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Bhakti Movement and Poetry Unified India More than any Political Movement

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Abstract

The essence of Bhakti being an element present in Indian mind, its movement originated in Tamil Nadu; its first emergence in the Tamil epic, *Silppadikaram* reached its zenith during the period of the Alvars, between sixth and tenth century. The *Bhagavata*, a Sanskrit work which weaved the theory of Bhakti for Krishna exercised great influence on the Bhakti movement. It became prominent in the seventh century CE. And 63 Saiva Nayanar saint-poets compiled *Tirumurai*, a compilation of hymns on Shiva which was developed into an influential scripture in Shaivism. It is said that the *Saiva Siddhanta* (Tamil Saivism) is more indebted to the passionate songs of the Saiva poets. *Virasaivas* contributed significantly towards the emergence of the Bhakti cult derived from Sankhya and Vedanta tradition. The movement embraced devotees from all castes and rungs of society. Singing ecstatic bhakti hymns in local language was a tradition there. Bhakti movement in the medieval period influenced other religions in India like Sikhism, Christianity and Jainism. It has similarity with Sufism.

Keywords- Bhakti, Chhayavad, Scripture, Nature, Religion, Hymns

Indian Ambience Congenial to Bhakti Movement

Primitive man viewed the forces of Nature with wonder and awe at first instigating him to propitiate such forces naming them Gods. The first encounter with such Gods is dateless. But from the first surviving records of man's relationship with God found in Indian Vedas, may be six thousand years and more old, we find sublime utterances by the Indian Rishis. "The Indian mind has always realised that the Supreme is the Infinite; it has perceived, right from the Vedic beginning, that to the soul in Nature the Infinite must always present itself in an endless variety of aspects." Sri Aurobindo wrote in *The Foundation of Indian Culture* (Culture 129). Bhakti is ingrained in such spiritual ideas.

Waiting up to the end of the Vedic period we come to Vedanta (Upanishad) where the hidden and symbolic words become literary beauties with the glory of God revealed in poetry. It gives birth to *Shraddha* resulting in intense love and devotion for the divine. Bhakti

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had been flourishing from the very early age in Indian soil. See how God was revealed to our forefathers:

Na tatra suryo bhati na chandratarakang ne ma vidyuto bhanti kutoyamagni
Tameva bhantamanubhati sarve tasya bhasa sarvamidang vibhati
Shwetashwatara Upanishad

“There the Sun cannot shine and the moon has no splendor; the stars are blind; there our lightnings flash not neither any earthly fire; all that is bright is but the shadow of His brightness and by His shining all this shineth. (Upanishads 379)

Maturity and Growth of Bhakti Movement

“From the THIRTEENTH century to the seventeenth century, the State of Maharashtra was blessed with great many saints. . . . During these four centuries . . . at least fifty saints were born in Mharashtra. The span of four centuries was a very special period in the history of the Bhakti Movement, not just in Maharashtra but also in other parts of India.” (Chandravati. Introduction 3)

Pandharpur with temple of Lord vithoba (also mentioned as Vitthal) is said to have been the centre for Bhakti Movement in Maharashtra. Namdeva was born in 1270 and he was there, dancing and singing before the God Vithoba which originally came from Karnataka, it is said, drawing large numbers of devotees. But as per legends, during Tukaram’s ancestor Visvambhara’s time, due mainly to his deep love for Lord Vithoba, images of Lord Panduranga or Krishna and his consort Rukmini were found in Dehu, a village some eight miles from Pune, by digging a spot in the mango grove as a dream sequence. Lord Vithoba and Panduranga are the name of the same deity. Thus Tukaram settled firmly in his native village, Dehu and the movement spread from there.

Tukaram was at the acme of devotion for the Lord. After some time in his sadhana he began composing kirtanas sung by them. It is said by some that he was initiated by Babaji Caitanya, a follower and disciple of a disciple of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu of Bengal who was famous for his dance with padabali (Kirtanas). During his pilgrimage to South India (1510-12) he stayed for some time in Pandharpur which was frequented by Tukaram. But it has not been firmly established. (Pravrajika 226)

Examples of Tukaram’s poetry:

The sun and its rays cannot be separated

Such is my relationship with the Lord now.

As quoted in Chandravati 24-25

And I experienced ‘I am He’,

Having reached the stage of knowing ‘I am That’

Rakta shwet Krishna peet, Gatha 4313: As quoted in Chandravati 133

Dadu Dayal, so named due to the predominance of charitable trait in his character, was born in Gujarat but stayed for long in Rajasthan. He was born Muslim though there are

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other stories of his birth. It is said that he was born in 1544 and died in 1603. (Upadhyaya 6-7) The date of birth of Kabir hasn't been accurately ascertained; the difference of year of birth was so wide as between 1389 to 1440 but about his death there has been some agreement; it was in 1518-19. He was present in fifteenth and a good part of sixteenth century. Mirabai was born in 1500 and Tukaram's birth was generally accepted to be in 1598. Eknath was born in 1533. Sri Chaitanya began his sankirtana from 1509 and it continued as he moved from place to place in India. Kabir, Mirabai, Tukaram and Sri Chaitanya may be considered as the pillars of Bhakti movement. The movement had its roaring growth from fifteenth to seventeenth century

Gaudiya Vaishnavism of Bengal, a Krishna cult, derived their doctrines and practices from the emotional experience of Sri Chaitanya Deva and the lyrics of Jayadeva, Vidyapati, Chandidasa and other Vaishnava poets. The legendary Prem Lila of Krishna and Radha in Vrindavan (Varanasi or Banares), Radha's going to Yamuna river for filling her earthen pitcher and Krishna's flute reverberating through meadows, river bank and alcoves anytime throughout the day, are the main stories besides other episodes of the divine drama. Poems written on such legends are called, *pada*, collectively *padavali*. Tagore was very fond of such songs and wrote series of poems imitating such *padavali*, titling them as Bhanu Singher Padabali.

One may remember a unique romantic poem of this era, written in Maithili bhaashaa or language.

Janama abadhi hama rupa neharalu
nayana na tirapati pela
lakha lakha yuga hiye hiye rakhalu
tai hiya judana na gela
(beauties have I seen from birth
eyes have never been gratified
for lakhs of years we conjoined our hearts
hearts have never been satisfied)

Born and married in royal families Mirabai came out on the road to Krishna; persecuted but overcame all obstacles and sang:

I have nothing to do with
relations or cousins,
I am bound
in love to my Lord
That's all that's real for me
Let what will be, be.
Pravrajika 294-95

Dadu, belonging to the same period, sang like Mira in his poem, "Birhani bapu na sambharai"
The separated one cannot control her body

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she is restless with no awareness of her body.
How can she survive, O Dadu,
without the vision of her Beloved God?
(Upadhyaya 125)

The other great saints and poets of this group were Nityananda Mahaprabhu, Jaydeva, Gnanadas, Bodu Chandidas, Srinivas Acharya, Rup and Sanatan Goswami, Narsi Mehta and others.

Sufi and Bhakti compared and contrasted

It is said that Sufism arrived in India with *fana*, *dhikr* and *sama* and with its beloved-lover framework. Rabia, the mystic of Basara (801 C.E.) is usually considered as the first important saint of the Sufi movement. Sufi poets were inspired by Indian philosophy, Vedanta in particular.

Sufism, though rooted in the Quran, derived much of its inspiration from various sources, some of which were anti-Quranic, including the folk traditions of Arab and Persia. . . . Its approach to God through love, its dependence on God's mercy and its idea of *tawhid* and *dhikr*, often appeared anti-Quranic in certain aspects. (Das 153)

They had no other religion than love on earth, the way to reach God. Rumi calls love a mirror through which God sees himself. "He sees himself, He himself is Beloved. He created the love and beauty and himself is Lover of that." (Kumar and Roy 130).

Proceed one step more and find what another mystic poet, Tagore writes,
Thus it is that thy joy in me is so full. Thus it is that thou hast come down
to me. O thou lord of all heavens, where would be thy love if I were not?

(Tagore Gitanjali /Ed. Das 62)

Rumi was the founder of the Order of whirling dervishes. Bhakti poets also danced like the Bauls dancing with one-stringed instrument in hand and singing full throated mystical songs of love through the meadows and fields in the country sides of Bengal from the medieval time till date. A prominent among the Bauls, Lalan Fakir sang,

khnachar bhitari achin pakhi
kamne ase jai!
Dharte parle man-bedi
ditam tahar paye
Ray 50
How does the strange bird
flit in and out of the cage.
If I could catch the bird
I would put it under the fetters of my heart.
(Chakraborty 250)

All of them danced and sang like mad in love with the God. Danced Kabir, danced Chaitanya, danced Guru Nanak and Mirabai with songs and madness infused in them by the God.

Bhakti Movement Spreads in different forms

The renewed Bhakti movement with Sufi poetry grew further with the participation of several geniuses from different regions flooding the whole of India transcending the barrier of religions and languages spreading to Manipur and Assam and other regions. The movement was strengthened by both Hindus and Muslims. Tulsidas was a great Bhakta poet of Sri Rama. Vidyapati was from Mithila. Though Dilip Kumar Roy settled in Pondicherry practicing Integral Yoga, left Sri Aurobindo's Cave of Tapasya after his withdrawal from the earthly scene and established his own 'Hari Krishna Ashram' in Pune with his disciple, Indira Devi, singing and dancing, worshipping Lord Krishna and Radha. We should add the great names of Ramprasad Sen, Atulprasad Sen, Rajanikanta Sen, Dwijendralal Roy and Kaji Nazrul Islam from Bengal and those who wrote from Odisha and are still writing devotional poems from different parts of India. The blazing devotion of Syed Ameeruddin needs to be mentioned here:

The vibrant divine within me blazes:

La Ilaha Illal Lahu!

Salam! Salam! Salam! . . .

Ekam Eva Advitiyam Brahman! . . .

Thus, I visioned

Summits of illumined peaks

Of benign Nirvana

Aham Brahman, Anal Haq,

And touched a moment eternal

Breathing the divine light of bliss-

The Sat-Chit-Ananda!

Summits Visioned Summits 152-57

The Movement Unified the Heart of India

During this effulgence of Bhakti movement in Maharashtra the saints belonged to different castes; all of them had great humility and all sorts of people were allowed to take part and participate in the movement. Tukaram was Kunbi (farmer, shudra) by birth but trader by profession. Namdev was a tailor, Narahari, a goldsmith, Chokha Mela, a sweeper but Dnyaneshwar, Eknath and Ramdas were Brahmin. This trend was found elsewhere from its beginning in Tamil Nadu and it includes the Indian Sufis. Kabir was a weaver, Ravidas a cobbler, Ramananda, a Brahmin but spoke against untouchability, Chaitanya, a Brahmin and

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great leader of the movement but repudiated the caste system. The movement became a source of unity among people. The age long conservatism got a jolt. This Bhakti trend in the mind and heart of the people of India from time immemorial actually unified it culturally and aesthetically though physical parts of it were under the occupation of several Kings, Chieftains, Zamindars or Nabobs, more than any political movement made during some of the earlier dynasties and during the Freedom Movement. The chains of temples, ashramas and such centres are part of this movement in spite of some inherent pitfalls. And who can forget the presence of such God like personalities of Raman Maharshi, Shirdi Sa Baba or Sri Ramakrishna; teaching people, helping them in their Godward journey? There were and still are some spiritual teachers. Who can forget the patriotic fervor of Swami Vivekananda? The political unification of India, whatever it is, has been successful to the extent as it is seen because of the cultural and aesthetic unification through Bhakti and such spiritual movements.

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