

Bhakti Movement

The Bhakti movement was the religious movement that brought religious reforms to medieval Hinduism. The movement started in Tamil Nadu in the 6th century CE and later spread to other parts of the country. However, the movement reached its zenith from the 15th to 17th century CE. Initially, the Bhakti Saints were divided into two groups of Nayanars and Alvars, who were the devotees of Shiva and Vishnu, respectively. They composed poems in regional languages and preached masses.

However, in the later half of the Bhakti movement, there was a change in the ideology of the reformers who believed that God is universal and condemned the idol worship of God. The period from the eighth century to the eighteenth belonged to the bhakti movement. It involved a lot of saints (Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus) who taught the masses about devotion and the transition of life through salvation.

Bhakti Movement in India

Term Bhakti refers to the the Sanskrit word "bhaj," meaning participate in or share. Thus, Bhakti is a spiritual term that means total devotion. The origin of the Bhakti Movement dates back to the 7th and 12th centuries in South India, particularly Tamil Nadu, and the 15th century in North India. In South India, the Bhakti Saints were divided into two groups, i.e., Alvars (Vishnu Devotees) and Nayanars (Shiva Devotees).

- These Bhakti Movement Leaders were poets who wrote many poems in regional languages like Telugu and Tamil. Their poems were subjected to the holy relationship between God and its devotees.
- Along with this, a wave was initiated against the priest, and the Bhakti saints thought the priest's presence was unnecessary. This ideology got great support from ordinary people.
- The caste system and other religious ceremonies of the Hindu society influenced the rise of Bhaktism. At that time, there was an influence of Buddhism and Jainism. Still, these two groups rejected the austerities they taught them, because of which people left these religions and

moved towards the Bhakti Movement to advocate several changes in their already established religions.

Along with this, Sufi Movement was also gaining popularity at that time because of its ease of prayer and democratic beliefs.

Bhakti Saints

The Bhakti movement had a lot of popular Bhakti saints who influenced the bhakti movement. From Shankaracharya to Yogis, here are the brief descriptions of the contributions made by these Bhakti Saints-

- **Shankaracharya-** Shankaracharya was one of the prominent Bhakti Saints born in 788 CE. He was responsible for giving a new orientation to Hinduism. He explained the theory of Monism (Advaita philosophy) and was also of the thought that God is without any attributes (Nirgunabrahman). He thought that Gyan (knowledge) was the only way that led to salvation. His famous quotes were Ekameva Adviteeyam Brahma and Brahma Satyam Jagat Mithya Jivo Brahmatra Naparaha.
- **Ramanuja-** Ramanuja was a supporter of Vishista Advaitavade, meaning qualified monism. He believed that God has attributes. According to him, all the creative processes were held by Shankaracharya. He found Brahmin as the personal God with omnipotent power. He wrote Vedantasara, Gita Bhasya, Vedanta Dipa, Sribhashya.
- **Madhavacharya- Madhavacharya was a** bhakti leader from Kannada who believed in the dualism of Jivatma and Paramatma. He was the founder of the Brahma Sampradaya and thought that the universe and the Brahmins were equal entities. According to him, matter, soul, and God are unique. Vishnu was the God of dualism who controlled all worldly affairs. He believes everyone must pray and worship God.
- **Nimbarka- Nimbarka** was Ramanuja's younger contemporary. He pronounced the philosophy of Bheda Abheda and Dvaita Advaita. He believes that the world is a part of Brahmins. He founded the Sanak Sampradaya and was the preacher of Vaishnavite Bhakti.
- **Vallabhacharya-** Vallabhacharya was the founder of pushtimarg and Rudra Sampradaya. According to him, Shudh Advaita forms the basis of pushtimarg devotional practice. He believed that the universe and brahmins are two different parts.

Women Bhakti Saints of the Bhakti Movement

The Bhakti movement was not only restricted to the prominent male leaders, but also women leaders had a significant impact on the movement. At that time, women were not allowed to go out of their houses and were considered homemakers, but they refused to follow the old norms and left their homes to lead the path of God by becoming wandering saints. Though it was not an easy task for these women to get a hold of the movement, they fought for their acceptance and changed the narrow-minded thinking of the people.

Here are some of the essential female leaders of the Bhakti Movement-

- **Akkamahadevi-** Akkamahadevi was a passionate Shiva devotee. She was a 12th-century female bhakt who lived in the southern region of Karnataka. The great philosophers of the 12th century (Prabhu Deva, Basavanna, Chenna Basavanna, and Madivalayya) gave her the title of Akka, meaning elder sister.
- **Janabai-** Janabai was a 13th-century devotee born into the Shudra Caste. She was one of the household workers of one of the most reputed Bhakti Saint, Namdeva. She has composed more than 300 poems. Her poems were based on her daily life matters, like the difficulties of being a lower caste woman and household chores. But she was able to write poems without any formal education.
- **Mira Bai-** Mira was one of the most chanted Krishna devotees who belonged to the high-class ruling Rajput family. She was the wife of the son of Rana Sanga of Mewar. But her love for God made her leave her husband and family. She went to different pilgrimage places. Her writings show her love for Krishna, but her poetry depicts a unique relationship between God and her wherein she is Krishna's devotee bride, and Krishna is characterized in her pursuits.
- **Andal-** Andal is another devotee who considered herself the beloved of Vishnu. She was the only female Alwar whose verse explains her divine love towards Vishnu.
- **Bahina Bai-** Bahina Bai was a devotee from Maharashtra. This 17th-century poet-saint wrote various abhyanga. She took inspiration from the life of women working in the field and wrote folk songs about women.
- **Karaikkal Ammaiyar-** There were 63 Nayanar, of which only 3 were women. She is one among those 3 women who was Shiva devotee. She leads the path of asceticism to attain her goals.

Bhakti Leaders According to Their Year of Birth

It is believed that the Bhakti Movement was started in South India in the 9th century by Adi Shankaracharya and grew throughout India. Go through the complete list of Saints of Bhakti Movement as per their year of birth.

- Shankara (788 - 820 AD)
- Ramanuja (1017-1137 A.D)
- Basava (12th Century)
- Madhva (1238-1319 AD)
- Ramanada (15th century)
- Kabir (1440-1510 AD)
- Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1538 AD)
- Purandara (15th century)
- Dadu Dayal (1544-1603 AD)
- Chaitanya (1468-1533 AD)
- Shankaradeva (1499-1569 AD)
- Vallabhacharya (1479-1531 AD)
- Surdas (1483-1563 AD)
- Mirabai (1498-1563 AD)
- Haridas (1478-1573 AD)
- Tulasidas (1532-1623 AD)
- Namdeva (1270-1309 AD)
- Jnanesvar (1275-1296 AD)
- Eknath
- Tukaram
- Ram Das



Bhakti Movement in Medieval India

During the medieval period, the Bhakti Movement was established because of the following reasons-

- **Religion's Complexity-** Though other religions' reforms spread the importance of Vedas, ordinary people found it difficult to understand the complex philosophy of the Upanishads and Vedas.
- **Simple Way of Devotion-** There were a lot of rituals and complex religious practices that were being performed throughout the country. But there was a desire to adopt the more straightforward form of worship, social conventions, and other spiritual practices. The Bhakti Marga came up more straightforwardly.
- **Societal Problems-** There were a lot of evil practices against the common person prevailing in society during the medieval period. There

was a need to bring on the liberal form of religion with basic religious rituals.

- **Evils in Hindu Culture-** There were a lot of problems in Hindu society, such as irrelevant rituals, blind faiths, caste rigidity, social dogmas, and other religious practices.
- **Role of Religious Reformers-** Ramanuja, Shri Chaitanya, Namdev, Ramananda, Mirabai, Shankara, Kabir, Nanak, Surdas, Nimbarka, Tukaram, Tulsidas, Chandidas, Vallabhacharya, and a lot of other important people had a significant impact on the society.

The other reasons that lead to the rise of the Bhakti Movement are-

- Spread of Islam
- Influence of Sufi sects
- Influence of Shaivism and Vaishnavism ideologies
- The emergence of great reformers

Bhakti Movement in South India

The development of the Bhakti movement took place in Tamil Nadu between the 7th and 12th CE. It was reflected in the emotional poems of the Nayanars (devotees of Shiva) and Alvars (devotees of Vishnu). These saints viewed religion not as cold, formal worship but as a loving bond based upon love between the worshiped and worshiper. Following are the key features of the Bhakti Movement in South India-

- Discarded rituals and sacrifices.
- They emphasized purity of heart and mind, humanism, and devotion.
- Monotheistic in nature.
- God has either Saguna or Nirguna form.
- An egalitarian movement, they denounced casteism.
- These saints preached in local languages.
- They rejected the austerities preached by Jainism and Buddhism. These religions saw a decline in their growth due to the Bhakti movement.
- Social reforms: They disregarded the caste system and attacked institutionalized religion, Brahminical dominance, idol worship, methods of elaborate rituals, etc. Not only this, the Bhakti Saints opposed Sati and female infanticide. The women were encouraged to join Kirtans. The primary aim of the Bhakti movement in south India was to bridge the gulf between Hindus and Muslims.

Bhakti Movement in North India

The saints wrote in local languages, Tamil and Telugu, and were, therefore, able to reach out to many people. They also translated Sanskrit works into local languages. Few saints are

1. Jnanadeva – Marathi
 2. Kabirdas, Surdas, Tulsi das – Hindi
 3. Sankaradeva - Assamese
 4. Chaitanya and Chandidas - Bengali
- Sanskrit, prevalent in the North, was given a new form as the movement moved to the North. Bhagavata Purana was a significant work in the 9th century and an essential component of the Bhakti movement
 - Kabir, Namdev, and Guru Nanak had preached devotion to a Nirankar form of God. The followers of Guru Nanak identify themselves as Sikhs.

Bhakti Movement in Maharashtra

The features of the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra are as follows-

- Monotheism was the basic principle of the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra.
- They were against idol worship.
- The bhakti reformers spread the idea of universal brotherhood.
- They opposed the fasts, pilgrimages, and rituals.
- They do not believe in the cycle of life and death.
- They composed poems in regional languages, making it more accessible for ordinary people to sing those hymns as they considered accolades a language to connect with God.
- They believed that self-surrender is bliss and preached its importance among the masses.

What Did the Bhakti Movement Teach?

The essential features of the Bhakti Movement were-

- They rejected the idea of idol worship. '
- It believed that God is one and is called up by different names.

- It was firmly against the rituals and the religious activities being performed, and thus, they condemned the blind faith, ceremonies, and other practices.
- It believed that one needs to surrender oneself to God completely.
- It supported both Schools of Bhakti- Nirguna, and Saguna and emphasized both teachings.
- It is believed that one can achieve salvation through Bhakti.
- It brought open-mindedness among the masses regarding religious matters.
- It was of the thought that all humans are equal. It is also against the rejection of people based on the caste system.
- It supported all the regional languages and rebelled against the dominance of the Sanskrit language in society.
- It was of the idea that teachings must be delivered in the regional languages, and for ease of understanding, the literature must be created in the local languages.

Schools of Bhakti Movement

Based on the separation of thoughts for perceiving God, the Bhakti Saints were divided into 2 types of schools. These were Nirguna School and Saguna School. The Nirguna School was of the thought that God is formless and devoid of qualities or traits. On the other side, Saguna School believed that God has a particular form and character. It was also thought that God shows himself in incarnations and has positive attributes.

Nirguna School

Adi Shankara introduced the Nirguna School. This School of Bhakti was represented by those poet-saints who considered God as free from any form or qualities. These saints were popularly called Monotheistic Bhakti Saints. The principal saints are Kabir and Nanak. Here are the critical points of these saints-

- Monotheistic Bhakti Saints were firmly against caste-based traditions.
- They condemned the Brahmin supremacy and were firmly against the practice of idol worship.
- These Bhakti Saints believe God is formless, non-incarnate, formless, and ineffable.

- Their thoughts combined Sufism, the Nanpanthi movement, and the Vaishnava concept of Bhakti. They adopted the Vaishnava concept of Bhakti with Nirguna emphasis on it.

Saguna School

The Saguna School of Bhakti was the school of poet-saints who believed that God had a particular form. They glorified the forms and qualities of God. The popular saints of Saguna School were Surdas, Meera, Chaitanya, and Tulsidas. The critical points of the Saguna School are as follows-

- They were in favor of Brahmin domination.
- They defended the caste system.
- They favor idol worship, but this also spreads the idea that one should believe in a personal God.
- They believe that Vedas hold a spiritual validity.
- The Saguna School preached that there was a need for brahmins or gurus that would act as the bridge between the devotees and God.

Literature and Poems of the Bhakti Movement

During the Bhakti Movement, literature of many regional languages flourished, particularly in devotional poems and songs. Here are some essential writers and poets of the Bhakti Movement:

- **Tulsidas** (1527-1623) wrote Rama Charita Manasa (holy lake of Rama's deeds), the first and greatest Hindi epic where he saw Lord Ram as the embodiment of God.
- **Surdas** (1478- 581), on the other hand, wrote a devotional poem about Lord Krishna.
- **Meerabai** (1498-1546) of Rajasthan penned and sang devotional lyrics in the glory of Lord Krishna.
- **Saint Purandaradasa** (1480-1564) developed a large following in Karnataka by singing the praises of God - 'Jagadodharana.'
- **Jayadeva**, a poet-devotee from the 11th century, wrote the Sanskrit masterpiece Geeta Govinda, which narrates the tale of Lord Krishna.
- **Basavanna** (1105-68) developed a rich vein of literature in the Kannada region known as Vachana Sahitya, composed by him and his pupils (Akkamahadevi, Allama Prabhu, Devara Dasimayya, and others).
- **Jnanadev** (1275-96), **Namdev** (1270-50), and **Tukaram** (1608-50) were among the most popular Bhakti Movement figures in Maharashtra, having penned many hymns that encapsulate the essence of Bhakti.

The Bhakti Movement reformers taught that liberation could only be obtained through great devotion and faith in God. The reformers emphasized the importance of singing hymns with profound devotion. It was an influential spiritual period to be reckoned with, especially after the great waves of Kabir, Basavanna, and Shri Chaitanya.

Alvars and Nayanars of Tamil Nadu

The Alvars and Nayanars led the Bhakti Movement in Tamil Nadu. The Nayanars were the Shiva devotees, while the Alvars were Vishnu's devotees.

- Appar, Sambandar, Sundaramurti, and Manikkavasagar were prominent Nayanars. The first three hymns are mentioned in Thiruvvasagam and were written by Manikkavasagar.
- Tirumurais is the collection of works of Nayanars which is called the fifth Veda.
- Andal was a woman Alvar saint. There were 12 Alvars and 63 Nayanars. Periyapuram by Shekkihazar traces the life history of Nayanars.
- Divya Prabhandam was the collection of hymns by Alvars.
- Alvars and Nayanars were against the caste system. They opposed the Brahmin's dominance.



Significance of Bhakti Movement

The Bhakti movement was established to spread the idea of monotheism. It was against idol worship. Thus, it condemned the practice of idol worship. It is strongly believed that rituals and religious rites are not the way to reach God. Instead, one can get God through love and adoration. The primary significance of the Bhakti Movement is as follows-

- The regional languages, like Marathi, etc., were promoted among the masses.
- It resulted in unity for all the Hindu gods.
- There was a rise in devotion among people.
- People adopted the loving and open-minded approach to faith and religion.
- It resulted in equality, and evil practices like the caste system were brought to an end.

- It empowered Indian society in a lot of fundamental ways.
- There was an introduction to the practices like social giving (Seva)
- Apart from Bhakti, it helped poor farmers.
- People started to believe in non-violence.

