

## MYSTIC POETS OF *BHAKTI* MOVEMENT

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### 1. Introduction

*Bhakti* or devotion to God is found in every religion and is considered to be a way to attain God realization. From ancient times onwards *bhakti* is considered as a way of God-realization along with *karma* (good actions) and *jñāna* (knowledge). In the medieval period, however, *bhakti* comes to the forefront as the best means with the writings of mystic poets. In India, this took the shape of big movements with a number of mystics writing their mystical poems in vernaculars. They created lasting imprints in the ethos of Indian mind. Along with it arose the Sufi poets in the Islamic world as the lovers of God, who refused to be bound by the rules and regulations of *shariat* or orthodox Islam. In Christianity at that time came the mystical poems of St. John of the Cross and the writings of St. Theresa of Avila. In India it revolutionized the concept of religion. With *bhakti* coming to the forefront the other two ways *karma* and *jñāna* receded to the background. The ritualistic religion of Brahmanism gave way to new and effective waves of the religion of the "lovers of God" (*bhaktas*), the membership to which was spread across all classes and castes. This movement swept away the masses with it and God became attainable to ordinary people.

### 2. The Background of *Bhakti* Movement

The period of *bhakti* movement is generally considered to be from the middle of 14<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of 17<sup>th</sup> century. The famous historian of Hindi Literature Acharya Ramchandra Shukla defines this period from 1318 to 1643, although the Tamil *bhakti* poets belong to an earlier period.

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In the political background we see the invasion and expansion of Muslim Kingdoms mainly of the Lodi, Syed, Tuglaqu and Mughal dynasties. Culturally and religiously, this was the period of interaction between two cultures and religions – the Brahmanic religion and Islam. The Muslims, differentiating themselves from other people of the land, started to address others 'Hindus'. So, for the first time, we see the word 'Hindu' being used in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In Hinduism a good number of people, especially the people of lower castes, were unhappy with caste divisions. On the other hand, Islam came with the message of fraternity and brotherhood and a good number of people embraced Islam. It gave rise to conflicts between the followers of these two religions. At the same time, we see the mutual influence and integration of both religions. Such an influence is more explicitly visible in art, architecture, music dance, paintings, etc. The *bhakti* movement paved the way for this in all aspects of life.

### 3. Meaning and Definitions of *Bhakti*

Etymologically, the word *bhakti* is derived from the Sanskrit root '*bhaj*' with suffix '*ktim*'. It means service, devotion, attachment, loyalty, worship or homage. It includes total surrender to the lord in word, mind and body. The equivalent word in Tamil is '*aupu*'.

*Bhakti* has been defined variously. According to Rṣi Śāṅḍilya in *Śāṅḍilya Bhakti Sūtra*, "*Bhakti* is infinite attachment to God" (śloka 132). *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra* states it as "infinite love God." Swami Vivekananda defines *Bhakti* as "A real and genuine search after the Lord, a search beginning and ending in love."<sup>1</sup> Sri Aurobindo explains *Bhakti* as "absolute self-giving and one minded surrender."<sup>2</sup> Thus, it becomes obvious that *bhakti* is the desirelessness and loving service of the Lord with a spirit of self-surrender to him.

### 4. *Bhakti Bhāva* and *Bhakti Rasa*

*Bhāva* is a feeling and it is the function of the heart. *Rasa* means to relish, or that which is tasted or relished. If any sentiment combined with other

<sup>1</sup>Swami Vivekananda, *Bhakti Yoga*, 3.

<sup>2</sup>Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, 304.

sentiments or feeling becomes more delicious and creates an ineffable feeling of bliss in the heart, it is the transformation of such feeling into *rasa*. If the senses, external and internal, are concentrated in tasting the wonderful bliss and their normal operations cease to function, the wonderful bliss is called *rasa*. The masters of *bhakti* Movement say that the *rasa* in the true sense is *bhakti rasa*, while other *rasas* are only its verisimilitude.<sup>3</sup>

Although *bhakti rasa* is one, it may manifest itself in various forms as the *bhakta* establishes his or her relationship with God. Among the *bhakti* poets some consider themselves as servants of God, some as His friends, and others as His brides and some even as His mother. Thus, *bhakti rasas* are called i) *Dāsya Bhakti Rasa* (relish of servanthship), ii) *Sakhya Bhakti Rasa* (relish of friendship), iii) *Mādhurya Bhakti Rasa* (bridal devotion), and iv) *Vātsalya Bhakti Rasa* (tender motherly love).

#### A. *Dāsya Bhakti Rasa* (Relish of Servanthship)

In *dāsya bhakti*, a devotee considers himself servant of the Lord. In this there is a combination of love and the feeling of inferiority, as the Lord is treated as the supreme taskmaster. Having the regard of the Lord as his own and rendering full service to the Lord are the elements in this *bhakti*.

A good member of the mystic poets considered themselves as the servants of God and, thus, added the title 'das' (meaning servant) to their name like, Kabirdas, Tulasidas, Raidas, Soordas, etc. For Tulasidas and others the main attitude reflected in their poems is that of a servant-master relationship. Tulasidas says: "you may call me any name you like, but Tulsi is famous as a slave of Ram."<sup>4</sup> For Tulsi the ideal *bhakta* is Hanuman who is at the beck and call of his Lord Ram. According to him, fulfilling the wish of the Lord is not an easy task. There will be all kinds of difficulties. Tulsi illustrates this through a not uncommon experience:

As 'Chakora'<sup>5</sup> looks at moon  
Although his neck is strained,

<sup>3</sup>Madhusudan, *Bhagavad Bhakti Rasayanam*, 183.

<sup>4</sup>Tulasidas, *Kavitavali*.

<sup>5</sup>'Chakora' is the mythical bird that drinks the drop of water from moon on Swāti day, before it touches earth.

So, Lord I serve you through my life,  
 However much I can be pained.<sup>6</sup>

The *bhakti* mystics claim three advantages of this way of relationship: (i) Since he is only a servant, there are no chances of ego raising its head in his heart. (ii) He is always at the service of the Lord and looks after his goodness. Thus there will be no selfishness in his heart. (iii) He believes in the benevolence of the master. Therefore, the master will take care of him in his troubles. With this sort of faith Dadu Dayal Sings:

God is my master  
 He gives me what I need  
 I know that if I serve him  
 When I am hungry he will feed  
 He gives all joy, dispels all fear  
 He really sets you free.<sup>7</sup>

### B. *Sakhya Bhakti Rasa* (Relish of Friendship)

While a loving servant has deep regards for his master, a loving friend has a sense of equality, trust and confidence in his compeer. The Lord, therefore, rides on the back of his friend and, sometimes, His friend rides on His own back. The Lord even plays and enjoys playful fight. There is neither vanity nor any sense of superiority in loving friendship. The Lord relishes *Sakhya Bhakti* as he is fond of His friends.

Soordas is the main *bhakti* poet who has extensively written about this attitude. In *Soorsagar*, two forms of this *bhakti* is expressed. First, Lord Krishna goes with the shepherd boys – *gop guala* – as their friend and the shepherd boys' whole concentration is on Krishna. *Gop gualas* have unbreakable bond of love with him and He is one among them. At the same time He saves them from rain holding the mountain and from the serpent Kālīya. The second forms His exploits – *lila* – with *Gopis*, the

<sup>6</sup>Madhusudan, *Bhagavad Bhakti Rasayanam*, 183.

<sup>7</sup>Many of the translations of poems are taken from R. H. Lesser, *Saints and Sages of India*, New Delhi: Intercultural publications, 1994.

shepherd girls. He plays with them and teases them. As Nagesdra says, "their *bhakti* is more expressive in their feeling of *viraha* – Separation."<sup>7</sup>

### C. *Vātsalya Bhakti Rasa* (Motherly Love)

In *Vātsalya Bhakti*, the devotee considers oneself as the mother of the Lord. It consists in affection than the love of a friend. In motherly love the mother represents a child and takes him to task as of right. In such affection the devotee takes God as her protégé and herself as His protector. The Lord responds to the motherly call of his own devotees. For the sake of His devotees the Lord becomes a child and sports as such. This *bhakti* tradition is mostly seen in Krishna *bhakti* poems, especially that of Soordas. Although he is a man, Soordas considers himself in the role of Yasodha, the mother of Lord Krishna. Although Krishna is the Lord of all universes, he plays the role of a son before Yasodha only to taste her love. He who feeds all people feels hungry and cries for the milk from her breast.<sup>8</sup> He, whom all the gods fear, himself fears Yasodha and submits to the lasso of Yasodha. Swami Vivekananda comments on *Vātsalya Bhakti* as follows:

It is a discipline to train as to detach all ideas of power from the concept of God. The ideas of power brings with it awe. There should be no awe in love. It is to avoid this association with God of the fear – creating sense of power – that the devotee worships God as his own child.<sup>9</sup>

With Soordas and other poets of Bhakti tradition this devotion becomes much more popular and deep-rooted in the minds North Indian Hindus.

### D. *Mādhurya Bhakti Rasa* (Bridal Relationship)

In this the devotee considers himself as eternal bride and the Lord his eternal bridegroom. *Mādhurya rasa* consists in all possible feelings mentioned in the above *rasas* and still more. The conjugal love is, therefore, the sweetest thing possible and that is why this *bhakti rasa* is

<sup>8</sup>Nagendra, *Hindi Sahitya ka Itihas*, 100.

<sup>9</sup>Swami Vivekananda, *Bhakti Yoga*, 105.

called *mādhurya*, meaning sweet. Swami Vivekananda comments on *mādhurya bhakti* thus:

It is indeed based on the highest manifestation of love in the world, and this love is also the strangest known to man. In this sweet representation of divine love, God is our husband. We are all women. All love and all passions of the human heart must go to God. He is the beloved, whom else can this heart love? He is the most Beautiful, the most sublime.<sup>10</sup>

Andal, one of the Tamil Alwar poets, the forerunners of *bhakti* poetic tradition, is known as the first exponent of this *bhakti*. She considered herself as married to Krishna. Her poems express the depths of a woman's heart in her love and dedication to Krishna, and she challenges others saying: "Now why should I be ashamed? All have known that I cannot live with out my beloved. I am troubled in the deep oceans of unbearable pain. If you want to save me take me to my husband Lord Vaikuṇḍanāth."

The expressions of passionate love to God become more popular with the poems of Meerabai. A few examples of her poems are worth-referring:

Can the lotus live with out water?  
 The night without moon?  
 So, without thee, dearest love,  
 I fall and faint and swoon.  
     My heart is full to the brim  
     Filled with my lover true  
     I have no time or space for others  
     His love has pierced me through.  
 People should not mock me,  
 What if I am mad with love!  
 My lover is not a human  
 He is the Lord above.

Not only women poets, men also take recourse to the same expressions to demonstrate their devotion. Kabir says: "When people say I am your bride I am ashamed, because I haven't touched your heart with my heart, I haven't touched your love with my love."

<sup>10</sup>Swami Vivekananda, *Bhakti Yoga*, 110.

It is interesting to note that in front of God all the souls are of feminine nature. Radhakrishnan observes on this point: "In relation to God, *bhaktas* are more like women. The supreme Lord alone is the only man, all others from Brahma downwards, are like women who long to be united with Him."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Newman states: "If the soul is to go on into higher spiritual blessedness it must become a woman; yes, however manly than may be among men."

An incident is said to have happened in the life of Meerabai. She undertook a pilgrimage to Brindavan. It is considered to be the sport field of Lord Krishna. Later, Brindavan, a sacred place, was abode to several holy men. Jeeva Goswami had taken a vow never to see a woman, even her shadow! So, a disciple of Goswami stopped her saying, "The swamiji will not see any woman." Mira laughed: "I thought the only man in Brindavan is Sri Krishna; now I see there is a rival to him." Mirabai's words stung Goswami and he at once understood the hidden meaning. He came out from his cottage, bowed to the great lady and escorted her to the hermitage.

In the later period, after the *bhakti* movement, *Mādhurya Bhakti* started to be expressed in a different phraseology, which appeared to be debased, immoral and, at times, entering into the limits of vulgarity. Bankey Behari, interpreting *Gītā Gōvinda*, expressly distinguishes *prema* (love) from *kāma* (lust):

The desire of gratification of one's own senses is *kāma*, while the desire to give pleasure to the Lord is *prema*. *Prema* is blessed because it caters to the enjoyment of the Beloved and, therefore, it is strong. *Kāma* is like darkness and *prema* like bright sun. There is no scent of *kāma* in devotee's *prema* to the Lord.<sup>12</sup>

### 5. *Prema* in *Bhakti* (Love in *Bhakti*)

*Prema* is the deep affection for the Lord solidified into passion for Him. Once the real passion for the Lord appears in the heart, it never disappears. As Behari explains, "When the *bhāva* (emotions) deepens to the maximum, it softens the heart completely and develops into the exceeding

<sup>11</sup>Radhakrishnan Reader, 243.

<sup>12</sup>Bankey Behari, "Introduction" to *Geeta Govinda*, ix.

feeling for the Lord as devotee's own. Thus, when the devotee is deeply attached to the Lord, the wise designates it as *prema*.<sup>13</sup> It is called *Avibhakta Bhakti*, inseparable devotion.

Human souls yearning for God or Supreme Lord provides the basis for this relationship of love. According to Kabir, "The way of love is very tender No desire, no non-desire, it's being are with day and night I announce it. As the rhythm in music or fish in water given my head in the service of Lord, I loose nothing." Meerabai expresses it as follows:

My Lord is my love  
Dear friends, no more appeal  
Father, Mother, blood relations  
Are no longer real.<sup>14</sup>

She continues:

Beloved! I wonder still  
In quest of Thee  
I am athirst for Thy eternal love!  
I long to make my body a lamp,  
The wick where of will be  
My tender heart  
And I would fill the lamp  
With scented oil of my love for Thee  
Then let it burn day and night  
At Thy shrine.

The intensity of emotion roused by unfathomable devotional urge transcends all carnal desires. The trust of the soul for union with the object of devotion is limitless, so that this yearning alone seems real and everything else fades out of the ken of devotee's consciousness.

<sup>13</sup>Bankey Behari, "Introduction" to *Geeta Govinda*, ix.

<sup>14</sup>In this connection, Bankey Behari recalls a passage from St. Augustine, who teaches the highest gospel of love: "Nothing is sweeter than love, nothing more courageous, nothing higher, nothing wider, nothing more pleasant, nothing fuller or better in heaven and earth, because love is born of God and cannot rest but in God above all created things... Love often knows no bonds but is fervent beyond all measure. Love feels no burden, thinks nothing of the trouble, attempts what is above its strength, pleads no excuse of impossibility for its things, all things lovable for itself and all things possible." Bankey Behari, *Nistraigunya Purushotma Yoga of the Gita*, 55.



### 6. *Sangam* and *Viraha* (Mystical Union and Agony of Separation)

Union and separation are the two faces of the same coin *prema*. They are two wings of a bird, the lover. In separation, the hue of *prema* becomes deep and profound. All the mystics experience the pain of *viraha*. In the agony of *viraha* Meerabai sings:

Oh how long must I seek you?  
My eyes ache seeking you  
My heart worn out with longing  
Oh! show yourself and speak.

Thus, it is said of the mystics that, blessed are they who got a glimpse of union and suffering with the pain for the great union. For Kabir the whole body has become abode of *viraha*, and he sings from the feelings of *viraha*, separation:

The veins are strings, body the Veena  
Which plays only the music of *Viraha*  
Without hearing again from my Lord.  
This body I make a lamp, my soul its wick  
Blood I Pour as oil,  
When will see the face of my Love.

In the union that the devotee achieves, the experience of being one is so deep in his being that very often the devotee identifies himself as his Lord. In Soordas' poems of *Raslīlā*, the *Gopis* very often get the experience that they have transformed themselves into Krishna. The Alwar poet Andal making the garland of flowers for Krishna put it on in her own neck. Further, Kabir expresses his experience as follows:

Remembering Rama, my soul has become Rama  
When soul itself has become Rama,  
Where should I bow my head?

It is the experience of breaking the bonds of one's existence and becoming one with the Supreme Being. Kabir continues:

The pitcher in water, water in pitcher  
Water inside and outside  
When the pitcher is broken  
Water becomes one with water  
The learned says this truth.

About this inseparable union Meerabai says:

What is the difference, dear  
 Between thyself and me?  
 How do these two differ,  
 The rolling waves and the sea?  
     Of gold a craftsman makes  
     A bracelet form the mould  
     Can you tell how do they differ?  
     The bracelet and the gold?  
 So close we are united  
 As rolling waves to sea,  
 As bracelet to gold  
 How solve this mystery?

### 7. *Bhakti* in Sufi Mystic Poets

When the *bhakti* movement was flourishing in the medieval period in India with Hindu *bhakti* poets, in Islam there was a similar movement called Sufism. The Sufis are mystics of Islam, who perceive that God is real and the world is his reflection. Some of the famous Sufi poets of India are Sharafuddin, Maneri, Khwaja Moin-ud-din Christi, Jaisy, Baba Farad and others. Guru Nanak in the Holy Book of Sikhs, *Ādi Grandh*, incorporated a good number of Baba Farad's poems. Unlike the traditional Islamic beliefs the Sufis believe that revelation is the inherent property of every soul. For them there are two kinds of knowledge: i) *Ilm-e-Sophia*, the knowledge attained through books, and ii) *Ilm-e-seena*, the knowledge revealed to the heart. The Sufis believe in the knowledge revealed to them

About the idea of God there are three theories: i) *Ijadiavad*, the theory according to which God is one and separate from world; ii) *Shahudiavad*, the theory that holds that God is one and the world is his reflection; iii) *Vajudiavad*, the theory that says that only God exists and He is in everything. The liberal Sufis hold either *Sahudiavad* or *Vajudiavad*.

Further, the Sufis recognize two aspects or phases of One's experience in ecstasy. The one is *fana*, the negation or passing away of the self, the other is *banga*, the intoxication in God, or abiding in God. The first and most important step is *Ishq*, or love. Chaganlal Lala writes about Sufis: "We see that the Sufis are the moths that offer their lives to the

burning candle, namely God and cherish His love and agony of separation is the core of their hearts. How can they be bound by rules and regulations of *shariat* or orthodox Islam?"<sup>15</sup> The Sufis as their name itself indicates are the lovers of God and the singers of Love. Two samples from their poems on the love of God are self-explanatory:

How can I love another?  
 Whatever his beauty may be  
 When I see and experience the love of God  
 I am drowned in that infinite sea!<sup>16</sup>

Be above joy and sorrow  
 The cares of the world are short  
 Surrender yourself to your loving lord  
 You will find your way to his heart.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, religious fundamentalism was non-existent with the Sufis spiritual quest. To them all religions are true in their essence. Hence, we can see a lot of Hindu and Christian thinking being reflected in their writings.

### 8. Bhakti Movement and a Paradigm Shift

With the emergence of *bhakti* movement there happened revolutionary changes in different aspects of life, especially in literature and religion. It swept across the whole of India. As Nagendra says, "*Bhakti* was born in Dravidian land, in Karnataka grew up, travelled through Maharashtra and became old in Gujrat. Coming back to Brindavan it got back its youthfulness and beauty."<sup>18</sup> All through its way it influenced the masses and left a very profound influence on the life and culture of Indians in the subsequent centuries. Some explicit shifts may be identified as follows:

<sup>15</sup>Chhuganlal Lala, *Bhakti in Religions of the World*, 192.

<sup>16</sup>Khwaja Moin-ud-din Christi.

<sup>17</sup>Baba Farid.

<sup>18</sup>Nagendra, *Hindi Sahitya ka Ithihas*, 105.

### A. Poetry Comes Out of Palaces to the Streets

Earlier the learned hermits or the learned poets under the patronage of kings generally did poetry. With the emergence of mystic poets poetry came into the hands of ordinary people. The first exponents of the *bhakti* movement, the Tamil Alwar poets, are from different walks of life and different castes. Andal, famous among them, was an uneducated girl. Kabir was a weaver, Soordas was a blind beggar, Raidas the cobbler, the *Mochi*, one of the lowest castes, whom Meerabai considered her *Guru*, Tukaram was a *sūdra*, and Mirabai was a princess who left her palace and came to the streets, singing and dancing.

### B. From Sanskrit to Vernacular

The writings of learned people, especially the poetry, were supposed to be in Sanskrit. The mystic poets, however, wrote for the people in their vernacular. It, thus, gave a boost to the development of regional language and literature, many poets like Eknath even had to suffer, because of writing in vernacular language and not in Sanskrit. Since, written in vernacular, in simple style it became the poetry of the people. Moreover, this introduced a difference in the style of poetry too. Even the learned people like Tulasidas, Eknath and others shunned the stylish poetry of the Sanskrit tradition and wrote in simple style.

### C. From Many Gods to One God: *Iṣṭa Devatha*

An important shift that occurred with *bhakti* movement is a change from the worship of many gods to the love of one God, the *Iṣṭa Devatha*. This *Iṣṭa Devatha*, the personal God, was different to different people, for some Śiva and for others Rāma or Kriṣṇa. Kabir, although he addresses God with different names like Rāma or Kriṣṇa, it was for the Supreme God not for Rama who came in the human form; Meerabai worshiped her beloved Kriṣṇa and sometimes although she addresses by the name Rama, she uses it as another name for Kriṣṇa. None of the saints advocates the practice of worshipping the thousands of gods, as was the practice earlier.

#### D. From Cultic Religion to Personal Religion

People were fed up with the *Karmakhand*, the rituals of Brahmanic religion and by the exploitation of Brāhmins in the name of religion. Almost all saints did not believe in rituals. They had, however, deep faith in the mercy of God.<sup>19</sup> According to the *bhakti* tradition, God removes the effects of bad *karma* (deeds) by His grace, without the rituals being performed. About such religious observations Dadu Dayal says:

With rosary and sandal marks  
I don't associate  
The one above dwells in my heart  
Him I meditate.

Kabir was a critic of religions, both Islam and Hinduism, as their ritual observations were practised in those days. For him the worship of God is in love and compassion. He says:

I don't know the rituals  
Not of ringing bells  
Nor I placed an Idol on throne  
And never offered flowers  
God is not pleased by these  
Or by burning the body  
Nor by leaving the clothes  
Or by killing the senses.

#### E. From Hostility to Religious and Social Harmony

The period of *bhakti* movement was a time of fights in the name of religion and caste discrimination. Amidst these, the saint poets came with the message of harmony. In none of the poems of the Hindu mystic poets we find any attack or hint against Islam. In the same way in the poems of Sufi saints we find nothing against Hinduism. However, in both we find a lot of poems on religious and social harmony. Kabir, for example, forcefully advocates the concept of a united humanity:

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<sup>19</sup>Nagendra, *Hindi Sahitya ka Itihas*, 200.

Adam who was first, did not know  
 Where came mother Eve  
 Then there was not Turk (Muslim) or Hindus  
 Then there was no race, no caste  
 If you think the maker distinguished caste  
 Birth according to the penalties for deeds  
 Born a śūdra, you die a śūdra  
 It is only in this world of illusion that  
 You assume sacred thread...  
 If you milk black and yellow cows together  
 Will you be able to distinguish their milk?

This is not a lone voice but one continuously being found among the varied writings of the mystic poets.

## 9. Conclusion

The new religious movement broke out in medieval India, that emphasized the devotion to God – *bhakti* – as the sole means for salvation. Collectively known as *bhakti* movement, it has left very profound impact on the religious and cultural life of Indians. Numerous religions (like Sikhism) and cults (like Vaiṣṇavism, Vīraśaivism, etc.) born then are active and strong today. This movement, to an extent, freed people from the cultic ritualism and brought them closer to God. Mystic poets, through their writings, tried to bring religious and social harmony. Love of God as the supreme devotion, as advocated by them, brought forth the idea that God is attainable to all who love God, despite of class or caste differences. Since most of these poets wrote in vernacular or regional languages, Sanskrit gave way to the regional languages, which flourished fast. Devotion to personal God gave rise to the development of art, literature, music and dance, thus making it a golden period for these arts. The period of *bhakti* movement in India gave both new paradigms. The greatest contribution of this movement was its ability to shun most of the communal aspects from religion and thus to emphasize the idea of one humanity.