



# Bhakti Movement: A *Sui Generis* Movement For Empowerment

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**Abstract:** The word 'Bhakti' is an enigmatic term to define. It is construed both as individual devotion as well as a socio-religious and literary movement, which makes it distinctive from other movements. As a social movement, it critiqued the upper caste orthodoxy or class hierarchy and believed in the equity and oneness of humankind. As a religious movement, it emphasized personal devotion to God without any mediation and the possibility of salvation for all through good deeds and austere living. As a literary movement, it provides a considerable impetus for the efflorescence of vernacular literature and liberated poetry from the eulogies of kings, infusing it with the themes of spirituality. Unlike other movements, it endeavoured for both the individual and the social upliftment of the lower strata of society.

The word 'empowerment' has myriad connotations; however, the apt version of empowerment is when a person is not the victim of any complex—cast complex, religious complex, social complex, or any other. The Bhakti movement offered the marginalised subjects a platform to fight against all socio-religious inequalities and consequently helped them to come out of these imposed shackles or complexes. This paper reviews the Bhakti movement as a *sui generis* movement for the empowerment of ghettoised and marginalised subjects in all respects. It also explicates how the Bhakti movement helps us to cater to and tackle the current scenario of India, characterised by acute polarization and extremism.

**Key Words:** Bhakti movement, Empowerment, India, Marginalized, Sui generis.

The history of mankind has seen many instances of mass rebellion that rejected the existent social orders, norms, and societal institutions. These movements mobilized the masses for sustained actions with a vision to modify partially or entirely the existing social system. These movements are termed social movements. Indian soil has witnessed a myriad number of reformative and revolutionary movements from time to time. For thousands of years, the social structure of India was based on the hierarchy of caste and class, in which the upper caste or class enjoyed all kinds of privileges, whereas the people drawn from the lower strata of society were denied even the most basic rights. The rigid caste system, the complicated ritualism that constituted the practice of worship, and the inherent need to move to a more fulfilling method of worship and salvation spurred a movement called the Bhakti movement. The rise of the Bhakti movement also coincides with the influx of Islam in India. Islam first arrived in India with the principles of equality and brotherhood. The egalitarian ideas of Islam provided equal status to all and eradicated all the distinctions based on the lines of caste, class, and creed. The Sufi path of Islam particularly attracted the lower sections of society. Due to its egalitarian ideals, there was a mass conversion of people, especially of the lower castes and classes. Under these conditions, the Bhakti movement emerged, intending to reform Hinduism so that it could accommodate

all sections of society. However, “Albrecht Weber, a preeminent German scholar of Sanskrit, hypothesized that bhakti originated from contact between Christians and Hindus in the remote historical past” (Prentiss 4).

Before the Bhakti movement, many reformist movements emerged in India that raised the voices against the corrupt practices of society and religion. Jainism and Buddhism were two of the significant movements that revolted against the prevalent class and caste order. These two movements protested against animal sacrifice as a part of a ritual. They opined that religion was a private matter. So, it should be based on the inner realization of truth. Jainism focused on personal conduct and devotion. They did not believe in the religious scriptures and their interpreters, the Brahmins. Jainism advocates religious equality that provides an equal chance to each member of society. It accepted members from every strata of society and gave equal rights and privileges to every member of society. The core value of Jainism was non-violence (*ahimsa*). Trade and commerce were the only possible occupations in Jainism. Consequently, it flourished among the trading community. Albeit Jainism and Buddhism were successful in getting the support of the masses, later on, they lost their prominence. Tara Chand argues that “the Saiva and Vaisnava saints combined to wean the people from their allegiance to Buddhism and Jainism to Siva and Vishnu worship. [...]. These devotees of Siva and Vishnu developed the cult of Bhakti, and their works are looked upon as those of the highest authority by the followers of the two creeds” (86–87). The Vaishnavite Alvars and Shaivite Nayanar saints of the Tamil region started a socio-religious reform movement called the Bhakti movement between the 7th and 9th centuries A.D. Though Bhakti is a pan-Indian phenomenon, it has regional variations and different phases. The first phase of the Bhakti movement was the textual interpretation of the Vedas, Upanishads, Gita, and others. The second stage of Bhakti, as a movement, had its origins in the south in the form of Alvar Bhakti. Thus, Bhakti as a social movement sought its genesis in the locales of South India and later expanded into other parts of the country. In North India, it spread during the fourteenth century A.D. Ramananda played an iconic role in its spread, along with his disciples Kabir, Raidas, Tulsidas, and others.

The word “Bhakti” is one of the enigmatic terms. John Stratton Hawley argues that “the word bhakti is notoriously hard to translate. The Sanskrit term bhakti is an action noun derived from the verbal root bhaj-, meaning broadly to share, to possess, and occupies a semantic field that embraces the notions of belonging, being loyal, even liking” (5). Grierson explains that “the word *bhakti*, with the allied words *Bhagavat* and *Bhagavata*, is derived from the Sanskrit root *bhaj*, meaning, in this case, ‘to adore’. Bhakti, therefore, has the primary meaning of ‘adoration’ while *Bhagavat* means ‘the Adorable one’ and *Bhagavata* ‘a worshipper of the Adorable one’” (2:539). In this sense, Bhakti signifies a personal belief in and adoration of God. Prentiss states that:

The Gita is the first text we know of that uses the term bhakti as a technical term to designate a religious path. In its earliest usage, the term encompassed meanings of affection and attachment, but the Gita transformed the word into a technical religious term, specifying a religious path that encouraged active participation in worship without the sense of material and familial attachment that had characterized earlier uses of the word. Through comparison with traditional religious paths, the Gita distinguished bhakti and endowed it with autonomy as its own religious path; in the Gita, bhakti denotes a method of religious experience that leads to liberation. (5)

Prentiss holds that there is a consensus among orientalist scholars like H. H. Wilson, M. Monier Williams and G. A. Grierson that Bhakti is a “devotion to a personal deity [...] [It] was a monotheistic reform movement, the first real instance of monotheism in India” (3). Thus, literally, Bhakti means devotion or attachment, but in the medieval ages, it emerged as a movement. Novetzke argues that:

A common scholarly convention interprets bhakti to mean personal devotion or sentiment of intimacy with a deity, but the term is also used in highly abstract contexts where the personal is not present. In these cases, both in scholarship and within the Indian public sphere, bhakti denotes a ‘movement’ of social protest against caste, class, religious, or gender inequalities. (257)

The Bhakti movement showed the path of spiritual salvation to non-privileged classes (Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, Chamars, and the other economically backward classes). The term Bhakti was found in many holy Hindu scriptures, which gave the path to getting free from the cycle of birth and achieving salvation. However, this form of Bhakti was limited to certain sections of society and excluded the lower strata of society. The nature of the later Bhakti movement differed from its early form. It offered equal opportunities to lower castes and classes in society to improve their conditions. Bhakti saints were against the meaningless and stultifying rituals, superstitions, and orthodoxy and denounced the class and caste distinction. They believe in equality and brotherhood and profess that everybody can achieve salvation through Bhakti. Bhakti places devotion and practice above traditional rituals. It was based on strong devotion between worshipped and worshipper. It can be said that the entire Bhakti movement is against the malpractices of existing society, against the caste system, superstition, gender, and feudal order of the society. It preaches its teachings in vernacular languages or local dialects, through which it can reach the larger masses meaningfully. Hawley mentions that “according to the bhakti movement paradigm, it was the radical perception that the legitimate demands of religion had to be expressed in speech people could actually understand—and that they themselves generated—that brought India’s vernacular languages to the fore in the millennium that began in 500 c.e; challenging the hegemony of Sanskrit” (8). They preached in the vernacular language rather than Sanskrit. These saints used local dialects in their preaching. They manifest their mystical forms in lyrics. The Bhakti saints believed that salvation was the ultimate goal of human life, which could be achieved by Bhakti. They challenged rampant social order and wanted to liberate the lower section from the clutches of the elites and society, which was based on caste, class, gender, and Varna. The Bhakti movement gained acceptance from all sections of society, irrespective of caste, class, and creed. Hawley states that:

- (1) The bhakti movement is characterized by the singing of devotional songs composed in vernacular languages by poets who have attained the status of saints.
- (2) It celebrates a sense of the mutual companionship on the part of many of these poet-saints.
- (3) It displays a tendency to consider both sexes and all strata of society as potential devotees.
- (4) It trumpets the cultivation of personal experience as against external or ritual punctiliousness, or at least clearly prioritizes the former in relation to the latter. (6-7)

The Bhakti movement criticized all kinds of hypocritical practices, such as superstitions and animal sacrifices, i.e., inhuman activities, and substituted them with the ideals of truth, non-violence, forgiveness, and compassion. Prentiss argues that “bhakti was a reform movement through its emphasis on feeling and its criticism of caste; and the medieval ‘reformers,’ especially the sixteenth-century bhakta (practitioner of bhakti) Caitanya, whom they likened to Luther, played the same role as Protestant reformers in Europe” (3). The nineteenth-century missionaries, therefore, interpreted Bhakti as an Indian version of Protestant Christianity.

The philosophy of Bhakti was divided into two schools of thought—Saguna Bhakti and Nirguna Bhakti. Saguna represents liberal reform without much change; it did not open the door of salvation to all people, including women and members of the non-privileged class. Saguna Bhakti believes in the anthropomorphisation of God. The prominent saints of Saguna Bhakti were Ramananda, Tulasi Das and Surdas, who advocated for the status quo in society. The Nirguna Bhakti believed in a formless, attributeless, monotheistic God without any human incarnation. Nirguna opens the doors of salvation for all sections of society, including women, non-privileged groups, and untouchables. Nirguna Bhakti believed that salvation was possible only through knowledge. They critiqued the dominant social order that was founded on the oppression, suffering, and exploitation of marginalised classes. At the same time, they accessed alternatives that were envisioned with the establishment of an egalitarian, democratic, and humanist society. The Nirguna Bhakti saints include Raidas, Kabir, Nanak, etc. In North India, Bhakti was popularized by the disciples of Ramananda, such as Kabir, who used the local language for preaching. Kabir brought both social and spiritual transformation to society. The notion of Bhakti is clarified by Kabir as not worship; it means *Mukti* (liberation) from caste, class, gender and superstitions. Kabir preached monotheism that appealed directly to the poor and assured them of their access to God without an intermediary. Through his songs, he bridges the gulf between Hindus and Muslims and thus acts as a harbinger of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Gail Omvedt argued that it was radical Bhakti saints who revolted against the structure and wanted to transform the basic structure of the Indian social system and visions to establish an egalitarian society. According to him, the legacy of the Bhakti and reformist movements had a remarkable impact on nation-building and provided a utopia for nation-building (15, 25, 164 and 272). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when bhakti entered the Indian public sphere, it came to stand for unity, for both “love of the nation” and, configured as “movement,” as a social force that has unified a religiously striated culture and is used in the service of a nascent state (Novetzke 265). However, in contemporary times, India is characterised by the Orwellian dystopia, where one is witnessing the crumbling of a nation from its basic grain of secularism and religious freedom. All the democratic institutions of society are hijacked by the corrupt practices of politicians. In conjunction with economic deprivation, there is social and moral deprivation among the masses. There is an acute fragmentation among communities, the subjugation of the voices of dissent, and the disintegration of social institutions. The privileged class orthodoxy once again sprouted vehemently, jeopardizing the lives of millions of marginalised communities like Muslims, Dalits, Adivasi and other socially and economically weaker sections. Thus, under these prevailing conditions, the Bhakti movement can act as a kind of antidote that equips us to tackle these anarchic circumstances and restore the fundamental principle of this nation—‘the unity in diversity.’

### Conclusion:

The above discussion follows that the Bhakti movement was essentially the phenomenal revolt of the marginalised segment (i.e., the lower castes and classes) at decentralising the hierarchy imposed by the upper-class fraternity. The ideology of the Bhakti movement was based on the principles of equality, the unity of God, universal brotherhood, and egalitarianism, which empowered the underbelly of Indian society in fundamental ways. It has brought metamorphosis on various levels—the individual, social, and literary—which makes it the *sui generis* movement for empowerment. At the individual level, it wiped out the various complexes from the psyches of underprivileged masses, bequeathed them with a kind of driving force to fight against all socio-religious inequalities, and consequently helped them to come out of these imposed shackles or complexes. At the social level, it rebutted the orthodoxy of the elite class, debunked religious superiority, deconstructed the class hierarchy, dismantled the caste system, and preached the gospel of equality, harmony, individual devotion, and inner realization that is bereft of any segregation or discrimination of caste, creed, or gender. As a literary movement, it provided the impetus for the growth of vernacular literature. Instead of Sanskrit, Bhakti saints used to preach their philosophy in the local dialect. Thus, bhakti is both a movement as well as an act of personal devotion. The prevailing conditions of contemporary times demand the revivification and reestablishment of Bhakti movement in Indian society so that we can establish a society that will be based on the principles of brotherhood, equality, and social and religious harmony among different communities and is free from social inequality, class hierarchy, gender discrimination, racial superiority, caste segregation, and religious orthodoxy.

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