UNIT 11: BHAKTI MOVEMENT

UNIT STRUCTURE

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, we will be able to,

- explain the origin and growth of the Bhakti Movement,
- discuss about the concepts of the Bhakti Movement, and
- *Analyse* the contribution of the different scholars and saints of Bhakti Movement including the women poet-saints.

11.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit, we have discussed the Sufi Movement. In that Unit, we discussed the origin, various orders of Sufism and its impact. In this Unit, we shall discuss the Bhakti Movement. The Bhakti cult emerged in the form of a movement in the Tamil country as early as the 6th century CE as a reaction against the growing tide of Buddhism and Jainism. It flourished in South India for about three centuries through its two well-defined denominations, namely Vaishnavism and Saivism. Bhakti as a religious concept means devotional surrender to a personal supreme god for attaining salvation. The origin of this doctrine has been traced both to the Brahmannical and Buddhist traditions of Ancient India found in various scriptures such as the *Bhagavat Gita*, in which love and devotion for the

Divine is considered to be the means of realisation of God or the Divine. Ramananda, a follower of Ramanuja, introduced the idea of Bhakti to North India. The Bhakti movement widely influenced the Indian peninsula and for centuries this movement continued. In fact it was a movement of the masses and it worked in their interest. After Buddhism lost its popularity in India, no efforts were made to reform society. The Bhakti movement was the only movement which earned a name in this direction. There were two main objectives of this movement. The first was that Hinduism should be reformed to be stronger in comparison to Islam. The second was to propagate Hindu-Muslim unity and friendship.

Due to the Bhakti movement, the caste rigidities were loosened and class differences were also mitigated to a considerable extent as the Bhakti saints believed in the unity of mankind. The Bhakti saints preached the equality of all before god. This religious movement began with the advent of Sankaracharya but in the 16th century, many socio-religious reformers further developed his ideas. Ramanand, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Chaitanya, Meera Bai, Ballabhacharya, Srimanta Sankardeva, Surdas, Tulsidas, etc. were the moving spirits behind this Movement.

11.3 ORIGIN OF THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

The origin of the Bhakti cult, which became popular in the twelfth century in India, can be traced back to antiquity. Its philosophical base has been part of India's ancient religious denominations. The term Bhakti denotes devotion to God; and the *bhakti marga* or the path of devotion represents a way of worship for salvation, which establishes a clean and pure relationship between god and his devotee. In this stage of being, the devotee becomes oblivious of his own sense of self, and struggles to merge into that of the Supreme Being through pure love and devotion in thought and action. Such humility and modesty helps the *bhakt* or devotee in eliminating his ego, thereby freeing and leading his soul to salvation. Though the genesis of the *bhakti marga* lies in ancient India, the spread of Buddhism and Jainism in southern India led to the revival of the Bhakti cult from the sixth century onwards, reaching its culmination in the seventh and eight centuries. Despite

its central focus on devotion to one's personal god, the Bhakti movement did not evolve into a homogeneous form and the movement remained on the fringes of the dominant socio-religious structures. The cult manifested itself in two main forms - Shaivism and Vaishnavism. Over time, these became the most popular Brahmannical sects of the time. The Bhakti movement served Indian society in two ways - by bridging the gulf between Hinduism and Islam and by rescuing Hinduism from the challenges of its own complexities.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What does the term "Bhakti" denote?

_____

Q2. Name three most prominent exponents of the Bhakti cult in medieval India

_____

11.4 DIFFERENT SCHOLARS OF THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

The religious movement that began with the advent of Shankaracharya developed in the 16th century under many other Bhakti gurus. Many socio-religious reformers like Tukaram, Ramananda, Srimanta Sankardeva, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Chaitanya, Mira Bai, Vallabhacharya, Tulsidas, and others wanted to bring about changes in the existing socio-religious order. Some of them are discussed below:

Sant Jnaneshwar: Sant Jnaneshwar is considered to be one of the greatest saints of Maharashtra. Born in 1275 CE in a Brahman family he was blessed with divine knowledge and showed signs of greatness from his childhood. He is said to have performed many miracles. At the tender age of fifteen, he wrote a beautiful commentary in Marathi on the *Bhagawat Gita* called the *Jnaneshwari*, which occupies a high place in the origin and early development of Marathi literature. Although Sant Jnaneshwar was a

Sanskrit scholar, he preached and sang in Marathi. He also composed the *Amritanubhava* and *Bhavartha Dipika* in the Marathi language. His followers belonged to all castes, since he did not believe in the caste system and condemned rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices in religious worship. His followers, known as Varkaris, believe in attaining the presence of god through religious songs or *Bhajans* and prayers. Sant Jnaneshwar passed away in 1296 CE at the young age of twenty-one. No other Indian saint won such great renown and fame in such a short span of life, as did this great Marathi saint.

Sant Namdev: A disciple of Sant Jnaneshwar, Sant Namdev was a tailor by caste and five years older to his guru. He travelled all over Maharashtra advised people to follow the *bhakti marga* and created in them a strong desire to protect their religion and develop a deep love for their motherland. He condemned idol worship. Namdev carried on the work of Sant Jnaneshwar after the latter's death. He composed songs not only in Marathi but also in Hindi and spread the message of equality, travelling all over India. Some of his devotional songs are found in the *Guru Granth Sahib* and other religious books of the Sikhs of Punjab. His songs are still sung with great love and devotion.

Ramananda: Ramananda, who was the fifth in apostolic succession to Sri Ramanuja, was the connecting link between the Bhakti movement of the south and the north. Born in a Brahman family of Allahabad he probably lived during the last quarter of the fourteen and the first half of the fifteen century. He was a bold and uncompromising reformer who introduced radical changes in Vaishnavism by founding a new school based on the doctrine of love and devotion. He ignored caste distinctions and introduced the cult of Rama and Sita in place of Krishna and Radha. His followers were called Ramanandis, and some became founders of different schools, spreading the message of Bhakti widely throughout northern and central India. Ramananda occupies a unique place in the history of religion in medieval India for successfully ushering in a new epoch in medieval mysticism.

Kabir: Kabir made earnest efforts to create a spirit of harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims. It is said that he was born to a Hindu widow, who abandoned him by a tank in Varanasi. He was raised by Niru, a Muslim weaver. When he grew up, he became a disciple of Ramananda, the famous saint of Varanasi. Kabir's teachings are contained in his *Dohas* or couplets, which are sung with devotion throughout India to this day. He did not believe in caste distinction or in the supremacy of the Brahmans and idol worship. Temples and other places of worship were not considered important by him. To him, Hindus and Muslims were pots of the same clay. Ram and Rahim were different names that he gave to the same Supreme Being. According to Kabir, salvation could be attained by performing good deeds and by means of Bhakti or sincere devotion to god.

Guru Nanak: Born in Talwindi in 1469 CE Guru Nanak was another great Bhakti preacher. He spent his entire life preaching universal brotherhood, religious tolerance and unity of the godhead. Like Kabir, he too condemned caste distinctions, idol worship, rituals and ceremonies. According to him, good deeds alone would be counted in God's court of judgment. As a result of his simple teachings, Guru Nanak won a large number of followers and founded Sikhism, the fifth largest organised religion in the world. He died in 1539 CE

Vallabhacharya: He was the most distinguished preacher of the Krishna cult, hailing from Andhradesa. He is said to have visited the court of Krishna Deva Raya where he defeated some Shaiva scholars in debate. He wrote a commentary on the *Brahmasutras* and the *Bhagavad* Gita and his philosophy is called *Suddhadvaita* or pure non-duality or pure monism. He preached that man should develop a spirit of detachment from worldly affairs and dedicate everything to Lord Krishna. But some of his followers misunderstood the spirit of his teachings and interpreted them in a material sense by indulging in objectionable practices.

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu: One of the most popular Vaishnava saints of India he was born in 1485 CE into a learned Brahman family of Nadia in Bengal. He became so popular that his followers came to regard him as an

avatar or incarnation of Lord Vishnu. He was popularly known as Mahaprabhu. He preached belief in Vishnu (Krishna) and his consort Radha and taught that through love and devotion, song and dance, a state of bliss could be attained in which the personal presence of God could be realised. His teachings were meant for all and his followers included low caste Hindus as well as Muslims. He was popular in Bengal, Orissa and other parts of Eastern India.

Sant Eknath: Born in 1538 to a Brahman family at Paithan. Sant Eknath displayed an inclination towards spirituality at an very early age. He became a disciple of Janardhan Swami, a deeply religious man who was then in charge of the fort of Daulatabad. Eknath was permitted by his guru to lead the life of a householder and his wife, Girijabai, proved to be an ideal companion who assisted him in his mission of social reformation. He was opposed in his reformist activities by high caste Hindus. He advocated social equality and preached the abolition of distinctions based on class, caste and creed. He did not believe in rituals, ceremonies and other orthodox ways of worship. He preferred the use of Marathi in his religious discourses and composed songs in Marathi as it was the language of the common people. His religious songs were known as *bharuds*, and narrative poems known as *ovee* which are still very popular in Maharashtra. He was a friend and advisor to the poor and down trodden, teaching them true devotion to god. He advised his followers to love all creatures and practiced what he preached. Besides devotional songs, Eknath also wrote a commentary in Marathi on the *Bhagavad Purana*, known as *Eknathi Bhagavata*. He also composed the *Bhavarth Ramayana* and *Rukmini Swayamwar Hastamalak.*

Sant Tukaram: He was a contemporary of Chattrapati Shivaji and though the two never met, Shivaji was greatly influenced by his teachings. Sant Tukaram was born to a Vaishya family in 1608 in a village near Poona. He was deeply religious even in his childhood days and spent his time singing devotional songs in praise of his favourite deity, Lord Vithoba of Pandharpur. He too believed in the *bhakti marga*. He often sang songs in praise of Lord Vithoba. Sant Tukaram sang self- composed devotional songs

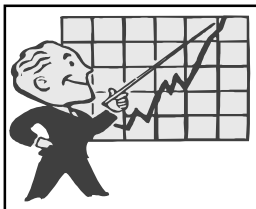
called *abhangas* and performed *kirtans* at devotional gatherings. He also spread the message of equality and brotherhood. The credit for uniting the various communities of Maharashtra goes to Sant Tukaram. The temple of his favourite deity, Lord Vithoba serves as the meeting place for all communities of Maharashtra to this day. According to a popular legend, when Sant Tukaram died in 1651, Lord Vithoba sent a vehicle to escort him to heaven.

Samarth Guru Ramdas: Guru Ramdas was also a contemporary of Chatrapati Shivaji. He was Shivaji's chosen friend, philosopher and guide. Shivaji was as strongly influenced by the ideas of Guru Ramdas as of Sant Tukaram. Guru Ramdas was born on Ramnavami day (the day of Rama's birthday) in 1608 at Jamb. His real name was Narayan, but he preferred to call himself Ramdas - meaning the servant of Rama. He was deeply spiritual from his childhood and had decided to devote himself to the worship of Lord Rama at an early age. He performed meditation (*tapasya*) at Panchavati (Nasik), a place associated with lord Rama's life in exile. Ramdas became a great admirer of Hanuman and looked upon him as the god of strength and an apostle of Bhramacharya. Laying immense importance on Lord Rama and Hanuman, he built a number of temples in honour of the latter in Maharashtra. Through his great book, *Dasbodh*, he taught people the ways of good life. His work brought about a great awakening among the people of Maharashtra, who united under Shivaji against Mughal rule.



LET US KNOW

Abhanga: a form of devotional poetry sung in praise of the Hindu God Vitthala, also known as Vithoba a form of Vishnu.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. Name any one saint of Maharashtra.

_____

Q4. Which saint condemned idol worship?

_____

Q5. Who were the Ramanandis?

_____

Q6. Where is the teaching of Kabir contained?

_____

11.5 CONTRIBUTION OF BHAKTI MOVEMENT

The 15th century which saw the emergence of the Bhakti movement is one of the great formative periods in the history of Northern India. Bhakti means the sense of devotion and dedication for one's chosen god. The object of the devotee is to get divine grace and obtain *moksha* (salvation). The Bhakti movement protested against the prevalent methods of worship. It emphasised upon the purity of mind and heart. The main source of salvation lay in service to humanity and a dedication to realise god. The differences of caste and creed were opposed by this movement. Its saints stood for social unity, purity of heart and good character. The saints of the Bhakti movement accepted the low class people and untouchables as equals. Many saints were themselves from the lower castes and classes. The Bhakti movement protested against the superiority of priests and Brahmans. The saints believed that one can realise god through one's own efforts and dedication. So the priests and the costly *yajnas* (sacrifices) were not required to realise God. The saints of the Bhakti movement preached in the language of the common people as opposed to Sanskrit. As a result the local languages like Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Assamese, Bengali, etc. developed. The Bhakti movement widely influenced the Indian peninsula and for centuries this movement continued. In fact it was a movement of the masses and it worked in their interest. Though the central

concept, love and meditation of god, was basically Hindu, yet it was influenced by Islamic traditions and beliefs like the concept of one single god.

There were two main objectives of this movement. The first was to strenghthen Hinduism by introducing reforms. The second was to propagate Hindu-Muslim unity and friendship. Due to the Bhakti movement, many elaborate rituals in Hinduism declined and caste rigidities were loosened. The class differences also were mitigated as the saints believed in the unity of mankind. They held that before God, all were equals.



LET US KNOW

Bhakti Movement in Assam:

In Assam, the Bhakti or Neo-Vaishnavite Movement was launched by Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavadeva in the 15th and 16th centuries. Sankardeva taught qualified monism of absolute surrender to one supreme God and advocated the *dasya* (servile) attitude of Bhakti, in which the votary is to consider himself as the servant of god. His religion comprised mainly of four principles: the comprehension of *Param Brahma*, the all-pervasive supreme being in the form of Vishnu as extolled in the Vedas, *Eka-Sarana* or absolute and undivided devotion to the supreme being (to the exclusion of all others) in the form of Sri Krishna as extolled in the *Bhagawat Gita*; *Sat-Sanga* or fraternity of the pious divine as enjoined by the *Bhagawata Purana* and *Nama-Kirtana* or divine devices in the form of prayer. These four principles in the condensed form are *Guru Deva, Bhakta* and *Nama.* Since his teachings were mainly based on the *Bhagawat Gita* and the *Bhagawata Purana*, his creed was called Bhagawata dharma. It was popularly known as *Mahapurushiya Dharma* and officially *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma.* His disciples were drawn from all communities of Assam - Chandsai was a Muslim; Govinda, a Garo; Paramananda, a Mishing; Jayananda, a Bhutia; Narahari, a Ahom; Srirama, a Kaivarta; Madhava of Jayanti, a potter, and Damodara, a baniya or trader.

11.6 WOMEN BHAKTAS

The Bhakti Movement also attracted the marginalised section of the society. And even though women had a limited space for expressing their religious or spiritual sentiments, yet they played an important role in the Bhakti Movement. They emerged as poet saints, - singing, writing, chanting hymns and praises of the lord in different languages. These women challenged Brahmannical patriarchy in the religious sphere. In the poems and songs that were written by the women during the Bhakti movement, they considered their deity as their lover, husband etc. Unlike their male counterparts, they had to often sacrifice the comforts of their homes and leave behind their husbands and other social relations in the quest for spiritual attainment.

In this section, we will discuss these women and their contribution to the Movement through their words and actions.

"In the Bhakti movements, women take on the qualities that men traditionally have. They break rules of Manu that forbid them to do so. A respectable woman is not, for instance, allowed to live by herself or outdoors, or refuse sex to her husband – but women saints wander and travel alone, give up husband, children and family."

– A.K. Ramanujan, 'Talking to God'

Mira Bai: Mira Bai belonged to a royal family of Rajasthan, yet she is known more for her devotional pursuits than her royal status. She was born around 1500 CE and was married at the age of 13 to a prince. From an early age she showed more interest in religious pursuits than towards her worldly responsibilities. It is said that she neglected her marital responsibilities and when queried about it, she said that it was impossible for her to be married to the king when she was already married to Lord Krishna. A major change in her life occurred at the death of her husband who had always supported her. It was customary in those days for a wife to commit sati, but when she refused to comply, her in-laws began harassing her. She then left the palace and began wandering throughout Rajasthan,

singing her *bhajans*, preaching the *bhakti marga* and gaining followers. She dedicated her entire life to God and endured all the difficulties of life. Awake or asleep, she thought only of Krishna. Mira Bai is known for the many *bhajans* that she had composed in praise of Lord Krishna. She is believed to have died around 1550 CE.

Sant Soyarabai: Sant Soyarabai was married and in her *abhangas* she mentions her devotion to god Vithoba, her family and pilgrimage and how she finds peace amidst it all. Her writings reveal her awareness about her caste and gender identity and the restrictions arising out of it.

Janabai: One of the best known poets who belonged to the Varkari sect and popular among the Marathi speaking people. At a young age she was sent to serve as a servant. Her poems reflect her day to day life and ordeals. Her relation with Vithoba, the deity who holds a special place among the followers of the Varkari sect, is that of a friend and companion who comforts her and guides her.

Atukuri Molla: Molla was an early 16th century Virasaiva poet who composed a new version of Ramayana, the *Molla Ramayanam* in Telugu. The Virasaiva movement originated in the Telugu speaking area and it condemned conventional rituals and discrimination on the basis of caste etc. A rebel at heart, her writings were equally rebellious.

Thus, there were marked contrast in the experiences of men and women under the Bhakti Movement. The men continued to tread the spiritual path while leading the life of a householder, but few women had that liberty and had to choose between their God and society. Akka Mahadevi and Lal Ded were among the few who challenged these norms. Mahadevi and Lal Ded walked out of their marriages and wandered naked. Nakedness in the Indian society was considered as a threat to men but these women challenged the societal norms of that period.

The Bhakti Movement nevertheless provided a liberal space to the less privileged class of people to rise up and challenge established dogmas.



LET US KNOW

Lal Ded whose actual name was Lalleswari was a Kashmiri poet- a rebel and a mystic of Kashmir Saivism. Her poems and verses, known as *Vakhs,* are still popular among the youths. She wrote about her daily woes. **Akka Mahadevi** was a Kannada poet belonging to the Lingayat sect. She regarded Lord Siva as her husband and her poems enriched Kannada literature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q7. Name a Virasaiva poet.

_____

Q8. Who wrote the *Molla Ramayanam*?

_____

Q9. Who was Lal Ded?

_____



11.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, we have learnt about the–

- concept and origin of the Bhakti Movement and
- different scholars who contributed towards the Bhakti Movement and
- the women bhaktas who also played a major role in this Movement.



11.8 FURTHER READING

1) Barua, S.L.. (2007). *A Comprehensive History of Assam: Munshiram Manoharlal.* New Delhi, India : Manoharlal Publishers.

2) Farooqui, Salma Ahmed. (2011). *A Comprehensive History of Medieval India.* Noida, India : Pearson.

3) Maiti, Provatansu. (2014). *Medieval India*. Kolkata, India: Sreedhar Publishers.

4) Thaosen, Maduli. (2017). *The Bhakti Movement and Roots of Indian Feminism*. Retrieved from https://feminisminindia.com/2017/04/03/bhakti-movement-women/



11.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to QNo.1: Devotion to God

Ans to QNo. 2: Mira Bai, Kabir and Chaitanya

Ans to QNo. 3: Sant Jnaneshwar

Ans to QNo. 4: Sant Namdev and Kabir

Ans to QNo. 5: Followers of Ramananda

Ans to QNo. 6: Dohas or couplets

Ans to QNo. 7: Molla

Ans to QNo. 8: Molla

Ans to QNo. 9: Kashmiri rebel and mystic poet



11.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Very Short Questions (Answer each within 50 words)

1. Who preached the Bhakti Movement in Assam?
2. Which saint is also known as Mahaprabhu?
3. Which female saint is known for her bhajans?

B. Short Questions (Answer each within 150 words)

1. What is the meaning of ‘Bhakti’?
2. Write short notes on:
   a. Kabir
   b. Mira Bai
   c. Guru Nanak
   d. Vallabhacharya
   e. Sankardeva
3. Write a short note on the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam.

C. Long Questions (Answer each within 500 words)

1. Discuss about the origin of the Bhakti movement.
2. Discuss briefly about the teachings and philosophy of Chaitanya.
3. Examine the contribution of the Bhakti saints in serving Indian society.
4. Analyse the role and contribution of Women bhakts in the Bhakti Movement.

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