

Theme 6 Bhakti-Sufi Traditions

Changes in Religious beliefs and devotional Texts

(C.Eighth to Eighteenth Century)

This chapter discusses how textual traditions have been used by historians to understand Bhakti-Sufi traditions.

The striking feature during the period between eighth to eighteenth centuries.

During this period, a large number of gods and goddesses in sculpture as well as in texts appeared. This indicated the continued and extended worship of the major deities such as Vishnu, Shiva and the goddesses, visualized in a variety of forms.

The integration of cults

- Historians who have tried to understand these developments suggest that there were at least two processes at work.
- One was a process of disseminating Brahmanical ideas. This was exemplified by the composition, compilation and preservation of Puranic texts in simple Sanskrit verse. They were meant to be accessible to women and Shudras who were excluded from Vedic learning.
- There was a second process at work that of the Brahmanas accepting and reworking the beliefs and practices these and other social categories.
- Through an example we can say that a local deity, whose image was and continues to be made of wood by local tribal specialists, was recognized as a form of Vishnu. These local deities were often incorporated within the puranic frame work by providing them with an identity as a wife of the principal male deities- sometimes they were equated with Lakshmi, the wife of Vishnu.

Tantric worship

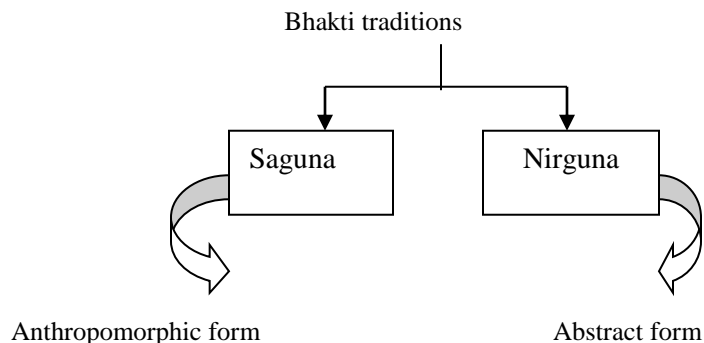
- The forms of worship often associated with goddess were classified as Tantric.
- Tantric worship was wide spread in the subcontinent. It was open to women and men.
- Those who followed Tantric rejected the caste and class within the ritual context.
- Many of these ideas influenced Shaivism and the Buddhism.

Conflicts that arose during the Bhakti movement

- There were conflicts between those who followed the Vedic tradition and those who practiced the Tantric way of worshipping deities.
- Those who valued Vedic tradition often condemned the practices that went beyond the performance of sacrifices and chanting of mantras.
- On the other hand those who engaged in Tantric practices ignored the authority of the Vedas.

Early Traditions of Bhakti

- The historians of religion classified Bhakti traditions into two broad categories: saguna (with attributes) and nirguna (without attributes).
- Saguna included traditions that focused on the worship of specific deities such as Shiva, Vishnu and his avatars (incarnations) and forms of the goddess or Devi.
- Nirguna bhakti on the other hand was worship of an abstract form of god.



The Alvars and Nayanars of Tamil Nadu

- During the sixth century, some of the Bhakti movements were led by the Alvars and the Nayanars.
- The literal meaning of the Alvars is those who are immersed in devotion to Vishnu.
- The meaning of the word Nayanars is those who were devotees of Shiva.
- They travelled from place to place singing hymns in Tamil in praise of their gods.
- During their travels the Alvars and Nayanars identified certain shrines as abodes of their chosen deities.
- Later big temples were built at those places and developed as pilgrimage centres.

Attitude towards caste

- According to some historians, the Alvars and the Nayanars started a movement of protest against the caste system and the Brahmanas and attempted to reform the system.
- The devotees came from the different social backgrounds such as artisans, cultivators and even from the caste that were considered “untouchable”

Compositions of the Alvars and Nayanars

- The compositions of the Alvars and the Nayanars are considered to be as important as the Vedas.
- For, instance, one of the anthologies of compositions of the Alvars, the Nalayira Divyaprabandham was described as the Tamil Veda and the text was significant like the Vedas that were used by the Brahmanas.

Women devotees.

- One of the striking features of these traditions was the presence of women.
- For example, there was a saint-poet called Andal, a woman Alvar.
- Her compositions were sung and sung even today.

- Another woman, Karaikkal Ammaiyar, a devotee of Shiva adopted the path of extreme asceticism to attain her goal.
- Her compositions were preserved within the Nayanar tradition.
- These women renounced their social obligations, but did not become nuns.
- Their presence was a challenge to patriarchal norms.

Opposition to Buddhism and Jainism

- The saint –poets the Alvars and the Nayanars were opposed to Buddhism and Jainism.
- This hostility is well marked in their compositions particularly of the Nayanars.
- Historians say that his conflict was due to competition between members of different religious traditions for royal patronage.

Relation with the state

Patronage of Chola rulers

- The Chola rulers supported the bhakti traditions and built temples for Shiva and Vishnu.
- Some of the magnificent temples for Shiva such as temples in Chidambaram, Thanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram were constructed under their patronage.
- The Chola rulers built temples often to claim divine support and proclaim their own power and status and adorned those temples with stone and metal sculpture to represent the visions of the popular saints.
- They made the spectacular representations of Shiva in bronze sculpture.
- The Chola kings introduced the singing of Tamil Shaiva hymns under royal patronage, taking the initiative to collect and organize them into a text (Tevaram).
- According to Inscriptional evidence, the Chola king Parantaka I had constructed the metal images of Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar in a Shiva temple.
- These were carried in procession during the festivals of these saints.

The Virashaiva Tradition in Karnataka

- During the twelfth century, the Virashaiva movement was started by a Brahmana named Basavanna (1106-68).
- He was a Jaina and a minister in the court of a Chalukya king.
- His followers were known as Virashaivas (heroes of Shiva) or Lingayats (wearers of the linga)

Lingayats and their belief

- Lingayats are an important community even today. They worship Shiva in the form of linga.
- They wear a small linga in a silver case over the left shoulder.
- Jangama or wandering monks are revered.
- Lingayats believe that after death, the devotee will be united with Shiva and will not return to this world.
- Therefore, they do not practice funerary rites such as cremation as prescribed in the Dharmashastras. Instead; they ceremonially bury their dead body.

Challenge to the Caste system

- The Lingayats challenged the idea of caste and the “pollution” attributed to some groups by Brahmanas.
- They also questioned the theory of rebirth.
- Their opposition to caste system won them number of followers who were marginalized within the Brahmanical social order.
- The Lingayats also practiced certain approvals that were rejected by the Dharmashastras such as post-puberty marriage and the remarriage of widows.
- Our knowledge about the Virashaiva tradition is came from vachanas (literally,sayings)composed in kannada by those who joined the movement.

Religious ferment in North India (Religious condition of north India)

- According to historians, in north India there was a period when several Rajput states emerged and in most of these states Brahmanas occupied important place by performing rituals.
- There was no attempt to question their position directly. At the same time there were other religious leaders who were out of the orthodox Brahmanical systems, and were gaining ground.
- These included the Naths,Jogis and Siddhas.Many of them came from artisanal groups such as weavers who were well organized.
- These religious leaders questioned the authority of the Vedas. However, they were unable to win the support of the ruling elites.
- Turkish conquest culminated in the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate.
- The power of many Rajput rulers was thus undermined and also of the Brahmanas who were associated with those kingdoms.
- The coming of the Sufis was a significant part of these developments.

The coming of Turks and the Islamic tradition

- Muhammed bin qasim conquered Sind in 711 AD. Sind became a part of the caliph’s domain. During the thirteenth century the Turks and Afghans established the Delhi Sultanate.
- Sultanates were also formed in the Deccan and other parts of the subcontinent. Islam was recognized as the religion of several areas. This continued with the establishment of the Mughal Empire.
- Muslim rulers were to be guided by the Ulema, which were expected to ensure that they ruled according to the Sahri’a.
- The Zimmi means “protected” and is derived from the Arabic word zimma, protection. It was developed for peoples who followed revealed scriptures, such as the Jews and Christians, and lived under muslimrule.They paid a tax called jizya and received protection from muslims.In India this status was extended to Hindus as well.
- In general, rulers often adopted a flexible policy towards their subjects.
- For example, several rulers gave land endowments and granted tax exemptions to Hindu, Jaina, Zoroastrian, Christian and Jewish religious institutions. They also showed respect and devotion towards non-Muslim religious

The popular practice of Islam

The five pillars of faith in Islam

Those who adopted Islam follow five “pillars” of faith.

- 1. There is one God, Allah, and Prophet Muhammad is his messenger (shahada)
- 2. Offering prayers five times a day (namaz/salat)
- 3. Giving alms (zakat)
- 4. Fasting during the month of Ramzan (sawam)
- 5. Performing the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj)
- The universal features of Islam declined due to the sectarian practices (Sunni, Shi') and the influence of local customary practices.
- For example, Arab Muslim traders who settled Malabar Coast adopted Malayalam language and matrilineal system.
- The best example of the blending of a universal faith and local traditions is mosques.
- The architectural features of mosques are universal (orientation towards Mecca and the placement of the mihrab (prayer niche) and the minbar (pulpit)).
- There are variations such as roofs and building materials.

The Growth of Sufism

Sufis were a group of religious minded people in Islam. They were critical of the dogmatic definitions and scholastic methods of interpreting the Quran. They emphasized interpretation of Quran on the basis of personal experience.

By the eleventh century Sufism evolved into a well developed movement with a body of literature on Quranic studies and Sufi practices. Sufism was organized in an institution around the hospice or Kanqah controlled by a teaching master known as sheikh, pir or murshid. He enrolled disciples and appointed a successor. He established rules for spiritual conduct and interaction between inmates as well as between laypersons and the master.

Silsilas

Silsila literally meaning a chain signifies a continuous link between master and disciple, stretching as an unbroken spiritual genealogy to the Prophet Muhammad. Sufi silsilas began to appear in different parts of the Islamic world around the twelfth century.

Dargah

Dargah is a Persian term. Its meaning is tomb-shrine. When the sheikh died, his tomb shrine became the centre of devotion for his followers. This encouraged the practice of pilgrimage or ziyarat to his grave, particularly on his death anniversary. It was believed that, after death the soul of sheikh got united with the soul of Allah. People sought their blessings to attain material and spiritual benefits. Thus evolved the cult of the sheikh revered as wali.

Ba-sharia and Be-sharia sufis

Ba shara were those Sufis who adhere with the Shariat and Be-sharia Sufis were those who ignored shariat

The Chishtis in the Subcontinent

Life in the Chishti khanqah

The khanqah was the centre of social life. It comprised several small rooms and a big hall where inmates and visitors lived and prayed. The Shaikh lived in a small room on the roof of the hall where he met visitors in the morning and evening. There was an open kitchen (langar). From morning till evening people from all walks of life, came to seek the blessings from the Shaikh in various matters. Other visitors included poets such as Amir Hasan Sijzi and Amir Khusru and the court historian Ziyauddin Barani and all of them wrote about the Shaikh.

The practices that were adopted by the Chishtis in their kanqah

- Bowing before the Shaikh
- Offering water to visitors
- Shaving the heads of initiates
- Yogic exercises

Shaikh Nizamuddin appointed his disciple to set up hospices in various parts of the sub continent. In this way they came in touch with the people which led to the popularization of chishti practices, teachings and also the fame of Shaikh

Chishti devotionism: Ziyarat and qawwali

Pilgrimage called Ziyarat tombs of Sufi saints is prevalent all over the Muslim world. This practice is an occasion for seeking the Sufi's spiritual grace (barakat). For more than seven centuries people from different walks of life expressed their devotion at the dargahs of the five great Chishti saints. The use of music and dance including mystical chants performed by specially trained musicians or qawwals to evoke divine ecstasy is also part of ziyarat. The Sufis remember God either by reciting the zikr (the Divine Names) or evoking His presence through sama or performance of mystical music known as qawwali.

Dargah of Khwaja Muinuddin

- The most popular dargah is that of Khwaja Muinuddin, popularly known as "Gharib Nawaz" (comforter of the poor). The dargah became so popular because of the following reasons.
- The austerity and piety of the Shaikh, greatness of his spiritual successors and the patronage of royal visitors.
- Location of Ajmer was another factor for its popularity. As it was located on the trade route connecting Delhi and Gujarat, it attracted number of travellers.
- Muhammad bin Tughlaq was the first Sultan to visit the dargah.
- Akbar, the Mughal emperor visited dargah at Ajmer fourteen times in his life and these visits were aimed at seeking blessings for new conquests, fulfilling his vows and to get sons.
- Many of his wishes were soon fulfilled and thus as an offering:
 - He gave generous gifts on each visit
 - He offered a huge cauldron to facilitate cooking for pilgrims.
 - He even got a mosque constructed within the dargah

Languages and communication

- ❖ The Chishtis composed their poems in several languages. The Chishtis used Hindavi or Persian language. Sufis such as Baba Farid composed poetry in local language. Some Sufis composed long poems or masnavis to express ideas of divine love using human love as an allegory.
- ❖ Sufi poetry was composed in the Dakhani language around the Bijapur and Karnataka region. Women while performing household chores like grinding grain and spinning sang these poems.
- ❖ Other poems were in the form of lullabies or wedding songs (shadinama). The Sufis of this region were inspired by the kannada vachanas of the Lingayats and the Marathi abhangs of the saints of Pandharpur.

Sufis and the state.

- ❖ The chishti tradition was austere but it did not isolate political power. The Sufis accepted unsolicited grants and donations from the political elites. The sultans set up charitable trusts (auqaf) as endowments for hospices and granted tax-free land (inam).
- ❖ The chishtis accepted donations in cash and kind and used for their immediate requirements such as food, clothes, living quarters and ritual necessities such as sama. The moral high status of the Sufis attracted people from all walks of life.
- ❖ The kings wished to secure their support. Kings simply did not need to show their association with Sufis and also required legitimating for them. When the Turks set up the Delhi Sultanate, Sufis resisted the insistence of the ulama on imposing shari'a as state law because they anticipated opposition from their subjects.
- ❖ The sultans also came to depend on the sufis to interpret the shari'a. It was believed that Auliya could intercede with god to improve the material and spiritual conditions of the people. As a result, kings got the shrines of the Sufis near built near their tombs.
- ❖ There were instances of conflict between the Sultans and the sufis. To assert their authority both expected certain rituals performed like kissing of the feet etc.

New devotional paths: Dialogue and Dissent in North India

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Kabir was one of the most outstanding examples of a poet-saint. Verses ascribed to Kabir have been compiled in three distinct traditions.

Sources to reconstruct the life of Kabir

The Kabir Bijak is preserved by the Kabirpanth (the path or sect of Kabir) in Varanasi and in Uttar Pradesh. The Kabir Granthavali is associated with the Dadupanth in Rajasthan and many of his compositions are found in the Adi Granth Sahib. All these compilations were made after the death of Kabir. Kabir's poems have survived in several languages and dialects and sometimes with special language of nirguna poets (the sant bhasha) and others known as ulatbansi (upside-down sayings)

Teachings of Kabir

Kabir tried to describe the Ultimate Reality including Islam. According to him the Ultimate Reality was Allah, Khuda, Hazrat and Pir. He also used certain Vedic terms such as Brahman and Atman.

He also used some yogic traditional terms such as shabda(sound) or shunya(emptiness). Some poems of Kabir expressed conflicting and diverse ideas. Some poems attacked Hindu polytheism and idol worship and others use sufi concept of zikr and ishq(love) to express the Hindu practice of nam-simaran(remembrance of God's name).

Historians have tried to analyse the language, style and content of these poems. Debates about whether Kabir was a Hindu or a Muslim by birth are well reflected in hagiographies. Hagiographies within the Vaishnava tradition suggest that he was born a Hindu, Kabirdas but brought up by a poor Muslim community of weavers. They also suggest that he was initiated into bhakti by a guru, Ramananda. The poems of Kabir used words guru and satguru but do not mention the name of any specific guru. Historians pointed out that it is very difficult to establish that Ramananda and Kabir were contemporaries.

Baba Guru Nanak and the Sacred Word

Baba Guru Nanak was born in a village called Nankana Sahib near Ravi in Punjab in 1469. He trained to be an accountant and studied Persian. He was married at a young age but he spent most of his time among sufis and bhaktas. He also travelled widely.

Teachings of Guru Nanak

His teachings are well reflected in his hymns. These hymns suggest that he advocated a form of nirguna bhakti. He rejected sacrifices, ritual baths, image worship and the scriptures of Hindus and Muslims.

- According to him, the Absolute or 'rab' had no gender or form. He proposed a simple way to connect to the Divine by remembering the Divine Name.
- He expressed his ideas through hymns called "shabad" in Punjabi, the language of the region and sang with different ragas.
- He organized his followers into a community. He set up rules for congregational worship (sangat). He appointed one of his disciples, Angad, to succeed him as the preceptor (guru). Guru Nanak did not want to establish a new religion.
- After his death, his followers consolidated their own practices to form a distinct community.
- The fifth guru, Guru Arjun compiled Guru Nanak's hymns along with those of his four successors and other religious poets like Baba Farid, Ravidas and Kabir in the Adi Granth Sahib. These hymns called "gurbani" are composed in various languages.
- The tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, included the compositions of the ninth guru; Guru Tegh Bahadur. This scripture was called the Guru Grantha Sahib. Guru Gobind Singh also laid the foundation of the Khalsa Panth (army of the pure). He also defined its five symbols:
- Uncut hair, a dagger, a pair of shorts, a comb and a steel bangle. It was under the leadership of Guru Gobind Singh that the community became a socio-religious and military force.

Mirabai, the devotee princess

- Mirabai was the best known woman poet within the bhakti tradition. She was a Rajput princess from Merta in Marwar. She was married to a prince of the Sisodia clan of Mewar against her wishes. She defied her husband and did not submit to the traditional role of wife and mother.
- She recognized Krishna, the avatar of Vishnu as her lover. Her in-laws tried to poison her, but she escaped and lived as a wandering singer composing songs with intense expressions of emotion.

- Her most famous preceptor was Raidas; a leather worker. It shows her defiance of the norms of caste society.
- She had donned the white robes of a widow or the saffron robe of the renouncer. Although she did not attract a sect or group of followers, she has been recognized as a source of inspiration for centuries.
- We get information about her from the bhajans attributed to her.

Reconstructing histories of religious traditions

- Historians used a variety of sources to reconstruct histories of religious traditions. These include stupas, monasteries, and temples.
- Historians also draw on textual sources including devotional literature and hagiographies. These sources enable historians to understand certain religious beliefs and practices.
- They range from the simple direct language of the vachanas of Basavanna to the ornate language of the farman of the Mughal emperors.
- Understanding each type of text requires different skills. Historians have to acquire familiarity with several languages and to be aware of the subtle variations in style that characterize each type.