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TEACHING OF BHAKTI MOVEMENT: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The Bhakti movement was a Hindu religious movement of the medieval period that promoted the belief that salvation was attainable by everyone. The movement is closely related to Islamic Sufism, which appeared around the same time: both advocated that a personal expression of devotion to God is the way to become at one with him. Bhakti movement swept through central and northern India, initiated by a loosely associated group of saints. Ramananda, Ravidas, Srimanta Sankardeva, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Vallabhacharya, Surdas, Meera Bai, Kabir, Tulsidas, Namdev, Dnyaneshwar, Tukaram and other mystics spearheaded the Bhakti movement in the North while Annamacharya, Bhadrachala Ramadas, Tyagaraja among others propagated Bhakti in the South. Bhakti movement in India is responsible for many rites and rituals associated with the worship of God by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. It stressed the mystical union of the individual with God.

They created a climate of opinion which continued to work through the succeeding centuries. Their teachings were reflected even in the religious ideas of present day Indian society.. The impact of their teaching can be seen in the continuous struggle between the orthodox and liberals till to day. This article have aim to highlight the teachings of prominent bhakti reformers and their impact on society.

Introduction

The cults of bhakti pondered over the subtle question of metaphysics and were of scholastic nature but it was followed by reformer saints mostly from northern India like

Ramananda, Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya, Ravidas and many more. They were essentially eclectic, broadminded, liberal and simple. Their message was for everyone-rich or poor, high born or to low caste. Educated or illiterate and they were form believer of humanity as one without distinction of caste or creed, religion or status whatsoever. Their teachings and attitudes followed exactly what Bhagavad Gita preached thousands of years before. "In the sight of god all devotees are equal. For those who take refuge in Me, O Partha (Arjuna), though they may be lowly born, women, Vaisyas, as well as Sudras, they all attain to the highest goal" (Bhagavad Gita).

Prominent Bhakti Reformers:

Ramananda (1360-1470 A.D.) : Ramananda was a leading light among the reformer saints of medieval India who for the first time threw upon his spiritual door wide open for the members of all castes. He called his disciples as avadhuts which means the emancipated ones as they did not believe in caste or creed and were totally liberated from these fetters. His twelve famous disciples were Anantananda, Kabir, Pipa, Bhavananda, Sukha, Padmavati, Narhari, Ravidas, Dhanna, Sadana, Sursura and Sursura's wife. These disciples belonged to different Castes and some of them were low born. Kabir even was from different religion (Islam). Dhanna was a Jat peasant from Rajputana while Sadana was a barbar. Ravidas was a shoemaker. It is said-Ramananda took back into Hindu fold many people who were converted to islam earlier and they were called Samyogis (the reunited). According to certain historians Ramananda gave up caste distinction altogether but some are of the opinion that "only religious restrictions were relaxed." P.D. Barthwal is of the view that Ramananda's orthodox upbringing could not allow him to stop enough to meet the aspirations of low caste people and in matters of social concerns he could not be expected to cast off the sense of superiority of a Hindu over a Mohammadan and of one belonging to the regenerate classes (dwijas) over a Sudra. It was left to Kabir, a Muslim disciple of Ramananda, in whom the new thought found its full expression.

Kabir (1425-1505 A.D.) : The teaching of Ramananda were responsible for the bhakti movement with a liberal thought which was respresented by Kabir, Nanak and other saints of those times. Kabir gave a practical shape to the religious and social philosophy of his illustrious guru. Due to the teaching of Ramananda, the way for social and religious reforms was prepared for enhancing a religious and national synthesis out of conflicting creeds. Kabir was a teacher

who had the courage to condemn what he considered sham and imparted religious and social instructions to Hindus and Muslims alike Kabir was of the opinion that religion, with out devotion was no religion at all and he had no preference for either religion, Hinduism or Islam. He was against the castes or creed of the contemporary society and believed in the maxim of his celebrated preceptor Ramananda that in bhakti no body asks to what caste the devotee belongs, the one who worships Hari (the lord of the world), only he belongs to Him. Kabir incessantly fought to remove the superstitions.

Kabir was in favour of Hindu Muslim unity. Dr. Tara Chand says; “He rejected those features of Hinduism and Islam which were against this spirit; and which were of no importance for real spiritual welfare of the individual.” Kabir made a genuine attempt to bridge the gulf between Hindus and Muslims and thus he represented the best symbol of cultural fusion. He tried to bring the eternal virtue of love of humanity to the foreground and emphasized the social philosophy that humanity is sacred trust of the Almighty. His verses added strength to the emotional integration of both the communities. The tangible result of the teaching of Kabir was that it widened the outlook of people opening the avenues for mutual adjustments between them. By and by his disciples swelled in number under the magic of his genuine simplicity and sincere outpour of the convincing teachings. He exerted an influence which was of paramount value and even continued to trickle down to later generations for creating a humane outlook Dr. Tara Chand asserts that Kabir’s influence on the future social scenario is as important as the swelling number of his disciples; “but it is not the number of his followers which is so important, it is the influence which extends to Punjab, Gujarat and Bengal and which continued to spread under the Moghal rule, till a wise-sovereign correctly estimating its value attempted to make it a religion approved by the state.” Students of history know Akbar’s principle of “peace with all”. Kabir exhorted his disciples to have faith and patience-(Shradda) and Saburi (contentment) and the scope of these attributes is limitless. In fact they could be well adopted as a functional philosophy of life to generate tolerance and harmony among all. Kabir’s basic concept of religion is simplicity, naturality and equality with all and it is the same concept which Bhagavad Gita recommends for a Yogi; “who sees with equality everything in the image of his ownself, whether in pleasure or pain, he is considered a perfect Yogi.” Kabir also asserts the same view in his own unimitable simple language.

Kabir was a spirited saint reformer so much full devotional humility that he longed to merge with his ideal and thought the individual self and the Supreme Self as one without distinction as a result of extreme devotional surrender to the deity though for bhakti the devotee needs a deity which is separate entity. In this respect Dr. Das Gupta extends a clarification.

“The assertion of the philosophic identity of the self and the Brahman is only for the purpose of strengthening the nature of Bhakti. It merely shows that the oneness that is felt through attachment can also be philosophically supported.” The same unity between self and Brahman has also been asserted by the Upanishad where it declares that the knower of the Brahman becomes Brahman himself.

Kabir is a prominent figure among the reformer saints of the Sultanate period with all his piety, humility, simplicity, ideal devotional attainments and intense preaching for social tolerance and homogeneity. His teachings may be summarized; “Be pure, live a natural simple life. The whole of creation is within your own self, behold the Lord of creation there. There is no distinction of the outer and the inner for all distinctions have been harmonized in Him who is beyond all distinctions. In this harmony are truth and realization.”

Thus Kabir will ever be remembered in history as a true seeker and also an ardent social reformer who fearlessly and cutting opposed and criticized ritualism and priest craft and also the monasticism in his scathing language. On the other hand he also denounced hypocrisy, falsehood and deceitfulness in both, religions and social ethics. According to this wonderful reformer devotion, penance, austerity, fasting and other such practices were meaningless without knowing the way to love and serve God. He vehemently criticized the emphasis of the so called yogis of his times on ascetic pursuits and obsession with physical exercises. He also denounced the idol worship and violence in society. Kabir could not understand the splitting of blood of innocent creatures and along with showing of humility. Those who accumulated wealth and property more than they needed were also targets of Kabir’s criticism. Kabir’s approach to the spiritual practices and attainments and his social doctrines of harmony and peace earned a unique niche for him not only in the contemporary society but in the posterity too as a reformer of far reaching importance, Thus Kabir’s teaching were ‘in perfect harmony with the social and religious needs of the times; the identified himself completely with the concept of an integrated Indian society

and won the heart of millions. Kabir was an outstanding bhakti reformer who led and preached and honest, noble and simple life dedicated to a noble cause of creating hues

Guru Nank (1469-1538):-

Guru Nank (A.D.1469-1538) was important reformer devotee of the Bhakti movement which was gathering strength ever since the time of Ramananda. Nank founded a new religion which has survived as a permanent element in Indian society. Guru Nank shared to the full the eclectic spirit of his time and sought to express Hindu and Muslim devotion alike using the nomenclatures for god from both the creeds. In reference to the almighty one, the name like Rama, Govinda, Hari, Murari, Rala and Rahim were frequently used by him. He also travelled to Baghdad to obtain first hand Knowledge of the centre of the Qadiri order of Pir-i-Dastgir Shaikh-Abdul-Quadir Jilani.

He wanted to demolish the wall that stood in the way of Hindus and Muslim communities. His social teaching was basically a reaffirmation of the ethical ideas common to the medieval Monotheistic religious doctrine of human equality. He was against the caste system prevalent in the Hindu society of that age and held that it was a sheer folly to think low or high in terms of caste or creed. A man was to be honored for his devotion to god and not for social position. He expressed his social conviction as: "God knoweth man's virtues and inquireth not his caste in the next world there is no caste." His followers were asked to eat together irrespective of their castes in free community kitchen started by him known as Guru-ka- langer to inculcate a feeling of equality and brotherhood among them. He did not believe in the doctrine of untouchability which had compartmentalized the society.

Guru Nanak's teaching ate full of stern ethical tone and practical approaches to the problems of life. Rejecting asceticism he advocated living of a normal life guided by piety and righteousness. Being a man of strong convictions he defined explicitly the ethics, norms and usages of public life. He did not approve the superstitions prevalent in the society of his times and educated people to distinguish superstitions from religious values and as such religious superstitions and formalism of both the communities were condemned by him.

Guru Nanak while discrediting the distinction between man and man based on religious division, wanted to give equal opportunities of development to all class of people, high born or low born.

It is mere nonsense to observe caste and to feel proud over grand names.

Thus he was an important reformer saint of the bhakti cult of India who spoke earnestly for the uplift of the poor and lowly, for a fusion of Hindu and Muslim religious and also against the prevailing superstitions and religious, social formalism. He envisaged a society in which every one including cultivators, merchants and other sections of society would work hard to earn their livelihood honestly. In his view “Likewise Hindus and Muslims would gain no spiritual benefit from their purification rituals for real impurity was greed falsehood and degrading sensual passion. The essence of goodness was humility and service to other” The Guru was against the amassing of wealth which was condemned by him. He was a non believer in predestination and ardently believed that the man’s fate is decided by his own acts. He discouraged the system of begging. In the eyes of the Guru, They were the best persons who earned their bread by labour. For the benefit of social harmony, Nanak’s teaching give unmistakable evidence of a courageous and happy blending of fusion of Hindu and Islamic ideas. He inspired the people to be aware of values that are based on equality, fraternity and freedom He inspire them to sacrifice their their lives if necessary to protect these values.”

Chaitanya (1485-1534)

Shri Chaitanya was born at Navadvipa now in Bengla Desh. The religious conditions of those times were far from satisfactory and even so called religious people were “surcharged with worldliness.” Chaitanya was initiated into the Bhakti cult by a vaishnava savant named Isvarapuri at Gaya and this had a marvellous effect on him. His heart became full of the most fascinating charms of Shri Krishna. The love dalliance of Krishna with Radha in the eternal land of Vrindavan flashed in his inward vision and produced rapturous ecstasy in him.

As a way of bhakti Chaitanya introduced devotional music called Kritan or Sankirtan where the name of krinan was chanted in chorus. When Chaitanya started such a Kirta, The participants were “carried away by the torrent of religious excitement.” Generally it happend to

be a congregational prayer and every participating in it was intoxicated with divine ecstasy. He recognised that sudras equally capable of developing spiritual personalit. He reorganied sankritana ie. the singing of Gods names as Hari in chorus with the accompaniment of musical instruments plunging wholly into it. It became his mission of life to induce people to turn their mind to God through kirtan.

Chaitanya's Kirtan apart from being a harbinger of the bond of unity among different castes, was a kind of social resolution. Chaitanya accepted different caste of Hindus as well as Muslims and tried to unite them socially though he was not wholly successful in an orthodox society compartmentalized with strict caste divisions. Chaitanya's work of thi new organisation was taken up by Nityananda who admitted many so called low caste people into this movement. "Chaitanya had found the caste system eating into the vitals of our social fabric., and he and his followers were determind to root out the evil from the land." As a result of Chaitanya's movement the caste distinction was removed in the sankirtans and many non-Brahmins began to give spiritual initiation even to Brahmins in the post Chaitanya age. His disciples Rupa and Sanatan settled in Varindavana for spreading the teaching of their preceptor. Chaitanya discarded all distinctions of castes in religious initiation and one of his most favourite disciple was a muslim devotee named Haridasa.

In the post Ramanand era many reformer saints appeared in different parts of the country. Apart from Kabir, Nanak and Chaitanya, sant Ravidasa in Varanasi, Narsi Mehta in Saurashtra (Gujrat), vamanna in Daccan (Andhra Pradesh), Shankar Dev in Assam spread eternal message of oneness of humanity and with the spiritual wisdom of their devotional outpourings tried to unite men in building a harmonious society without distinction of caste and creed. Ravidasa expressed the view that all in the society are equal without any distinction of low or high and that only the devotion to God purifies the devotees. Narsi Mehta emphasized that only those people truly belong to God who feel pangs of the suffering of others. As a result of this movement the contemporary society undoubtedly derived nourishment from the teachings of these medieval reformer saints. It is rightly remarked : "At a time when religious ideas tended to become dry, lifeless and static, and rituals and ceremonialism took place of spiritual enlightenment, the teachings and personalities of the saints (bhaktas) galvanized the insert

masses.“ Undoubtedly these reformer saints remolded the social institutions of the Hindus and created an atmosphere of Hindu Muslim rapprochement and also were successful in the removal of caste system to some extent. Bhakti movement restored the confidence of the masses in their religious and socio- cultural heritage and “stopped conversion to Islam on a large scale” The Bhakti movement laid stress on the finer values of life and as a result improved the moral tone of the society as a whole. The Bhakti reformer saints appealed to the hearts of the people “by singing to them mostly in the languages of masses”. Thus the Bhakti movement enriched the literary stock of the vernacular languages including Tamil, Telgu, Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, and Marathi. In this way through the devotional songs in the languages of the masses, the Bhakti saints individually as well as collectively, helped in the creation of an atmosphere of brotherhood and fellow feelings between the Hindus and Muslim and later on strengthened the hands of the Mughal Emperors in adopting a policy of complete religious toleration”. Finally, it improved the moral and spiritual ways of life of the medieval society. It provided an example for the future generation to live with the spirit of toleration.

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