



The Bhakti Movement in India: A path of devotion and social reform

Dr. Shubhajeet Shome

Department of Law, University of North Bengal, West Bengal, India

Abstract

The Bhakti Movement in India represents a significant socio-religious transformation that emerged during the medieval period, emphasizing personal devotion over ritualistic practices and rigid social hierarchies. This movement, led by saints such as Kabir, Mirabai, and Guru Nanak, challenged orthodox Brahmanical dominance and promoted a direct, emotional connection with the divine. By advocating equality, the Bhakti tradition questioned caste discrimination and opened spiritual participation to marginalized communities, including women and lower castes. The movement spread across different regions of India, incorporating vernacular languages and local cultural expressions, thereby making religious ideas more accessible to the masses. Its emphasis on love, devotion, and unity fostered a sense of social cohesion and moral reform. Furthermore, the Bhakti Movement played a crucial role in bridging religious divides, encouraging harmony between Hindus and Muslims through its inclusive teachings.

This article explores how the Bhakti Movement functioned not only as a spiritual awakening but also as a form of social resistance, reshaping Indian society by promoting egalitarian values and challenging established norms. Its legacy continues to influence contemporary religious and cultural practices in India.

Keywords: Bhakti Movement, Devotion (Bhakti), Social Reform, Caste Equality, Medieval India

Introduction

The word bhakti is derived from the Sanskrit verb bhaj, which translates to 'to serve', 'to share', and 'to participate'. Bhakti signifies a profound devotion to God, encompassing the acts of serving Him, sharing in, and engaging with the divine experience, as well as the close relationship a devotee has with a personalized understanding of the divine. The concept of bhakti can be traced back to the hymns found in the Rigveda, and it began to take shape during the Epic and Puranic eras of Hindu history. The Narayaneeya part of Santiparva in the Mahabharata, along with the Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana, and Bhagavad Gita, clearly delve into Bhakti Yoga, or the Path of devotion, as a way to achieve salvation, highlighting the superiority of bhakti marga over the other two methods, which are the path of knowledge, or jnana marga, and the path of rituals and good deeds, karma marga (Srinivasan & Aithal, 2025) [16]. The Bhagavad Gita offers a thorough explanation of Bhakti in every way. Krishna mentions that he welcomes even the simplest gifts, such as a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or just water, as long as they are given with a spirit of devotion (Bhagavad Gita, 9.26).

The biggest impact of the movement was that it made God accessible to everyone, giving each person their own sense of spirituality and salvation, no matter their background or gender (Debnath, 2021) [2]. This helped create a more equal society that challenged the Brahmanical dominance. So, we can look at the Bhakti movement as a social and cultural mass movement, even though it has deep roots in personal connections with God. It started in South India during the 7th and 8th centuries with figures like Andal, Basava, Akka Mahadevi, and Basavanna, and then it spread north during the medieval period, led by poet-saints like Chaitanya, Kabir, Sur Das, Tulsi Das, and Mirabai, eventually becoming a pan-Indian movement by the fourteenth century. The saiva Nayanar saints and vaisnava Alvar saints from South India promoted the idea of bhakti to various groups in

society, regardless of caste or gender, during the time frame of the 7th to the 10th century. The saint poets passionately preached bhakti and aimed to foster religious equality (Fromm, Erick, 2012) [1]. They disregarded rituals and traveled around the region multiple times, singing, dancing, and promoting bhakti. The Alvar and Nayanar saints chose to use Tamil instead of Sanskrit for their preaching and for writing devotional songs. This choice helped the movement gain a broad following.

The South Indian bhakti saints often criticized the Jains and Buddhists, who held a favored position in the courts of South Indian kings at that time. They attracted many followers from Buddhism and Jainism, both of which had become quite rigid and formal by then. These saint-poets also pushed back against the dominance of orthodox Brahmins, making bhakti available to everyone, regardless of caste or gender (Chakravarti, 1993) [3].

The Bhakti movement introduced a fresh perspective that challenged Brahminical traditions, making the role of Brahmin priests seem less important since people could now connect with God directly. Bhakti saints transformed the belief system, and even when temples shut their doors, they kept their God alive in their hearts, worshipping a nirguna God. At times, they even envisioned a personal God who could be with them without all the extra stuff tied to temple deities.

Prominent Bhakti Movement figures in south India: Ramanuja (1017–1137 AD)

He was a key figure in Vishishtadvaita (qualified non-dualism), championing social inclusivity and devotion to Vishnu. He promoted social equality and justice, rejecting caste discrimination and opening religious practices and temple access to all, including marginalized communities. Ramanuja's teachings, spread through his influential Sanskrit commentaries and Tamil vernacular literature, made devotionalism accessible, shifting the focus from

complex rituals to a personal relationship with God and laying the philosophical foundation for the Sri Vaishnava tradition.

Madhvacharya(1238–1317AD)

He who started Dvaita philosophy (dualism), really pushed for total devotion to Vishnu. He significantly contributed to the Bhakti movement by founding the Dvaita (dualistic) school of Vedanta, emphasizing personal devotion (bhakti) to Vishnu and the fundamental difference between the individual soul and the Supreme Being. His teachings, which promoted the path of devotion as a means to liberation and provided a strong alternative to the dominant monistic philosophy of the time, revitalized the Bhakti traditions in South India, especially Karnataka, making the spiritual path accessible to all.

Annamacharya(1408–1503AD)

A trailblazer in Telugu Keertanas, he wrote hymns for Lord Venkateswara, leaving a mark on Carnatic music. He was a poet-saint who composed thousands of devotional songs (sankirtanas) in praise of Lord Venkateswara. He popularized Carnatic music through his compositions, which influenced the structure of musical forms like the keertana. Annamacharya also opposed caste discrimination and championed universal brotherhood, making his compositions and the message of devotion to Lord Vishnu accessible to people of all backgrounds.

Vallabhacharya(1479–1531AD)

The founder of Pushtimarg (the path of grace), he spread the word about Krishna Bhakti and Shuddhadvaita (pure non-dualism). He founded the Pushtimarg sect and propounding the Shuddhadvaita (pure non-dualism) philosophy. His philosophy emphasized grace-based devotion to child Krishna, enriched with music, festivals, and customs, advocating householdership as a path to spiritual life. He established his teachings through the Rudra Sampradaya, traversing India to spread his message and establish Pushtimarg seats.

Basavanna(1105–1167AD)

He was the founder of the Lingayat (Virashaiva) movement in Karnataka. A social and spiritual reformer, Basavanna challenged Brahmin-led temple worship and rigid caste systems, promoting spiritual equality and an ethical way of life through his influential writings and the Sharana movement. He stood against casteism, Brahminical orthodoxy, idol worship, and Vedic rituals. He promoted monotheism, gender equality, and social justice through Vachanas (which are Kannada devotional poems). He set up Anubhava Mantapa, a democratic religious forum that encouraged equality. He worshipped Shiva as Ishtalinga (a personal linga that devotees wear). He rejected the caste system, the Vedas, and complex rituals. He highlighted the importance of Kayaka (honest work) and Dasoha (charity & sharing wealth).

Prominent Bhakti movement figures in North India:

Ramananda(14thcentury)

He was known for spreading devotion to Lord Rama in North India and advocating social equality by accepting disciples from all castes. He used the local Hindi dialect instead of Sanskrit to make spiritual teachings accessible,

challenged caste barriers, and founded the Ramanandi sect, which emphasized personal devotion to God and love for all humanity (Bhattacharyya, 1989) ^[9]. Key followers included the renowned saints Kabir and Ravidas, who further propagated his inclusive ideals.

KabirDas(1440–1518AD)

A Nirguna saint who revered a formless God. He rejected casteism, idol worship, and rigid religious doctrines. Kabir was influenced by both Hinduism and Islam but was critical of orthodoxy in both. He composed Dohas (couplets) in Hindi (authored Bijak), celebrated for their spiritual richness. His hymns are part of the Guru Granth Sahib. He emphasized devotion to a formless God (Nirguna Bhakti), promoting equality, and critiquing religious hypocrisy and caste divisions in both Hinduism and Islam. He conveyed his philosophy through simple, powerful verses and couplets (dohas), teaching spiritual unity and inner truth over ritualistic practices, and his teachings influenced the development of the Hindi language and the Kabir Panth.

Guru Nanak (1469–1539 AD)

Founder of Sikhism, he emphasized devotion to a single God. He promoted "Naam Japna" (meditation), "Kirat Karni" (living honestly), and "Vand Chakna" (sharing with others). He was against ritualism, idol worship, and the caste system. He traveled widely (India, Mecca, Baghdad, Tibet) to share his teachings. He wrote Japji Sahib, which is central to the Guru Granth Sahib. He set up Langar (community kitchen) to encourage equality and selfless service.

Tulsidas(1532–1623AD)

He wrote the Ramcharitmanas, which is a version of the Ramayana in the local language, and it really pushed the idea of Rama Bhakti. He was a major figure in the Bhakti movement, a spiritual tradition emphasizing devotion to God, by writing the Ramcharitmanas in the common language of Awadhi instead of Sanskrit. This work, a retelling of the Ramayana, made sacred stories and religious teachings accessible to the masses, fostered devotion to a human-like form of God (Lord Rama), and promoted the practice of chanting Ram Naam (Hussain, 1977) ^[10]. His philosophy aligned with Saguna Bhakti, focusing on God with attributes, and he is considered one of India's greatest poets and a proponent of the Bhakti movement.

Surdas(1478–1583AD)

Surdas was a prominent 15th/16th-century poet-saint of the Bhakti movement, celebrated for his devotion to Lord Krishna and his lyrical compositions in Braj Bhasha, compiled in the Sur Sagar. He popularized emotional, personal devotion (Bhakti) through his poetry and hymns (kirtans), emphasizing love and divine connection over rituals and caste. Associated with the Pushti Marg tradition founded by Vallabhacharya, Surdas's work made devotion accessible to the masses, particularly in the Braj region, highlighting Krishna's childhood and his passionate relationship with Radha (Hussain, 1977) ^[10].

Mirabai(1498–1547AD)

A Rajput princess who was dedicated to Krishna, she composed many bhajans. She was prominent Hindu mystic poet and devotee of Lord Krishna during the Bhakti

movement. Born a Rajput princess, she is known for her devotional songs (bhajans) in praise of Krishna, her complete rejection of material wealth, and her defiance of social and familial conventions to pursue her divine love. Her story and poetry, which express deep spiritual longing, have made her an iconic figure and an exemplar of pure devotion for centuries.

Ravidas(15th–16thcentury)

He was a disciple of Ramananda. He opposed the caste system and advocated for equality and personal devotion. He believed in a formless God (Nirguna Bhakti). His poetry is part of the Guru Granth Sahib. He established the Ravidassia sect, which adheres to his teachings.

ChaitanyaMahaprabhu(1486–1534AD)

Founder of Gaudiya Vaishnavism – A Krishna-centered Bhakti tradition. Bhakti & Sankirtan Movement – Popularized Hare Krishna chanting and congregational singing (Sankirtan) Monotheistic Krishna Devotion – Preached Krishna as Svayam Bhagavan and Bhakti as the path to salvation. Achintya Bheda Abheda Philosophy which is a blend of Dvaita (dualism) and Advaita (non-dualism), stating the soul is distinct yet one with God. Preaching & Pilgrimage across Bengal, Odisha, Vrindavan, Mathura, and Puri, spreading Krishna Bhakti which inspired the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in the 20th century.

Here are the main highlights of the Bhakti movement explained in detail

Personal Devotion to One God

This movement focused on the belief in a single God who is loving and personal, accessible through deep faith and devotion. Encouraged a deep, personal, and emotional bond with God. Bhakti was considered an act of pure love and surrender.

Bhakti as the Path to Salvation

Rather than relying on complicated rituals, ceremonies, and austerities, the straightforward route to liberation from the cycle of life and death was through heartfelt, emotional devotion to God. Promoted the idea that anyone can attain moksha (liberation) through devotion, regardless of social status (Shima, 2011) ^[12].

Rejection of Caste System

Bhakti saints advocated for the notion that everyone is equal in the eyes of God, challenging the existing caste distinctions and fostering social unity. Stressed equality of all, regardless of caste, gender, or religion. Criticized the caste system and Brahmanical dominance. The Bhakti saints rejected the rigid caste system and preached universal brotherhood. In modern times, where caste-based discrimination still persists, their message encourages social inclusion, dignity of labor, and equality for all. Example: Sant Ravidas, who was from a marginalized caste, spoke of an egalitarian society — a vision still relevant in today's fight against caste-based oppression (Sadarangani, 2004) ^[13].

Critique of Idol Worship

Numerous Bhakti reformers questioned and opposed idol worship, promoting a more direct and personal connection with the divine. The Bhakti Movement focused on personal

devotion (bhakti) over elaborate rituals and intermediaries (Chand, 2013) ^[4]. In our fast-paced modern lives, this makes spirituality more accessible, allowing people to connect with the divine through music, poetry, prayer, and personal reflection.

Simplicity in Religion and religious tolerance

The movement encouraged a departure from strict dogmas, blind faith, superstitions, and elaborate religious practices. Emphasized personal devotion (bhakti) to God as the path to salvation. Rejected complex rituals, sacrifices, and priestly authority. Bhakti saints like Kabir and Guru Nanak emphasized the oneness of God, regardless of whether He is called Ram, Allah, or Waheguru. In today's context of rising religious intolerance, their teachings foster interfaith harmony and mutual respect.

Use of Vernacular Languages

Saints wrote hymns and poems in local languages instead of Sanskrit, making spiritual teachings more accessible to the general public. Saints used bhajans, kirtans, and poetry to express devotion. This created a rich tradition of devotional literature.

Role of the Guru

A spiritual guide or Guru was deemed crucial for assisting followers on their journey of love, devotion, and spiritual development. The Bhakti saints critiqued hollow materialism and ego, focusing on humility, love, and contentment. Their teachings offer a spiritual antidote to today's consumer-driven, high-stress society.

Emphasis on Serving Humanity

Some teachings indicated that serving humanity was a vital aspect of worshipping God, connecting spiritual devotion with real-world compassion. Hiren Gohain, in his book *The Labyrinth of Bhakti and Some Questions of Medieval Indian History*, offers a perspective on social structures and their influence on the growth of the Bhakti movement. Eric Fromm explores the idea of liberation in his work *The Fear of Freedom*, where he highlights Freedom as a necessity for both individuals and society. It's clear that the burden of freedom is often shouldered by others.

Bhakti movement as emancipation

Uma Chakravarti's work, *Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State*, is a seminal contribution to the field of women's studies. This essay examines early India and Pre-Bhakti textual traditions, utilizing its conceptual framework and theoretical perspective to illuminate the subversive and transformative aspects of the Bhakti Movement. The movement's acceptance of female devotion, its challenge to caste hierarchy, and its focus on vernacular spirituality become increasingly clear when analyzed within the framework of patriarchal structures.

An individual or a group that does not conform to the majority may choose to remain separate from the mainstream or may be compelled to do so. The term 'alienation' fundamentally implies a sense of 'division' or the dichotomy between 'self' and 'other,' which is evident in various contradictions across social, economic, political, and religious spheres. (Debnath, *et al.*, 2021) ^[2] Among the different manifestations of alienation, Ludwig Feuerbach

addresses the issue from a religious perspective. Feuerbach acknowledges that the acceptance of a historical interpretation of religion and God has alienated individuals from their true essence. (Debnath, *et al.*, 2021)^[2]

Ravidas was a man from Benares who lived during the fifteen or sixteenth century; he is still regarded today as a significant untouchable saint of North India. Ravidas was unique—besides being a leatherworker, or *chamar*, he was also a singer and a poet whose hymns evidently contained a truth that even the Brahmins came to hear. In his praise of God, he consistently contrasted the divine presence with his own: God, he stated, was superior to him, just as silk is to a worm, and more aromatic than he, akin to sandalwood compared to the foul-smelling castor oil plant. (Juergensmeyer, 2021)^[11]

Kabir did not wish to be categorized as either Hindu or Muslim; he referred to himself in his poetry as *Kori* and *julana* (a weaver of both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds). He addressed God as *Ram* and *Rahim*. He aligned himself with a movement that did not adhere strictly to Hinduism or Islam, but rather to a universal faith. Kabir also held the belief in a God devoid of attributes. It was this understanding of God that led Kabir to reject idol worship and the rituals associated with it. Kabir acknowledged the presence of *Maya* by stating, "worldly life is akin to a dream, yet believing the world to be real, I do not attach myself to it."

Richbuild temple for shiv
What can I, a poor man do
My legs are pillars
My body is the temple

Numerous women Bhakti poets chose to defy the boundaries set by society and outright rejected them. This decision involved disregarding the expectations associated with the conventional roles dictated by society. They abandoned their husbands and homes, becoming wandering *bhaktas* akin to the South Indian saint *Mahadeviyakka*. She proclaimed that she was wed to her personal deity *Chennamallikarjuna* (a name for *Shiva*). Her *Vachnas* serve as a manifestation of her intense character striving to liberate herself from the constraints of societal ties.

"My Lord, while as Jasmine, is my husband
Take These husbands who die, decay
and feed them To your kitchen fires"

Types of Bhakti movement

The Bhakti Movement has two main beliefs. One is called *Saguna Bhakti*, and the other is *Nirguna Bhakti*. *Saguna Bhakti* focuses on worshipping a personal god. Followers believe in the reincarnation of their beloved deity and worship them in human forms like *Lord Krishna* and *Lord Rama* (Habib, 2008)^[5]. A great example of *Saguna Bhakti* is the devotee *Mirabai*, who adored *Lord Krishna* and sang devotional songs in his honor. Poets such as *Tulsidas* and *Surdas* also wrote and performed songs praising *Lord Rama*. These devotees were all about dedicating everything to their most cherished god.

Nirguna Bhakti is seen as a journey to discover the inner self. It's more about philosophy than performing rituals and ceremonies. In this idea, God is viewed as something abstract. Followers believe that God exists in every little

thing and in all people. Therefore, one shouldn't seek God in temples or man-made religious sites. Instead, God resides in our hearts, and we just need to focus on the good within us (Chandra, 2005)^[6]. Thus, it's essential for humans to engage in good deeds, assist others, and provide food for those in need who can't afford it. Regardless of the path we choose, we should always follow God's guidance and teachings.

Saguna represents a significant school of thought within the *Bhakti Movement*. This particular school advocates the concept of *Saguna Brahman*, which refers to a personal deity possessing form. It strongly emphasizes the values of devotion and love.

The *Bhakti* saints were categorized into two schools based on their perceptions of God. One perspective regarded God as formless, lacking any qualities or attributes, which is referred to as the *Nirguna School*. In contrast, the *Saguna School* perceives God as having a specific form, character, and positive attributes, manifesting in incarnations such as *Rama* and *Krishna*. The idols and images worshipped in homes and temples embody his spirit. This school emphasizes devotion and love significantly (Sharma, 1987)^[8]. The *Saguna Bhakti School* was further divided into two factions. The first faction prioritized *Ram Bhakti*, while the second consisted of devotees of *Krishna Bhakti*. They recognize the spiritual authority of the *Vedas* and the necessity for a human *Guru* to serve as an intermediary between God and his followers. The poets of the *Saguna School* supported the caste system and promoted *Brahmin* dominance. While endorsing idol worship, they advocated for a faith characterized by submission and simple belief in a personal deity. According to *Madhvacharya's Dvaita* and *Ramanujacharya's Vishishtadvaita*, *Brahman* is understood as *Saguna Brahman* (personal deity) or *Ishvara* (Lord of the universe), possessing infinite attributes, including form. However, unlike *Dvaita*, *Vishishtadvaita* refers to *Brahman* as the foundation of the world, encompassing all minds and material entities that constitute *Brahman's* body. The *Bhagavad Gita* states that *Saguna Brahman* is immortal, imperishable, and eternal. *Adi Narayana*, or *Krishna*, is the most frequently mentioned personal form. Both *Saguna Brahman* and *Advaita* were preserved in *Adi Shankara's Advaita*. This philosophical school included notable figures such as *Ramanuja*, *Ramananda*, *Meera Bai*, and *Chaitanya Mahaprabhu* (Karapanagiotis, 2021)^[14].

Nirguna bhakti is all about having devotion for a God that's formless and everywhere. The term '*nirguna*' translates to 'without traits,' highlighting that God doesn't have any physical characteristics. Many people see *nirguna bhakti* as the highest form of devotion. It represents a pure, unmanifested way of showing absolute love and dedication to God.

Nirguna bhakti refers to the devotion and worship of the formless Divine. The term '*Nir*' means 'without,' '*guna*' translates to 'qualities' or 'properties,' and '*bhakti*' stands for 'devotion' or 'faithfulness'—all of which are Sanskrit words. These practitioners focused more on learning and rejected the Scriptures, criticizing all forms of idolatry. The *Nirguna* poet-saints challenged the dominance of the *Brahmins*, along with all caste-related customs and idol worship. They cherished personal experiences with God, and while they used various names and titles for Him, their concept of God was formless, eternal, non-incarnate, and beyond description. Their beliefs seemed to blend elements from three traditions: *Vaishnava Bhakti*, the *Nanpanthi*

movement, and Sufism. They offered a Nirguna viewpoint on Bhakti, even though it was influenced by Vaishnavism. Bhakti can be categorized in several ways, often as pairs of opposites, depending on the specific Hindu tradition or school. Nirguna bhakti represents a non-manifested form of absolute devotion to God (Gaeffke & Lorenzen, 1998)^[15].

In contrast, saguna bhakti involves worship and devotion to a revealed deity that can be represented as an idol, image, or incarnation. Since the ishta devata, or personal deity, is worshipped in a recognizable form, saguna bhakti is straightforward to grasp. On the flip side, nirguna bhakti is about devotion to the Absolute, which is the divine essence that constitutes the universe and the highest state of consciousness. Achieving unity with this sacred essence is the ultimate goal.

Conclusion

The Bhakti movement saw the rise of numerous lower-caste saints who turned into spiritual leaders in their local areas, engaging with the community through relatable poems, songs, and stories in the languages they spoke. This movement went beyond just devotion and actively embraced the fight against the oppressive systems of language, caste, and class divisions.

Another key part of the Bhakti movement is the rise of women saints, which is remarkable not just in number (since there were many women saints) but also in principle, especially considering it was a time when women were the most oppressed group in society. They challenged the gender norms deeply rooted in social structures, creating a new way of thinking that was previously unthinkable. "In the Bhakti movements, women embody traits that are typically associated with men. Women saints wrote poems and songs directed at God, who they saw as a lover or husband instead of a remote deity. They expressed their pain, sorrow, and their deepest wishes for personal and emotional freedom. This relationship is almost like an affair, pushing back against the absolute authority of husbands in marriage. Moreover, they broke free from the limitations of motherhood and family, which had always been used to confine women's roles. In this way, Bhakti provided something truly ground breaking for women who had never experienced personal liberty.

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