



BHAKTI MOVEMENT & SUFISM

Class 11th Tamil Nadu Book

Chapter 18

LESSON 18

BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Learning Objectives

Students will acquire knowledge about

1. *Rise and spread of Bhakti Movement in India.*
2. *Sufism and its development in India.*
3. *Bhakti saints like Sankara, Ramanuja and others.*
4. *Ramananda, Kabir and Guru Nanak and their teachings.*
5. *Bhakti Movement in Bengal and Maharashtra.*
6. *Importance of Bhakti Movement.*

We have already studied the rise of Bhakti cult in Tamil Nadu during the seventh and eight centuries. The Saivaite Nayanmars and Vashnavaites Alvars preached the Bhakti cult under the Pallavas, Pandyas and Cholas. But, the spread of Bhakti movement in medieval India is a different kind. This medieval Bhakti movement was the direct result of the influence of the spread of Islam in India. Monotheism or belief in one God, equality and brotherhood of man and rejection of rituals and class divisions are the distinctive characteristics of Islam. These Islamic ideas created a profound impact on the religious leaders of this period. Moreover, the preaching of Sufi teachers shaped the thinking of Bhakti reformers like Ramananda, Kabir and Nanak.



**Khwaja
Muinuddin Chishti**

Sufism

Sufism was a liberal reform movement within Islam. It had its origin in Persia and spread into India in the eleventh century. The first Sufi saint Shaikh Ismail of Lahore started preaching his ideas. The most famous of the Sufi saints of India was Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti, who settled in Ajmer which became the centre of his activities. He had a number of disciples who are called Sufis of the Chishti order. Another well known Sufi saint was Bahauddin Zakariya who came under the influence of another famous mystic Shihabuddin Suhrawardi. His branch of Sufi saints was known as the Sufis of the Suhrawardi Order. Yet another famous Sufi saint was Nizamuddin Auliya who belonged to the Chishti order and who was a mighty spiritual force. These Sufi saints are revered even today by not only Muslims but by a large number of Hindus. Their tombs have become popular places of pilgrimage for both communities.

Sufism stressed the elements of love and devotion as effective means of the realisation of God. Love of God meant love of humanity and so the Sufis believed service to humanity was tantamount to service to God. In Sufism, self discipline was considered an essential condition to gain knowledge of God by sense of perception. While orthodox Muslims emphasise external conduct, the Sufis lay stress on inner purity. While the orthodox believe in blind observance of rituals, the Sufis consider love and devotion as the only means of attaining salvation. According to them one must have the guidance of a pir or guru, without which spiritual development is impossible. Sufism also inculcated a spirit of tolerance among its followers. Other ideas emphasised by Sufism are meditation, good actions, repentance for sins, performance of prayers and pilgrimages, fasting, charity and suppression of passions by ascetic practices.

These liberal and unorthodox features of Sufism had a profound influence on medieval Bhakti saints. In the later period, Akbar, the Mughal emperor, appreciated Sufi doctrines which shaped his religious outlook and religious policies. When the Sufi movement was becoming popular in India, about the same time the Bhakti cult was gaining strength among the Hindus. The two parallel movements based on the doctrines of love and selfless devotion contributed a great deal to bringing the two communities closer together. However, this trend did not last long.

Bhakti Movement

In the ninth century **Sankara** started a Hindu revivalist movement giving a new orientation to Hinduism. He was born in Kaladi in Kerala. His doctrine of *Advaita* or Monism was too abstract to appeal to the common man. Moreover, there was a reaction against the *Advaita* concept of *Nirgunabrahman* (God without attributes) with the emergence of the idea of *Sagunabrahman* (God with attributes).



SANKARA

In the twelfth century, **Ramanuja**, who was born at Sriperumbudur near modern Chennai, preached *Visishtadvaita*.

According to him God is *Sagunabrahman*. The creative process and all the objects in creation are real but not illusory as was held by Sankaracharya. Therefore, God, soul, matter are real. But God is inner substance and the rest are his attributes. He also advocated *prabattimarga* or path of self-surrender to God. He invited the downtrodden to Vaishnavism.



Ramanuja

In the thirteenth century, **Madhava** from Kannada region propagated *Dvaita* or dualism of *Jivatma* and *Paramatma*. According to his philosophy, the world is not an illusion but a reality. God, soul, matter are unique in nature. **Nimbarka** and **Vallabhacharya** were also other preachers of Vaishnavite Bhakti in the Telungana region. **Surdas** was the disciple of Vallabhacharya and he popularized Krishna cult in north India. **Mirabai** was a great devotee of Krishna and she became popular in Rajasthan for her bhajans. **Tulsidas** was a worshipper of Rama and composed the famous *Ramcharitmanas*, the Hindi version of Ramayana.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, **Ramananda**, **Kabir** and **Nanak** remained great apostles of the Bhakti cult. They drew inspiration from old masters but showed a new path. They helped the common people to shed age-old superstitions and attain salvation through *Bhakti* or pure devotion. Unlike the early reformers, they were not linked with any particular religious creed and did not believe in rituals and ceremonies. They condemned polytheism and believed in one god. They also denounced all forms of idolatry. They strongly believed in *Bhakti* as the only means of salvation. They also emphasised the fundamental unity of all religions.

Ramananda

Ramananda was born at Allahabad. He was originally a follower of Ramanuja. Later he founded his own sect and preached his principles in Hindi at Banaras and Agra. He was a worshipper of Rama. He was the first to employ the vernacular medium to propagate his ideas. Simplification of worship and emancipation of people from the traditional caste rules were his two important contributions to the *Bhakti* movement. He opposed the caste system and chose his disciples from all sections of society disregarding caste. His disciples were: a) Kabir, a Muslim weaver b) Raidasa, a cobbler c) Sena, a barber d) Sadhana, a butcher e) Dhanna, a Jat farmer f) Naraharai, a goldsmith and g) Pipa, a Rajput prince.

Kabir

Among the disciples of Ramananda the most famous was Kabir. He was born near Banaras to a brahmin widow. But he was brought up by a Muslim couple who were weavers by profession.



KABIR

He possessed an inquiring mind and while in Benares learnt much about Hinduism. He became familiar with Islamic teachings also and Ramananda initiated him into the higher knowledge of Hindu and Muslim religious and philosophical ideas. Kabir's object was to reconcile Hindus and Muslims and establish harmony between the two sects. He denounced idolatry and rituals and laid great emphasis on the equality of man before God. He emphasised the essential oneness of all religions by describing

Hindus and Muslims 'as pots of the same clay'. To him Rama and Allah, temple and mosque were the same. He regarded devotion to god as an effective means of salvation and urged that to achieve this one must have a pure heart, free from cruelty, dishonesty, hypocrisy and insincerity. He is regarded as the greatest of the mystic saints and his followers are called Kabirpanthis.

Guru Nanak

Another well-known saint-preacher of the medieval period was Guru Nanak, founder of the Sikh religion and a disciple of Kabir. He was born in Talwandi near Lahore. He denounced caste distinctions and rituals like bathing in holy rivers. His conception of religion was highly practical and sternly ethical. He exhorted people to give up selfishness, falsehood and hypocrisy and to lead a life of truth, honesty



GURUNANAK

and kindness. 'Abide pure amidst the impurities of the world' was one of his famous sayings. His life was dedicated to establishing harmony between Hindus and Muslims. His followers were known as Sikhs.

Chaitanya was another well-known saint and reformer of Bengal who popularised the Krishna cult. He renounced the world, became an ascetic and wandered all over the country preaching his ideas. He proclaimed the universal brotherhood of man and condemned all distinction based on religion and caste. He emphasised love and peace and showed great sympathy to the sufferings of other people, especially that of the poor and the weak. He believed that through love and devotion, song and dance, a devotee can feel the presence of God. He accepted disciples from all classes and castes and his teachings are widely followed in Bengal even today.

Gnanadeva was the founder of the Bhakti Movement in Maharashtra in the thirteenth century. It was called Maharashtra dharma. He wrote a commentary of *Bhagavat Gita* called *Gnaneswari*. **Namadeva** preached the gospel of love. He opposed idol worship and priestly domination. He also opposed the caste system. In the sixteenth century, **Ekanatha** opposed caste distinctions and sympathetic towards the lower castes. He composed many lyrics and his bhajans and kirtans were famous. Another Bhakti saint of Maharashtra was **Tukaram**, a contemporary of Sivaji. He was responsible for creating a background for Maratha nationalism. He opposed all social distinctions.

Importance of the Bhakti Movement

The importance of the Bhakti movement was very great. Various preachers spoke and wrote in the regional languages. So, the Bhakti movement provided an impetus for the development of regional languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Kannada, etc. Through these languages they made direct appeal to the masses. As