

Bhakti Movement- Some important points for Prelims

The seeds of Bhakti can be seen in the Vedic period. People made all kinds of offerings to the God-Indra, Agni, Varuna etc. in return of which they received prasada or the favour of the God (during early Vedic). In the later Vedic period, worship centred around the trinity Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Rituals, chanting of hymns and sacrifices prevailed.

Upanishads and Bhagavadgita also give insight of Bhakti.

Period of Mahayana Buddhism – Buddha began to be worshipped in his gracious (avalokita) form. The worship of Vishnu through the Bhagavata and Narayana cult developed more or less at the same time and got strengthened during Gupta period.

We can categorise the development of Bhakti movement into three phases:

Phase I – development in the South

From 6th century AD and till 12th century, Bhakti cult developed in the South.

1. In Bhakti, the devotees completely surrendered to the God. There was a strong bond between the God and the worshipper.
2. Between 6th and 12th centuries, popular saints Nayanars (Saivites) and Alvars (Vaishnavites) flourished in the Tamil kingdom (Pandya, Pallava, Chola periods)
3. They composed their works in Tamil and local languages.
4. They rejected austerities preached by the Jains and the Buddhists and preached personal devotion to God as a means of salvation.
5. Appar, Janasambandar, Sundaramurti and Manikkavasagar were the famous Nayanars. The hymns of the first three were collected in 'Devaram'.
6. Manikkavasagar wrote 'Tiruvagam'. Tirumurais the collection of the works of Nayanars and Saiva poets of South India (twelve volumes compiled in 12th century during later Chola period) is known as the fifth Veda.
7. The 12th Tirumurai was 'Periyapuramam' by Shekkizhar, and contains the life depiction of all the 63 nayanars. Agamas also belong to the Saiva literature, which gives the methods of temple construction and worship. Saiva siddhanta developed with all these great works.

There were 12 famous Alvars - Poygai, Pudam and Pey were the first three among them. Tirumangai and Periyalvar and Andal were other famous saints. Tiruppan was a low caste saint . Nandan and Vipranarayana were other two. Kulasekhar Alvar, the ruler of Kerala was another famous alvar. Nammalvar and Madhurakavi were among the last.

Andal was a woman Alvar saint of the times.

Collection of the hymns of Alvars is known as- Divya Prabandha

Almost all of them disregarded the inequalities of caste, though they did not try to oppose the caste system as such. The path of Bhakti advocated vedic worship to all , irrespective of caste.

Sankaracharya (9th century) propounded advaitavada – the doctrine of non-dualism ; Vedanta philosophy. Vedas are the fountainhead of true knowledge ; a bhakt had to clean his heart through jnan for which the study of the scriptures is necessary. Sankara established a number of mathas in different parts of India- Sringeri, Dvaraka, Badrinath, Puri and Kanchi being the well known ones. He regarded Buddhism as Hinduism's chief enemy.

Ramanuja (first quarter of 11th century) was the greatest Vaishnava acharya. Near Madras. 'Visishtadvaita' philosophy- soul can attain bliss not in absorption with the God , but in existence near him. He refuted the Mayavada of Sankara. The Matha at Melkote was established by him after he won over the Hoysala king Vishnuvardhana from Jainism.

Nimbarka was a young contemporary of Ramanuja – he propounded the philosophy of 'bheda-bheda' (the God, the soul and the world were identical yet distinct)

Madhvacharya (born shortly before 1200 near Udipi)) gave the philosophy of complete pluralism- the 'dvaita vedanta' He taught that the Universe is ruled by God as two persons- Vishnu and Lakshmi – and that the souls in the world are eternally distinct from him.

Phase II- spread of Bhakti to the North:

Development of non-sectarian movements

The ideas of Bhakti were carried from the south to the north by saints , after 12th century. Namadeva (Maharashtrian saint- first part of 14th century) was prominent among them. He was a tailor , and was bandit before he took up Bhakti. He wrote poems in Marathi. He travelled far , interacted and held discussions with the Sufis at Delhi.

Ramananda, was Namadeva's disciple , was born at Prayag (Allahabad) (in the second half of 14th century) and lived at Benaras. He substituted Rama in place of Vishnu. He was part of saguna cult. He disregarded the ban on people of different castes cooking or eating their meals together. He enrolled disciples from all castes:

Ravidas- a cobbler

Kabir- a weaver

Sena- a barber

Sadhana- a butcher were his famous disciples.

Nanak was another Bhakti saint whose ideas gave rise to Sikh religion. He had a mystic outlook, composed hymns and sang them to the accompaniment of 'rabab'. He travelled far and wide , to Srilanka in the south and Mecca and Madina in the west. In addition to love and affection, Nanak laid great emphasis on the purity of character and conduct as the first condition of approaching God. He too denounced idol worship and pilgrimages.

Kabir and Nanak were most critical of the existing social order and made a strong plea for Hindu-Muslim unity. Kabir advocated the unity of God and denounced untouchability. He called God by several names , such as Rama, Hari, Govinda, Allah, Sain, Saheb etc. He strongly condemned idol worship, pilgrimages, bathing in holy rivers and doing namaz. His followers were called kabir panthis. Kabir was a nirguna bhakti saint.

Phase III – Development in North India and Maratha kingdom – worship of Rama and Krishna:

During 15th and 16th centuries.- development of Vaishnavite cult. Used the love between Radha and Krishna to depict the relationship of love in its various aspects of the individual soul with the supreme soul.

1. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (Bengal and Orissa)– popularized musical gathering or kirtan ,to realize salvation to unite with Hari. He did not reject the scriptures or idol worship.
2. Meerabai in Rajasthan; she popularized bhajans
3. Surdas in Western Uttarpradesh, wrote ‘soor sagar’ and ‘soor suravali’
4. Shankaradasa in Assam
5. Narsinha Mehta and Dadu dayal in Gujarat
6. Vallabhacharya (1479-1531) was among the prominent philosophers of this period. His philosophy was ‘Shudhadvaita’ (pure non-dualism) which exalted bhakti above knowledge ; he founded the ‘Pushti marga.’ (path of grace) . He was born at Benaras.

Heights of lyrical fervor and love transcending all barriers. They believed in Vedantic monism which emphasized the fundamental unity of the God and the created world.

Marathi saints:

Jnaneswar belonged to the Varakari sect.

Tukaram was a 17th century poet saint of Maharashtra ; He belonged to the ‘varakari’ sect of devotional saints. Tukaram is known for his Abhanga devotional poetry and community-oriented worship with spiritual songs known as kirtans . He was contemporary of Sivaji.

Vamana Pandit was another prominent poet saint of 17th century in Maharashtra. His famous work is 'Yatharthadeepika';

Eknath was another great saint.

Samartha Ramadas belonged to the Dharakari (means' warrior')sect (in Maharashtra)

Varakaris (means pilgrim) undertake an annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur to worship Vithoba on Ekadashi day.

Other related information:

Pasupatas, Kapalikas and Kalamukhas were saiva worshippers who followed gruesome practices, in the Tamil territory from 7th century onwards.

Smearing the body with ashes from a burning ghat, eating food in a skull and keeping a pot of wine were some of the common practices of the Kalamukhas.

Virasaivism or the Lingayat cult developed in the 12th century in Karnataka and the Telugu country. Basava, the prime minister of Kalachuri king Bijjala was the founder. His nephew Channabasava also joined him.They strongly opposed caste system and rejected fasts, feasts, pilgrimages and sacrifices.

Aradhya saivism existed in the Telugu country.

Development of tantra school was an offshoot of Bhakti. By uttering magical words(mantra) and making various kinds of mystic gestures, one could attain the desires as well as gain supernatural powers. Gorakhnath in north India (11TH century) and his followers Nath-panthis belonged to this group.