
Chapter 8

Devotional Paths to the Divine

❖ The idea of a supreme god

- In simple societies, people worshipped their own gods and goddesses. Interactions between different cultures increased through growth of towns and trade led to the generation of new ideas.
- These ideas were related to cycles of birth and rebirth, access to social privileges and their relation to a person's deeds.
- People who disapproved of these ideas started to follow the teachings of the Buddha and the Jainas.
- The idea of devotion or bhakti also took hold during this time. Local myths became a part of larger mythological stories and local gods started to be identified with prominent deities.

❖ Bhakti in South India – Nayanars and Alvars

- New religious movements, based on the philosophy of bhakti, emerged in South India between the seventh to ninth centuries.
- The devotees of Shiva were called Nayanars and those of Vishnu were called Alvars. They came from all castes including the “untouchables”. They preached ardent love of Shiva or Vishnu as the path to salvation.
- The Nayanars and Alvars went from place to place composing exquisite poems in praise of the deities enshrined in the villages they visited, and set them to music.
- Temples were built by Chola and Pandya kings around shrines visited by these saints and their biographies were composed as well. This developed a relation between temple worship and the Bhakti tradition.

❖ Philosophy and Bhakti

- The philosopher Shankara was born in Kerala in the eighth century. He was a proponent of Advaita or the doctrine of the oneness of the individual soul and the Supreme God which is the Ultimate Reality.
- Ramanuja, born in Tamil Nadu in the eleventh century, was deeply influenced by the Alvars. He preached salvation through intense devotion to Vishnu.

❖ Basavanna's Virashaivism

- The movement began in Karnataka in the mid-twelfth century as a reaction to Bhakti through temple worship.
- Virashaivas argued for the equality of all human beings and against Brahmanical ideas about caste and the treatment of women.

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- They were against all forms of ritual and idol worship.

❖ **The Saints of Maharashtra**

- From the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, a number of saint-poets emerged in Maharashtra. Important among them were Janeshwar, Namdev, Eknath and Tukaram and women like Sakkubai and the family of Chokhamela, who belonged to the “untouchable” Mahar caste.
- The saint-poets rejected all forms of ritualism, outward display of piety and social differences based on birth. They also rejected the idea of renunciation and preferred to live with their families, while serving those in need.

❖ **Nathpanthis, Siddhas and Yogis**

- They advocated salvation through renunciation of the world to realize the formless Ultimate Reality.
- They preferred to train the mind and body through practices like *yogasanas*, breathing exercises and meditation.

❖ **Islam and Sufism**

- Sufis were Muslim mystics who rejected outward religiosity and emphasized love and devotion to God and compassion towards all fellow human beings.
- Islam propagated strict monotheism or submission to one God. It rejected idol worship and considerably simplified rituals of worship into collective prayers.
- Sufis often rejected the elaborate rituals and codes of behavior demanded by Muslim religious scholars. They sought union with God much as a lover seeks his beloved with a disregard for the world.
- The Sufis engaged themselves in contemplation, chanting, singing, dancing and composed poems to express their feelings. The genealogy of Sufi teachers was called *silsila*.
- Sufi centres developed across the subcontinent with the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. The assemblies of Sufi masters were called *khanqahs*.

❖ **New religious developments in north India**

- The period after the thirteenth century saw a new wave of the Bhakti movement in north India. This was an age of intermingling of Islamic, Brahmanical, Sufi, Bhakti, and the Nathpanthi, Siddha and Yogi philosophical traditions..
- Kabir and Baba Guru Nanak rejected all orthodox religions. Others like Tulsidas and Surdas accepted existing beliefs and practices but wanted to make these accessible to all. Other prominent saints were Dadu Dayal, Ravidas and Mirabai.

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- Most of the works of saints were composed in regional languages and could be sung. They became immensely popular and were handed down orally from generation to generation.

❖ **Kabir**

- Kabir's teachings were based on complete rejection of the major religious traditions.
- He believed in a formless Supreme God. His teachings openly criticised all forms of external worship of both Brahmanical Hinduism and Islam, the pre-eminence of the priestly classes and the caste system.
- The language of his poetry was a form of spoken Hindi widely understood by ordinary people.
- His works were collected and preserved in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, *Panch Vani* and *Bijak*.

❖ **Guru Nanak**

- Guru Nanak established a centre for worship at Kartarpur which consisted of the singing of hymns composed by him. His followers ate together in the common kitchen called *langar*, irrespective of their former creed, caste or gender.
- The number of Guru Nanak's followers increased through the sixteenth century under his successors. They belonged to a number of castes but traders, agriculturalists, artisans and craftsmen predominated.
- The ideas of Guru Nanak influenced the Sikh movement heavily. He emphasised the importance of the worship of one God and insisted that caste, creed or gender was irrelevant for attaining liberation. These ideas had social and political implications.
- The Sikh movement got politicized during the seventeenth century, due to a threat perceived by the Mughal rulers. The culmination of this movement was the institution of *Khalsa* by Guru Gobind Singh.