagery in *Saivism*.⁹⁵ The general public finds it challenging to comprehend the trinity concept of God, which encompasses *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, and *Shiva*. Notwithstanding their compelling ideals, Brahmins find it challenging to articulate their equal dignity. The lack of *Brahma* in sacred scriptures causes the general public to favor *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, or their consorts. They assert that genuine love, referred to as Bhakti, surpasses outward symbols or manifestations, emphasizing the

83 P.N. Chopra, *India: Society, Religion and Literature in Ancient and Medieval Periods*, 96.

84 R. Chandra and K.L. Chanchreek, *Dalit Identity: History and Tradition*, 126-127.

85 Rekha Pande, *Religious Movement in Medieval India: Bhakti Creation of Alternative Spaces*, 69.

86 David C. Scott, *Kabir's Mythology: The Religious Perceptions, Doctrines and Practices of a Medieval Indian Sant* (Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashana, 1985), 14.

87 David C. Scott, *Kabir's Mythology: The Religious Perceptions, Doctrines and Practices of a Medieval Indian Sant*, 15.

88 M. Neeti Sadarangani, *Bhakti Poetry in Medieval India: Its Inception, Cultural Encounter and Impact*, 55.

89 David C. Scott, *Kabir's Mythology: The Religious Perceptions, Doctrines and Practices of a Medieval Indian Sant*, 4.

90 Rekha Pande, *Religious Movement in Medieval India: Bhakti Creation of Alternative Spaces*, 56.

91 Rekha Pande, *Religious Movement in Medieval India: Bhakti Creation of Alternative Spaces*, 68.

92 Rekha Pande, *Religious Movement in Medieval India: Bhakti Creation of Alternative Spaces*, 65.

⁹³ Type of land distribution.

94 Rekha Pande, *Religious Movement in Medieval India: Bhakti Creation of Alternative Spaces*, 66.

95 Darshan Singh, *Indian Bhakti Tradition and Sikh Gurus* (Chandigarh: Lyall Book Depot, 1968), 27.

complexity of the *trimoorthy* concept. The *Bhakti Acharyas* was a religious sect in Tamil Nadu that prioritized the study of sacred texts, ceremonial bathing, and Vedic songs over other pursuits like travel and charity. The *Vaishnavite* saints *Alvars* and the *Shaivite* saints *Nayanars* spearheaded the Bhakti movement, emphasizing the importance of releasing one's limited self and material worries in favor of a transcendent, eternal god. The *Vaishnavite* deity is *Narayana*, whereas the *Shaivite* deity is *Shiva*. *Shaivism* dominated in the early Bhakti movement, but *Vaishnavism* ascended in later phases.⁹⁶ The *Shaiva Siddhanta*, a monotheistic religion, emerged outside the Brahminic tradition in Tamil and Sanskrit. It identifies three types of existence: lord (*Pati*), soul (*Pashu*), and binding cosmos (*Pasa*). The deity, *Sadashiva*, performs five actions, including creation, preservation, dissolution, concealment, and revelation. In contrast to *Shiva*, the soteriological objective is freedom from the cycle of rebirth.⁹⁷ The *Vaishnava* Bhakti school of thought, which places a focus on Krishna's emotional nature, draws heavily on the *Bhagavadgita* and the *Bhagavata Purana*. The Gopis of *Vrindavan*, an important part of the *Vaishnava* faith, portray the deep devotion and affection that people have for Krishna.⁹⁸

7. Nirguna and Saguna Bhakti in North India

Due to theological differences in how they conceptualize the nature of the divine being, the object of worship, Bhakti religion in north India has split into two major streams or currents—*Nirguna* and *Saguna*—since the latter part of the fifteenth century.⁹⁹ The *Saguna bhakti* tradition has been prevalent throughout the Hindu community. The *Nirguna* tradition has exerted its influence in northern India since about 1500 CE, except in Punjab, where *Nirguna bhakti* has remained a subservient minority tradition.¹⁰⁰ Hindi scholars such as Ramachandra Shukla (1952), P.D. Barthwal (1968), and Parshuram Chaturvedi (2010) first popularised the *Nirguna-Saguna* concept. Ramachandra Shukla, the first significant Hindi scholar, introduced the concept of *Bhakti Kal* (the age of Bhakti) and classified the period into two distinct theological categories. He classified Kabir, Ravidas, Dadu, and others in the *Nirguna* category due to their belief in the non-incarnate, formless God, i.e., those who venerate an ineffable divine Absolute.¹⁰¹ Subsequent *Vaishnava* disciples, such as Surdas and Tulsidas, who promoted the concept of anthropomorphic (a personal), and theriomorphic (incarnate deity in human form), were classified under the *Saguna* group.¹⁰² Notwithstanding their differences with him, the majority of Hindi scholars today acknowledge Shukla's perspective that the medieval Bhakti movement had two separate theological categories.¹⁰³ The *Nirguna bhakti* instructs the followers to worship a formless, universal God.¹⁰⁴ Pande correctly identifies Kabir as the founder of the medieval school of *Nirguna bhakti* of a formless God.¹⁰⁵ The *Saguna bhakti* focuses on *Vishnu* worship; his incarnations preceded the *Nirguna bhakti* historically and, as noted by Lorenzen, represent the dominant philosophy of contemporary Hindu society.¹⁰⁶ In the *Saguna* method, the *bhakti* saints conjure the image of the divine, depicted in human and material forms. They examine diverse ties between the divine and the devotee by conceptualizing them in relatable human terms.¹⁰⁷ Historically, *Saguna bhakti* signifies a progressive reform of older Vedic and *Sastric* Hinduism, when the brahmana elite governed Vedic knowledge. *Saguna* Bhakti sought to democratize access to salvation for all individuals, including women and marginalized groups, without explicitly contesting the *brahmanas'* exclusive authority over the *Vedas*. Nonetheless, Lorenzen contends that this privilege did not include the *avarnas* (untouchables).¹⁰⁸ *Nirguna bhakti*, exemplified by Kabir and Nanak, repudiated the caste system and society conventions, while *Saguna bhaktas*, such as Tulsidas, upheld the caste hierarchy and *brahmin* supremacy, advocating for novel spiritual doctrines while preserving the existing social order and traditions.¹⁰⁹ *Nirguna* School stood for social equity and communal and racial re-approachment. They claimed that the *Shudras* had perfect equality with the *brahmanas* and other castes.¹¹⁰ The *Saguna* Bhakti saints reinstated idol worship rites and reinforced the *brahmins'* status as the principal practitioners of the new religion. Furthermore, these saints endeavored to reinterpret the scriptures instead of seeing them as inconsequential.¹¹¹ Conversely, adherents of the *Nirguna* faith, particularly Sikhs, often dismissed the veneration of *avatars* of *Vishnu* or any other

96 Darshan Singh, *Indian Bhakti Tradition and Sikh Gurus*, 26.

97 V. S. Lalrinawma, *Major Faith Tradition in India* (Delhi: ISPCCK, 2007), 207.

98 V. S. Lalrinawma, *Major Faith Tradition in India*, 207.

99 David N. Lorenzen, *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity and Political Action* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996), 1.

100 David N. Lorenzen, *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity and Political Action*, 13.

101 David N. Lorenzen, *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity and Political Action*, 15.

102 Half human, half animal deity.

103 John V. Mathew, *Interpreting Bhakti Tradition Through Subaltern Postcolonial Lens* (New Delhi: 2023), 58.

104 David N. Lorenzen, *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity and Political Action*, 2.

105 Rekha Pande, *Religious Movement in Medieval India: Bhakti Creation of Alternative Spaces*, 161.

106 David N. Lorenzen, *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity and Political Action*, 14.

107 Wendy Doniger and Mircea Eliade, ed., "Bhakti," in *Britannica Encyclopaedia of World Religions* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2006), 127.

108 David N. Lorenzen, *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity and Political Action*, 15.

109 Krishna Sharma, "Towards a New Perspective," in *Religious Movements in South Asia 600- 1800* ed. David N. Lorenzen (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 292.

110 P.D. Barthwal, *Traditions of Indian Mysticism Based Upon Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry*, 180.

111 Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History*, 55.

anthropomorphic god.¹¹² *Nirguna* literature in India emphasizes the veneration of a formless global God, partially manifested in the Name of God, collective words, and figures of *gurus* and saints. Lorenzen highlights the contrast between *Saguna* and *Nirguna*'s devotional movements, arguing that communalism, particularly devotion to avatar Rama, is the primary cause of social and political discord in contemporary India.¹¹³ Some scholars contest the significance of the distinction between the two traditions. John Stratton Hawley asserts that "we talk about a single family of saints."¹¹⁴ The general population often appreciates the poetry and melodies of the prominent poet-saints from both faiths. Several medieval manuscripts also comprise compilations of songs by both *Nirguna* and *Saguna* poet-saints.¹¹⁵ Hawley has further noted that in *Shudra* poetry, it is typical for many *Saguna* poets to devote some songs to God in His transcendent *Nirguna* form.¹¹⁶ *Saguna bhakti* and *Nirguna bhakti* are distinct traditions based on narratives of *avatars*, with the former denying or diminishing their significance, while the latter heavily relies on the hagiography of founders and famous poets.¹¹⁷ The *Nirguna* religion, influenced by historical precedent and authority, holds more significance than the *Saguna* religion. The *Nirguna* religion's ethical framework, including principles of transmigration and rebirth, is a fundamental tenet, yet adherents of the *Saguna* religion show little enthusiasm for this doctrine. In Hindu law texts like the *Dharmasutra* and *Dharmashastras*, rules for how people of different social classes should behave are laid out. These rules are part of the social ideology of *Saguna* Bhakti, which says that people from higher social classes usually have more rights.¹¹⁸

8. The Bhakti Movement's Influence on Christianity in India

Christians and Hindus both share a love for God, viewing the Christian life as a journey of devotion. Hindus and Christians seek *Moksha*, or salvation, through faith and union with God. The ultimate goal is a loving personal union with Christ, influenced by the Hindu Bhakti movement in India.

8.1. The concept of the Bhakti in Christianity

In Christian belief, Bhakti entails love, obedience, submission, and devotion to the Lord. It involves worship, obedience, and service to the creator. The gospel depicts the relationship between the *guru* and the disciples, with Christ serving as an exemplary model of morality, justice, and purpose. The *guru* is friendly, guides the *bhakta*, meets their needs, and endures extreme pain for their cause. The apostle's deed in the New Testament illustrates this *guru-bhakti* relationship among followers.¹¹⁹

8.2. Bhakti and Christian Spirituality

W.H. Thorp was among the first missionaries to advocate for a Christian tradition among indigenous Indians at the turn of the century. He picks up on two traits common to Hindu temperament that might be essential in establishing indigenous Christianity in India. Thorp saw an indigenous figure, the *Hindu Bhakta*, displaying untamed zeal and joy. In his view, Bhakti's unwavering devotion to the deity sprang from genuine religious conviction. Thorp thought it would be naive to discount the Bhakti spirit's beneficent potential, even while he acknowledged unethical acts.¹²⁰ Unflinching devotion to the celestial Lord is central to Bhakti philosophy, which is an integral part of Christianity and enhances a believer's spiritual path. Unlike Hinduism, which encourages apathy, this dedication motivates people to love and work hard. Bhakti's view of devotion to a deity, which moves from subservience to passionate love, and the value of surrendering oneself to a deity, emphasizes the developing spirituality within Christianity. On their path to holiness, Christians may benefit much from this viewpoint.¹²¹ According to Appasamy, such aspirations, when nurtured by Indian Christians, would lead us "deeper down into Christ and help us to live and work for a fuller realization of God's abiding presence."¹²² Appasamy recognizes that Hinduism has aspects that contradict Christianity; yet, he proposes that reevaluating these beliefs may enhance the comprehension of our Christian position and strengthen our commitment to Christ. By deriving insights from suitable elements of Hinduism, we may enhance our Christian spiritual growth.¹²³

8.3. Bhakti and Indian Christian Theology

E.W. Thompson, a missionary, acknowledged Bhakti's significance in Indian Christian identity and contested the missionary perspective of "unilateral giving without reciprocity." He believed that Hinduism's gifts could enhance the spiritual experience of Indian Christians, including both citizens and missionaries. He emphasized

112 Urvasi Surti, *Kabir: Jivana Aur Darsana* (Allahabad: Lok Bharti Prakashan, 1980), 146.

113 David N. Lorenzen, *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity and Political Action*, 2-4.

114 John Stratton Hawley and Juergensmeyer Mark, *Songs of the Saints of India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4.

115 David N. Lorenzen, *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity and Political Action*, 14.

116 John Stratton Hawley, *Surdas: Poet, Singer, Saint* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 121-160.

117 David N. Lorenzen, *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity and Political Action*, 17.

118 David N. Lorenzen, *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity and Political Action*, 18-19.

119 P.T. Dharm. Prakash Sharma, *Christ: The Mystery of Godliness from Vedanta to John* (Chennai: Woc Publication, 2011), 7.

120 W.H. Thorp, *The Indigenous Christianity* (London: ISPCK, 1903), 405.

121 W.H. Thorp, *The Indigenous Christianity*, 415.

122 A. J. Appasamy, *An Approach to Hindu* (Madras: International Review of Missions, 1928), 475.

123 A. J. Appasamy, *An Approach to Hindu*, 475.

the theological concept of the “motherhood of God,” suggesting that the church may draw insights from Hindu Bhakti for continued development.¹²⁴

9. Bhakti’s Role in the Evolution of Indigenous Christianity

E.W. Thompson refers to T. V. Philip’s view that “the importance of India’s spiritual heritage for the development of Indian Christian theology is not often recognized.” Indian Christian scholars have expressed concern about Bhakti’s influence on developing indigenous Christianity in India. Only a small percentage of people acknowledge Bhakti’s influence. Two primary patterns of discovery emerge: Bhakti enriches indigenous Indian Christian theology and elevates the indigenous Christian worship experience in India.¹²⁵ Tilak and Pandita Ramabai, renowned Indian Christian *bhaktas*, have significantly influenced Nicol MacNicol, a missionary. MacNicol believes that Hindu *bhakti*, embodied by the Indian church, can improve Indian Christianity’s doctrinal discourse, especially in situations where the church lacks a distinct local identity. Their lives may have influenced MacNicol’s work.¹²⁶ Tilak’s life and emotions underwent a profound transformation. Tilak, deeply affected by the *bhakti* pilgrims singing, started composing Christian songs in a conventional Hindu manner, motivated by the songs’ focus on affectionate, personal devotion to God.¹²⁷ Tilak, a poet, adopted contextual alternatives to conventional Christian worship practices, emphasizing Bhakti devotion and Hindu Bhakti tradition. His prayer gatherings, marked by exuberant singing and dancing, underscored the divine unity. In his lyrics and hymns, Tilak used the literary style and cadence of Hindu *bhaktas* to explore this revered theme, underscoring the significance of communion with Christ.¹²⁸ Another missionary who saw the value of *bhakti* in enhancing Indian worship was Popley. He references the work of Bhagavathar Vedanayagam Sastriyar, who wrote several Bhakti hymns for Christians and shared the gospel with Hindus through devotional music.¹²⁹ Several Christians in India have voiced their desire to reach out to *Hindu Bhakti Marga* adherents in different ways. There is a clear division between them. One of them may find a broad framework for evangelism within the Bhakti notion; two others have proposed concrete strategies for reaching out to Bhakti Hindus.¹³⁰

9.1. Christian Lyrics

The lyrics, written between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, remain relevant to people regardless of their religion and beliefs.¹³¹ By offering hymns, lyrics, and *bhajans* in reverence to God during communal sessions and individual prayer groups, the Indian Church upholds the profound heritage of song that the early church established.¹³² The first part of the nineteenth century elucidates the emergence of Christian *bhakti*. In Tamil Nadu, Christian poets were composing Christian poetry that presented offerings of devotion to Christ. The Bhakti tradition of Hinduism profoundly influenced these writers.¹³³

9.1.1. The Concept of Lyric

Songs are based on poetry, which combines figurative language and deep human emotions to depict imagination, the mind, ideas, rhythm, and feelings. Consequently, music lyrics and poetic verses use the same terminology. Both include artwork. We must recognize that art is not simply a single concept but rather a collection of ideas exhibited in tangible form.¹³⁴ According to Awe, lyrics are the words that the author uses to communicate an event or perception. The lyrics express someone’s sentiments about what they have seen, heard, or experienced. The poet or songwriter uses a play on words and language to communicate his or her experience and to give the lyrics or poetry appeal and uniqueness.¹³⁵ Bhakti *kirtans*, composed of Tukaram and Kabir in northern India and *Alvara* and *Nayanars* in southern India, play an important role in spirituality. The Church uses hymns and lyrics to praise God for humanity’s virtuous deeds, making melodies prevalent in liturgical practices. Missionaries in India faced challenges in worship due to the absence of songs in the vernacular language. Bhakti followers, including Vedanayagam Sastriyar and H. A. Krishna Pillai, incorporated Western songs into Tamil church liturgy because of their deep devotion to Bhakti, a belief that aligns with *Shaivites* and *Vaishnavites*’ customs.¹³⁶ The writings of Tilak, especially his songs and hymns, were his greatest

124 E.W. Thompson, *The Influence of India on Christian Thought* (Delhi: Private Limited, 1993), 326.

125 E.W. Thompson, *The Influence of India on Christian Thought*, 326.

126 Nicol MacNicol, “Hindu Devotional Mysticism,” *International Review of Missions* (London:1916): 210.

127 H.L. Richard, *Christ-Bhakti: Narayan Vaman Tilak and Christian Work Among Hindus* ((Delhi: ISPCK,1991), 73.

128 H.L. Richard, *Christ- Bhakti: Narayan Vaman Tilak and Christian Work Among Hindus*,78.

129 H. A. Popley, *The Musical Heritage of India* (Madras: Sri Krishna Library, 1921), 226.

130 A.J. Appasamy, *The Gospel and India’s Heritage* (Landon: ISPCK.1942), 18.

131 Matthew Daniel, *Sadhu Kochukunju Upadesi* (Thiruvalla: The Christian Literature Society,1996), 39.

132 S. Sylus Raj, Sam Amirtham, *Yellam Yesuve: A Collection of Christian Lyrics in the Four Languages of South India* (Thiruvananthapuram: CSI, 1997),

n.a.

133 Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), 112.

134 Kartika, D. S, and Prawira N. G. (2014): *Pengantar Estetika Bandung: Rekayasa*, cited by Sabapathy Kulandran “Christian Faith and Hindu Bhakti,” 06-4_118.pdf, Biblical Studies.org.uk, accessed on 19.08.2024, <https://biblical studies.org.uk>.

135 Awe. (2013). “Nyanyian Tengah Kegelepan: Yogyakarta, cited by Sabapathy Kulandran “Christian Faith and Hindu Bhakti,” 06-4_118.pdf, Biblical Studies.org.uk, accessed on 19.08.2024, <https://biblical studies.org.uk>.

136 P. Selvanayagam Samuel, *Kristava Ilakya Thirattu* (Madras: CLS, 1995), ix-xi.

contribution to the Christian Church.¹³⁷ Sunder Rao emphasizes the impact of Hindu *bhakti* songs on Telugu Church hymns, underscoring the significance of the *Vaishnava Bhakti* tradition on these compositions. Telugu Christian hymns, integrating local representations of the divine, enhance the worship experience and provide a novel depth to Indian Christian theology, exemplified by concepts such as the ocean of compassion and everlasting pleasure.¹³⁸

9.1.2. The Characteristics of the Christian Lyrics

The lyrics serve as a source of comfort to millions of people who struggle with the temptations and competition of this world. To them, they are meadows of peace and tranquillity. They are unique lights that drive away the darkness of ignorance.¹³⁹ Christian music lyrics often incorporate Hindu ideas, whether intentionally or unintentionally, due to their deep roots in vernacular literature. These lyrics serve as contemplative reflections, encouraging social transformation and stimulating contemplative thought. Despite the challenges of eradicating impacted cultures, Christian music remains a significant source of religious expression.¹⁴⁰ The Hebrew Bible, a crucial source of Christian hymns, features lyrics that convey praise, gratitude, and faith in God in the second person, while the Psalmists highlight His love and benevolence in the third person, urging worshippers to exalt God and assist one another in spiritual development.¹⁴¹

10. The Cultural Impact

Theologians in India provide new insights into the gospel by combining aspects of both the Judeo-Christian and Pan-Indian traditions. The influence of both traditions is evident in the work of Indian poets, who use music to convey profound religious themes; this work also emphasizes the importance of using Indian words.¹⁴² The Indian Church views Chalcedonian Christology as authentic, recognizing Christ as the “true God” and “true man.” Most of the lyrics reflect this concept, with Jesus Christ serving as the central figure and the poet’s standard. These lyrics’ foundation shapes the poet’s life perspective.¹⁴³

Conclusion

This essay tried to highlight how the Bhakti movement addressed the socio-religious and political-economic situation of the day and how it influenced Christianity in India. The Bhakti movement, a significant part of the medieval period, promoted harmony among different castes and groups, fostering collaboration for the betterment of mankind. The *Nirguna* philosophy, a key component of the Bhakti movement, emphasized empathy for suffering and hunger. The Bhakti movement embraced individuals regardless of caste distinctions, addressing social imbalances and exposing social injustices. It revealed our country’s spiritual core and emphasized that achieving *Moksha* requires more than just worshipping deities or rituals. Instead, it emphasizes the importance of supporting the impoverished, providing sustenance and shelter, and engaging in altruistic service to attain divine love and *Moksha*. Christians see Bhakti as a definitive precursor to the gospel for two reasons. The first pertains to the worldwide revelation of God in Hindu Bhakti, while the second concerns the extensive veneration of Christ among Bhakti Hindus. Indian Christians possess a Hindu Bhakti tradition that seems to affirm God’s universal revelation.

Bibliography

Appasamy, J. A. *The Theology Hindu Bhakti*. Madras: CLS, 1970.

Amirtham, Sam, and Raj Sylus S. *Yellam Yesuve: A Collection of Christian Lyrics in the Four Languages of South India*. Thiruvananthapuram: CSI, 1997.

Appasamy, J. A. *The Gospel and India’s Heritage*. Landon: ISPCCK.1942.

Appasamy, J. A. *An Approach to Hindu*. Madras: International Review of Missions, 1928.

Bhandarkar, G. R. *Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious System*. Strassburg: Verlag Von Karl J. Trubner,1913.

Basham, L. A. *The Wonder That Was India*. 3rd rev. edtn. London: Picador, 2004.

Boyd, Robin. *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*. Delhi: ISPCCK, 2006.

Barthwal, D. P. “The Times and Their Need.” In *Religious Movements in South Asia 600-1800*. ed. David N. Lorenzen. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Chandra, Savitri. “Dissent and Protest in Hindi Bhakti Poetry.” In *Indian Movements: Some Aspects of Dissent, Protest and Reform*. ed. S.C. Malik. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study,1978.

Chandra, Satish. *Essays on Medieval Indian History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.

137 H.L. Richard, *Christ- Bhakti: Narayan Vaman Tilak and Christian Work Among Hindus*, 58-59.

138 R. R. Sundara Rao, *Bhakti Theology in the Telugu Hymnal* (Madras: CLS, 1983), 12.

139 K.M. George, *Sadhu KochuKunju* (Thiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithy,1999), 117.

140 K.L. Samuel, “Hindu Concepts in the Christian Songs,” *Yuvakam* (June 1978): 16.

141 I-to-Loh, *Asian Songs of Worship: CCA Hymnal Supplement III* (Philippines: AILM and WCC,1988), n.a.

142 Durai Singh “Indian Hyphenated Christians and Theological Religion and Society,” Vol. xxvi, No.4 (December 1979): 96.

143 R. Sahayadas, *An Evaluation of Christology Implied in Tamil Christian Lyrics in the Order of Service and Hymnal*, BD Thesis (Bangalore: UTC, 1985),

- Chatterjee, Debi. *Up Against Caste: Comparative Study of Ambedkar and Periyar*. Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publication, 2004.
- Char, Desika V. S. *Caste, Religion, and Country: A View of Ancient and Medieval India*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1993.
- Chakravarti, C.A. "Bhakti Cult." In *The Bhakti Cult and Ancient Indian Geography*. Ed. D.C. Sircar. Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1970.
- Carman, John B. "Bhakti." In *Encyclopaedia of Religion*. ed. Lindsay Jones 2nd edtn. Vol.2. Detroit, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005.
- Chanchreek, K.L. and Chandra R. *Dalit Identity: History and Tradition*. New Delhi: Ocean Books, 2002.
- Chopra, N. P. *India: Society, Religion and Literature in Ancient and Medieval Periods*. New Delhi: Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1988.
- Dayal, Har. *Bodhi Sattva Doctrine*. London: Kegan Paul, 1932.
- Devi, Yasoda V. "Ramanuja and the Bhakti Movement in Andhradesa." In *Social Contents of Indian Religious Reform Movements*. ed., S.P. Sen. Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies, 1978.
- Daniel, Matthew. *Sadhu Kochukunju Upadesi*. Thiruvalla: The Christian Literature Society, 1996.
- Francis, Dayananda T. *Aspects of Christian and Hindu Bhakti*. Madras: CLS, 1987.
- Fernandes, Walter. *Caste and Conversion Movements in India: Religion and Human Rights*. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1981.
- Gonda, Jan. *Visnuism and Saivism: A Comparison*. London: University of London and The Athlone Press, 1970.
- Goswami, O. *The Story of Indian Music*. (Madras: Asian Publication House,). Cited by Durai Swamy Selvaraj BD Thesis. Bangalore: UTC, 1975.
- Hudson, Dennis D. *Dharma Deepika, South India Christian History*. Hyderabad: ISPCK, 2004.
- Husain, Yusuf. *Glimpses of Medieval Indian Culture*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1957.
- Hawley, Stratton John. *Surdas: Poet, Singer, Saint*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Jatava, R. D. *Evolution of Indian Social Thought*. Jaipur: Bohra Publication, 1987.
- Jaiswal, Suvira. *The Origin and Development of Vaishnavism: Vaishnavism from 200 BCE to CE500*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Munshiram Manohar Lal, 1967.
- Jordens, F. T. J. "Medieval Hindu Devotionalism." In *A Cultural History of India*. Ed. A.L. Basham. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
- Johnson, Shaji. *The Theological Significance of the Christian Lyrics of Sadhu Kochukunju*. B D Thesis Bangalore: United Theologica Collage, 2002.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark, and Hawley Stratton John. *Songs of the Saints of India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Kamble, R. J. *In Pursuit of Equality in Indian History*. New Delhi: National Publication House, 1985.
- Kumar, Raj. *Essays on Medieval India*. New Delhi: Discovery Publication House, 2003.
- Lorenzen, N. David. *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity and Political Action*. New Delhi: Manohar, 1996.
- Loh, I-to. *Asian Songs of Worship: CCA Hymnal Supplement III*. Philippines: AILM and WCC, 1988.
- Lalrinwan, S. V. *Major Faith Tradition in India*. Delhi: ISPCK, 2001.
- Majumdar, K. A. *Bhakti Renaissance*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan, 1979.
- Mathew, V. John. *Interpreting Bhakti Tradition Through Subaltern Postcolonial Lens*. New Delhi: D.K. Pvt. Ltd., 2023.
- Pande, Susmita. *Medieval Bhakti Movement: Its History and Philosophy*. Meerut: Kusumanjali Prakashan, 1989.
- Pande, Rekha. *Religious Movement in Medieval India: Bhakti Creation of Alternative Spaces*. New Delhi: Gyan Publication, 2005.
- Popley, A. H. *The Musical Heritage of India*. Madras: Sri Krishna Library, 1921.
- Robinson, Gnana. *The Gospel in Krishna Pillai's Poetry*. B D Thesis. Bangalore: UTC, 1960.
- Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy*. London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1923-27.
- Rao, Sundara R.R. *Bhakti Theology in the Telugu Hymnal*. Madras: CLS, 1983.
- Raghavan, V. *The Great Integrators: The Singer Saints of India*. New Delhi: Publication Department GoI, 1966.
- Richard, L. H. *Christ-Bhakti: Narayan Vaman Tilak and Christian Work Among Hindus*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1991.
- Sharma, Krishna. *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1987.

Sharma, Krishna. *Early Indian Bhakti: With Special Reference to Kabir, Historical Analysis & Re-Interpretation*. Quest, 2017.

Subramanian, N. "Bhaktism in Medieval Tamilnad." In *Medieval Bhakti Movements in India: Sri Caitanya Quincentenary Commemoration*. Vol.3. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharila, 1999.

Sharma, S. R. *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation*. Kolkata: Orient Longman, 2003.

Sadarangani, Neeti M. *Bhakti Poetry in Medieval India: Its Inception, Cultural Encounter and Impact*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2004.

Shukla, Ramachandra. *Hindi Sahitya ka Itihas*. Varanasi: Nagari Pracarini Sabha, 1952.

Scott, C. David. *Kabir's Mythology: The Religious Perceptions, Doctrines and Practices of a Medieval Indian Sant*. Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashana, 1985.

Singh, Darshan. *Indian Bhakti Tradition and Sikh Gurus*. Chandigarh: Lyall Book Depot, 1968.

Sastri, Gangasaran. *Caurasi Ang Ki Sakti*. Part I. Tran. Varanasi: Kabirvani Prakashan Kendra, 2000.

Sharma, Prakash and Dharm. T. P. *Christ: The Mystery of Godliness from Vedanta to John*. Chennai: Woc Publication, 2011.

Sahayadas, R. *An Evaluation of Christology Implied in Tamil Christian Lyrics in the Order of Service and Hymnal*. BD Thesis. Bangalore: UTC, 1985.

Thorp, H. W. *The Indigenous Christianity*. London: ISPCK, 1903.

Thompson, W.E. *The Influence of India on Christian Thought*. Delhi: Private Limited, 1993.

Tiwari, Ramachandra. *Kabir Ki Vicaradara*. Kanpur: Sahitya Niketan, 2007.

Thapar, Romila. *A History of India*. Vol. I. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990.

Viswanathan, Indra and Peterson. *Poems to Siva the Hymns of the Tamil Saints*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991.

White, E. Emmans. *Appreciating India's Music*. Madras: CLS, 1975.

Watson, Kesarcodi I and Baily G.M. eds., *Bhakti Studies*. New Delhi: Sterling Publication, 1992.

Articles

Anjla. "Bhakti Movement in India: A Catalyst of Cultural Change." *Samvedana*. Vol. V, Issue-2 (2023):1.

Hopkins, E.W. "The Epic Use of Bhagavat and Bhakti." *JRAS*. (1911): 727-738.

MacNicol, Nicol. "Hindu Devotional Mysticism." London: *International Review of Missions* (1916): 210.

Singh, Durai. "Indian Hyphenated Christians and Theological Religion and Society." Vol. xxvi, No.4 (December 1979): 96.

Samuel, L. K. "Hindu Concepts in the Christian Songs." *Yuvalokam* (June 1978):16.

Webliography

Awe. (2013). "Nyanyian Tengah Kegelapan: *Yogyakarta*. Cited by Sabapathy Kulandran "Christian Faith and Hindu Bhakti." 06-4_118.pdf, Biblical Studies.org.uk. Accessed on 19.08.2024, <https://biblicalstudies.org.uk>.

G. N. Prawira and S. D. Kartika. (2014): *Pengantar Estetika Bandung: Rekayasa*. Cited by Sabapathy Kulandran. "Christian Faith and Hindu Bhakti." 06-4_118.pdf. Biblical Studies.org.uk. Accessed on 19.08.2024, <https://biblicalstudies.org>.