

Equality and Bhakti Movement in India

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Abstract – The Bhakti Movement originated in India as a reaction against the caste system and ritualism. It was started by the Vaishnava and Saiva saints of south India. It attacked the caste system and preached equality of all people by emphasising over the doctrine that there is only one God and all people are equal in the eyes of God. The teachings of bhakti saints like Guru Nanak, Kabir and Ravidas helped in reforming the Indian society. They tried to evolve a new social order by following the principles of equality and by denouncing caste distinction.

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Social movements in their historical context reflect the nature and functioning of social system and diverse social interests of the time. Every movement passes through a process which is guided and directed by certain values and concept bearing mechanism. The idea of equality as a value as well as concept could become guiding principle for the emergence of Bhakti Movement in India.

Social inequality is not something which is a new phenomenon. In India, various social inequalities have been produced by the social structure and deeply rooted for many centuries. Bhakti movement emerged as a popular movement to protest and denounce various structural inequalities such as caste hierarchies, religious discrimination, untouchability, social and ritual exclusion, etc. It is very difficult to confine Bhakti Movement in a time period because, it was not spontaneous rather its development took place at different places and times. "The devotional Bhakti Movement which originated from the tenth century in South India and flourished in central and northern India between the thirteenth and eighteenth century by an abandonment by the self in devotion and love for a personal god"³².

Bhakti meaning devotion and dedication of self to God for attaining salvation could emerge as a powerful social movement by the teachings, poems and poetic writings of saints. Popular and torch bearer Bhakti saints were Ramananda, Kabir, Surdas, Tulsidas, Meerabai, Ravidas, Guru Nanak, etc.(North India); " while the Bhakti tradition has been most prominently identified with the Brahman saints Dnyaneshwar and Eknath, it also included the Mahar saints Chokha Mela, Karma Mela, Banka and Nirmala, the courtesan Kanhopatra, as well as the

Non-Brahman saints Namdev (Tailor), Gora (potter), Sawata (gardener), Sena (barber), and Tukaram (kunjabi or peasant)."³³

Bhakti Movement had multi-dimensional impact. Being a social movement, it did not only addressed the issue of social equality but political, economic, and gender equality as well. The very important aspect of Bhakti Movement was that it could reflect the things in their totality implying inter subjective approach towards society.

In pre-medieval and medieval era, Indian social structure was based on rigid and discriminatory caste system which determined an individual's status and place in society based on social hierarchy. The mechanism of social hierarchy started producing relationships based on superiority and inferiority complexes which later on also established the practice of untouchability. Differences and discrimination based on religion was widespread. Relationship between men and women were based on an unequal positioning of women in society. Women's freedoms were restricted and basic rights were denied. Kings and rulers were not caring and generous to subjects. A feudal structure was prevalent and powerful in society and a large gap was present between landowners and landless labourers, powerful affluent class of people and poor & suffering masses, money lenders and money borrowers, etc.

This was the clear background in which the Bhakti movement was started. This background shows the chaotic situation and social order which could become the breeding ground of social inequalities and injustices.

³² - Vidhu Verma- Non- discrimination and equality in India: contesting boundaries of social justice, London: Routledge , 2011, p. 31.

³³ - Jayashree B. Gokhale-Turner: Bhakti or Vidroha: continuity and change in dalit sahitya, article in Tradition and modernity in Bhakti Movement by E.J. Brill, 1981, p.29.

Here I would discuss that how different Bhakti saints protested and fought against these inequalities and injustices produced by the structure and how could Bhakti movement become a powerful voice to establish equality.

The most famous Bhakti saints came from lower strata of society. So their understanding and knowledge was based on their experiences. They could feel the sufferings of people and they could also see the oppressed people in themselves because they were ones among them.

Kabir (Julaha/weaver), who was one of the most important figures of Bhakti movement. Like many other poet saints, He preached the doctrine of 'Monotheism' which is a belief in one single God. He said that God is one whom people call by different names such as Ram and Rahim. Through this conception of Monotheism "He condemned the inequality of men on the basis of religion, caste, tribe or race or family. Castigating the Turks for their pride and their sense of racial superiority, Kabir in a well-known passage said:

"Only the one I recognise

Those who call him two will go to hell

For they not know the reality.

All human beings are sustained by the same air and water,

And are illuminated by the same light;

All have been formed out by the same dust and their creator is the same"³⁴

Since everybody is created by the same super power, difference and inequality do not exist and one creation is the same like another in the eyes of god. Inequalities based on religion, caste, race, etc. are social construct and thus divide the people and fail to see everyone with compassion and humanitarian approach. Kabir saw the greatest enemy of humanity and equality in Hindu caste system, its rituals, conservatism and superstitions. Kabir said that the original Hindu religion is captured by Brahmanical misinterpretation and dominance through rituals and superstitions. So Kabir said that equality in Hindu society will not come until the Brahmanic rituals and practices will go away from the religion. Kabir also attacked the ill treatment and mentality of society for certain occupants and their occupations. Kabir spread his ideas that no job is lowly and every individual is equal and respect worthy irrespective of jobs and occupations he or she is doing. Another Bhakti saint Ravidas (a cobbler) preached the

importance of purity of mind and soul instead of ceremonial purity of body. Ravidas said that if you are honest in your profession and good by heart thus respecting humanity, you are pure and so there is no need to take bath in the holy Ganga and visit religious places.

Saints such as Kabir, Surdas and Tulasi raised their voices against exploitations done by trading class, moneylender businessmen and state officials. In the writings of these poet saints grim situations of that time could be seen. Kabir was against collecting so much money and wealth by an individual, because then it would increase economic inequalities in society and unequal distribution would take place which further would be responsible for increasing poverty. Kabir strongly said that only required amount of wealth and property should be possessed. His preaching of economic equality also related to god and corporeal body. He said that we are with our own mortal bodies which would not exist forever and when death would come to door; your wealth and property would not go with you. So his devotional writings became a powerful advocate of economic equality as well.

"Surdas condemns individually, and collectively those officials with whom the peasant had to deal with directly or indirectly. He observes: "The Patwari is arrogant, and produces a false Bahi (account book) which shows a balance against the peasant, the Amin or land assessor is dishonest, the Mustaufi or accountant is high-handed, the Kotwal is deceitful, and given the opportunity plunders everything. Even the Wazir is sinful. All of them conspire against the peasants, and send the Ahadi (messenger), who is like an agent of the death God, to collect the arrears from them. If they are not paid, a military contingent is despatched which surrounds the village and arrests the peasants along with their families."³⁵

The above sentences from the writing of Surdas clearly depict the political-economic landscape of the time and how masses were oppressed by the state officials. So it was the great contribution of Bhakti movement which touched and addressed the issues related to every walk of life. Issues such as exploitation of people by the ruling class and further other issues of poverty and sorrow were addressed by another Bhakti poet saint Tulsidas where he put forward his concept of ideal 'Ramrajya', where the king or ruling authority possesses the high moral standard and character and is always dedicated for the well-being of subjects.

Medieval period was not just at all for women. Women's sufferings were much more acute than

³⁴ - Savitri Chandra Shobha- Social life and concepts in medieval Hindi Bhakti poetry: A socio-cultural study, Delhi: Chandrayan publications, 1983, p. 48-49.

³⁵ - Savitri Chandra Shobha- Social life and concepts in medieval Hindi Bhakti poetry: A socio-cultural study, Delhi: Chandrayan publications, 1983, p. 68. (Surdas' original writing)

today. Though all the Bhakti saints did not raise the issue of women's equality and rights properly, but we can find the voices for women in the writings of Surdas and Meerabai. For them a woman and her body was not an object of sex and bodily pleasures (as it was seen in that period by society as well as many other poets). In Surdas and Meerabai's writings, women were seen on an equal footing with men. Both advocated the liberation of women from the ideology of male dominance. The established order of male subjugation which confines a woman in the four walls of the house and restricts her freedom would have to be forsaken. And both these poet saints strongly advocated the devotion to God. "A sensitive woman who, under conditions of oppressions, looks upon god as an alternative to husband, does not, I think, look upon the former as a mere alternative, but rather as a determinate negation of that very being which a husband is not but should be. The tensions between the two potential masters: the god and husband, is not a question of choosing between options. Like O' Connell's *Gaudia Vaisnavas*, god to them is a unique master because he looks forward to an autonomous and equal relationship with his servant, beloved or *bhakta*. The worldly husband symbolises the lure, the bondage, the oppressive reality of family life, while the god as husband or lover signifies liberation, liquification or deliverance."³⁶

In the Bhakti poetry, concerned issues of women were raised through attacking the existing social order where a woman was seen only in relation to her husband and family thereby denying an independent existence and identity to her. Thereby detaching the self of a woman from worldly and socially constructed relationship and attaching the self to the creator was felt necessary.

Untouchability which was the most painful social evil developed in the period of time and took place as an established social practice. This social evil was strongly attacked by Bhakti saints mainly Mahar(untouchables) Bhakti saints from Maharashtra such as Chokha Mela, Karma Mela, etc. They condemned and questioned the atrocious practices of untouchability and caste system mainly through *Abhangs* (poems/songs). In the discriminatory social system, entry in the temples and access to wells & public places were forbidden to untouchables. There was no respect for untouchables and basic rights were denied to them. This was the background as well as landscape of the society where Untouchables themselves protested through Bhakti Tradition. Their pathetic conditions can be seen in this writing by Chokha Mela.

"Johar maybap johar

³⁶ - Jayant Lele- The Bhakti Movement in India: A critical introduction, p.12.

I am your mahars' mahar

I am hungry for your leftovers

I am hopeful

I am the servant of your slaves

For your leavings

I've brought my basket."³⁷

Dalit Bhakti voices talking about denial of dignity, rights and freedom could spread the large scale awareness among masses especially Untouchables.

While concluding I would say that I too agree with the view that "The Bhakti Movement was a sublimation of terrible worldly sufferings, pain and misery that found natural outlet in sweet-sad and poignant devotional songs."³⁸ Bhakti movement had a tremendous impact on society. It could also become so popular because the Bhakti saints who led this movement were mainly from the oppressed and lower sections of society and they spoke out the things which they experienced as well. Many people raise the question that if it was so popular and powerful then why could it not change and annihilate the whole social structure? Here it should be kept in mind that Bhakti Movement was not a revolutionary movement and also it could not get the support of ruling and dominant classes. Whatever this movement could do to address the issues of various equalities was outstanding and exemplary.

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³⁷ - Jayashree B. Gokhale-Turner: Bhakti or Vidroha: continuity and change in dalit sahitya, article in Tradition and modernity in Bhakti Movement by E.J. Brill, 1981, p.31.

³⁸ - Hiren Gohain- The labyrinth of Bhakti: On some questions of medieval Indian history, EPW, Vol.22, No.46(Nov. 14,1987),p.1970.

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