

7th – Devotional Paths to the Divine I



The early medieval period in India witnessed the beginning of two powerful religious movements—the Bhakti Movement and the Sufi Movement. These movements had a profound effect on society and the way religion would be practiced. By the 7th century, people started worshipping a variety of gods—each region and each community had its favourite deity. The control of the priests had over the practice of religion appears to have increased. They seem to have encouraged

The Idea of a Supreme God: Before large kingdoms emerged, different groups of people worshipped their own gods and goddesses. As people were brought together through the growth of towns, trade and empires, new ideas began to develop. The idea that all living things pass through countless cycles of birth and rebirth performing good deeds and bad came to be widely accepted. Similarly, the idea that all human beings are not equal even at birth gained ground during this period. The belief that social privileges came from birth in a “noble” family or a “high” caste was the subject of many learned texts.

Many people were uneasy with such ideas and turned to the teachings of the Buddha or the Jainas according to which it was possible to overcome social differences and break the cycle of rebirth through personal effort. Others felt attracted to the idea of a supreme god who could deliver humans from such bondage if approached with devotion (or bhakti). This idea, advocated in the Bhagavagita, grew in popularity in the early centuries of the Common Era. Shiva, Vishnu and Durga as supreme deities came to be worshipped through elaborate rituals.

A new kind of Bhakti in South India Nayanars and Alvars: Bhakti is the total surrender of the self to god; it is the expression of extreme love for god without expecting anything in return. The seventh to ninth centuries saw the emergence of new religious movements, led by the Nayanars (saints devoted to shiva) and Alvars (saints devoted to Vishnu). Who came from all castes including those considered “untouchable” like the pulaiyar and the panars. They were sharply critical of the Buddhists and Jainas and preached ardent love of Shiva or Vishnu as the path to salvation. They drew upon the ideals of love and heroism as found in the Sangam literature the values of bhakti. The Nayanars and Alvars went from place to place composing exquisite poems in praise of the deities enshrined in the villages they visited, and set them to music.

Philosophy and Bhakti: Shankara, one of the most influential philosophers of India, was born in Kerala in the eight century. He was an advocated of Advaita or the doctrine of the oneness of the individual soul and the supreme God which is the Ultimate Reality. He taught that Brahman, the only or Ultimate Reality, was formless and without any attributes. He considered the world around us to be Maya and preached renunciation of the world and to adopt path of knowledge to understand the true nature of Braham and attain salvation.

Basavanna’s Virashaivism: The connection between the Tamil bhakti movement and temple worship. This in turn led to a reaction that is best represented in the virashaiva movement initiated by Basavanna and his companions like Allama Prabhu and Akkamahadevi. This movement began in Karnataka in the mid- twelfth century. The Virashaivas strongly for the equality of all human beings and against

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Brahmanical ideas about caste and the treatment of women. They were also against all forms of ritual and idol worship.

The Saints of Maharashtra: From the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries Maharashtra saw a great number of saint-poets, whose songs in simple Marathi continue to inspire people. The most important among them were Haneshwar, Namdev, Eknath and Tukaram as well as women like Sakkubai and family of Chokhamela, who belonged to the “untouchable” Mahar caste. This regional tradition of bhakti focused on the Vitthala (a form of Vishnu) temple in Pandharpur, as well as on the notion of a personal god residing in the hearts of all people. Poets rejected all forms of ritualism, outward display of piety and social differences based on birth.

In Bengal, **Chaitanya** popularized Bhakti and composed hymns in praise of lord Krishna. Surdas was another Bhakti devotee who wrote songs of devotion for lord Krishna. Sursagar is his famous book consisting of his devotional songs. **Mirabia**, a Rajput princess, was also a great devotee of Krishna. **Vallabhachary** built a temple for lord Krishna on Govardhan hill near Mathura. He came from Telugu Brahmin family.

Woman Bhakti Saints: In the 14th century, a Maharashtra woman Janabai becomes a saint-poet with her Bhakti toward Vithoba, the god at Pandharpur Temple. The most well-known woman Bhakti saint of the 15th century is Mirabia. Mirabia was the wife of the crown prince of Mewar. She was a great devotee of Lord Krishna. When she got married, she insisted on carrying an idol of Krishna to her husband's house. Mirabai's in-laws did not like her devotion to Krishna and tried to stop her. She composed various bhajans to express her love and devotion for Krishna. She composed about 1,400 poems in Rajasthani and Gujarati.

Nathpanthis, Siddhas and Yogis: A number of religious groups that emerged during this period criticized the ritual and other aspects of conventional religion and the social order, using simple, logical arguments, among them were the Nathpanthis, Siddhacharas and yogis. They advocated renunciation of the world. To them the path to salvation lay in meditation on the formless ultimate reality and the realization of oneness with it. To achieve this they advocated intense training of the mind and body through practices like yogasanas. Breathing exercise and meditation. These groups became particularly popular among “low” castes. Their criticism of conventional religion created the ground for devotional religion to become a popular force.

The Bhakti Teachings:

1. All human beings are equal Hindus and Muslims were not created by God.
2. Selfless love and devotion bring a person close to god.
3. Purity of heart and mind is important.
4. Share others' pain as helping fellow human beings is the true test of Bhakti.
5. A devotee should express Bhakti through devotional music.

