

Lesson-4

The Rise of Neo -Religious Thoughts



G4R6C7

Learning outcomes :

Students will–

- ✦ understand the causes and the nature of the religious evolution that had occurred in India.
- ✦ form an idea of the social background and challenges of medieval India.
- ✦ know about the two new religious movements- the *Bhakti* Movement and the *Sufi* Movement.
- ✦ acquire knowledge of the teachings and expansion of the *Bhakti* Movement in different parts of India.
- ✦ be introduced to **Sankardeva** and the teachings of **Neo Vaishnavism** propagated by him and their effects on the Assamese society.



Pic- 4.1

Source: via pxfuel.com

Let us take a look at the pictures above. Aren't these pictures familiar images of various forms of worship and rituals men perform to please God? These pictures show people praying to God by performing the *Naam Kirtana*, observing rituals and silently seeking God's blessings. This kind of devotion to God was a tradition of *Bhakti* and *Sufi* Movements which began in India in the 8 century A.D. In this lesson we shall discuss the rise of religious thoughts that rose in India at different times.

The Evolution of Religion in India :

Prior to the rise of the Maurya dynasty, the people of India prayed to different gods and goddesses, animals, trees, etc. But when towns and cities came up, trade and commerce also expanded and empires were established. Similarly, a change also occurred in man's social and economic status. People took up various occupations due to the expansion of trade and commerce which made them prosperous. These changes also affected the society as there was a conflict

between old and new ideas. People found it difficult to accept old differences of caste and class in society, the privileges enjoyed by the aristocracy, and strict religious rituals and norms. This resulted in a wave of new thinking that led to a revolution in social and religious beliefs. Many religious reformers, thinkers and philosophers preached their precepts and philosophy among the people. Among these, the teachings of the **Buddhists** and the **Jains** attracted many to their fold. These two religions preached that one could attain salvation through following harsh discipline and self control.

Activity :

- ✦ Name the religious institutions that you find in and around your locality. How do people pray to God in these institutions? Discuss in groups and write.
- ✦ With the help of your teacher find out and make a list of the communities practising Buddhism in Assam.

‘Absolute devotion to God is the only way to attain salvation’- this message of the *Bhagavad Gita* had become very popular during this period. In the later phase of the rise of Hinduism, worship of gods and goddesses, other than Shiva and Vishnu was also practised. The ritualistic worship prescribed in the **Puranas** had become popular during this time. However, the *Puranas* also accepted that God could be reached through devotion by everyone, irrespective of caste or creed. This unifying message of *Bhakti* had become so popular that it was accepted by religions like Buddhism and Jainism too.



Pic-4.2 Slokas of *Bhagavata Gita* giving of moral advice by Krishna to Arjuna

What is the Bhakti Movement?

The word 'Bhakti' has been derived from the Sanskrit word 'Bhaj' which means to worship, to express loyalty, faith or love. The dictionary meaning of the word 'devotion' is to express deep attachment or faith to God. One of the glorious aspects of Indian culture is Bhakti. Bhakti is such a mental state where the devotees surrender themselves to God and enjoys divine joy. The word 'Bhakti' is first mentioned in the Upanishads of Vedic literature. Devotionalism is the doctrine that the great men created by focusing on the union of the human soul with God, immense love for God and devotion. When in different parts of India the idea of devotion spread, it came to be known as 'Bhakti' movement.

The Rise of *Bhaktism* :

From the 7 century A.D., two communities of South India called the *Alvars* and *Nayanars* had tried to bring about a social change through *Bhakti*. The *Alvars* were *Vaishnavs* and the *Nayanars* were *Shaivas*. They paid homage to their own god through songs and tried to instil in people the spirit of realizing God through devotion. Their bhakti movement wrapped up all sections of the society above caste and creed.

At the same time, in Kerala also a similar religious movement had begun under the leadership of **Sankaracharya**. Sankaracharya believed in *Advaitabad- the oneness of God and the human soul*. Sankaracharya said that God could be found within man. One could attain salvation through one's noble deeds and noble thoughts. This is the main philosophy behind *advaitabad*.

The bhakti movement of South lasted till the 11th century AD and during this time Ramanuj or Ramanujacharya was the pioneer. He was the propagator of the Vaishnava religious bhakti movement. Historians have divided the bhakti movement into Saguna and Nirguna. The Saguna worshipped God with form while Nirguna worshipped God without form.

In this way, new thoughts of the *Bhakti* Movement impacted the society and culture of medieval India and tried to bring about a religious and social transformation. *Bhakti* was not simply regarded as devotion to God but also as a medium through which the social evils could be eradicated and feeling of brotherhood developed among all groups of people. *Bhakti* began to be considered as a devotional activity by which the welfare of mankind could be achieved. This new thought of the medieval Age became popular all over India, particularly in North and North East India.

Let us know :

- ★ People of all castes and occupations like the labourers, peasants, hunters, potters, soldiers, Brahmins and the people regarded as untouchables were associated with the *Bhakti* Movement of the *Alvars* and the *Nayanars*.
- ★ The songs and compositions of the *Alvars* which were in the oral form were later published as written texts. This collection is known as the *Divya Prabandham*.

Activity :

- ★ Do you think elaborate rituals are required to pray to God? Give reasons for your answer.

Medieval India was faced with many challenges which gave rise to many views and philosophies of the *Bhakti* Movement. These thoughts and views in turn created a spiritual and intellectual awakening of the Hindu society. The strict rules and rituals of the Hindu religion, discrimination on the basis of high and low caste, rich and poor, etc- were some of the evils which had made the life of the ordinary man unbearable. They wanted freedom from these evils. Although thinkers like Sankaracharya tried to show a way out of this, their philosophy was too high to understand for the common man. On the other hand, from the 9 century A.D., the Muslim Turks and Afghans had begun to migrate to India and establish their empires here. At this time

some Islamic preachers also came to India from the Middle Asia and began to preach their religion under the patronage of their sultans. There is no elaborate ritual or idol worship in Islam. Muslims believe in only one God- (Allah) and in the eyes of God all are equal. This message of equality attracted the neglected and lower section of Hindus to Islam.

Neo-Bhaktism :

It became important to remove the growing caste discrimination and prejudices in Hinduism and re-establish it in the public mind. As a result, between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries AD, many of the scholars, led by social reformers, re-organized the bhakti movement in different parts of India. The bhakti movement which has

come to life during this period is called neo-bhaktism. The map in Pic- 9.3 highlights the places where neo-bhakti movement started in India.



Pic-4.3 Major bhakti saints and the regions associated with them

Activity :

- ★ Why were a section of people in medieval India attracted to Islam? Discuss in groups.



Pic- 4.4 Gyandev

The Preachers of the Neo- Religious Movement: (North-West India) :

In 13 century A.D. in Maharashtra of North-West India, a new trend of *Bhakti* Movement was spearheaded by a religious preacher called Gyaneswar or Gyandev (1271-1295). Gyandev spread his teachings through songs and compositions. He preached a society which did not discriminate between rich or poor, high or low caste and was based on equality, friendship and simplicity. He told people that God was present in every man. Gyandev's teachings were taken to different regions of North West India by his disciples like Namdev, Eknath, Tukaram, Ramdas, etc.



Pict-4.5 Meerabai

About this time, a similar movement was started in Gujarat and Rajasthan also by **Ravidas**, **Dadu Dayal** and **Meerabai**. Meerabai expressed her devotion to Shri Krishna through her *bhajans* which were popular among people. In this way, she spread *Bhakti* through her *bhajan* and *kirtan* which attracted many people to this movement. Though she was the wife of crown prince of Mewar she had discarded all the worldly pleasure for her love for Lord Krishna.

Bhakti Movement in North India:

In North India, particularly in the Hindi speaking regions, Ramananda was the pioneer of the *Bhakti* Movement. Ramananda was a scholar and a social reformer. Ramananda was a devout worshipper of Ram who is regarded as the incarnation of Vishnu. He embraced everybody- high and low to his faith. He composed devotional poems in Hindi to spread his faith. **Kabir** was his most eminent disciple.

Although he was brought up by a Muslim family of weavers due to his guru Ramananda's influence, he was free from the influence of both Hinduism and Islamic practices and impartially



Pict-4.6 Kabir

dedicated his life in the spread of Bhaktism. In those **Dohas** he used to question the rigid policies of Hinduism and Islamism.

Let us know :

- ★ Kabir's *Dohas* are invaluable treasures of Hindi literature. Some portions of these dohas were included in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the holy book of the Sikhs.
- ★ It is mentioned in the **Guru Charit Katha** that Sankardeva are referred to Kabir as a devout Vaishnav before Madhavdeva.

The two renowned preachers of 16th century of Neo-Bhakti Movement were Surdas and Tulsidas. Poet Surdas with his poems strengthened

the trend of Krishna bhakti. On the other hand, Tulsidas composed '**Ram Charit Manas**' in North Indian spoken language and spread the glory of Lord Rama.

Similarly during 15-16th century, rise of Sikhism, founded by Guru Nanak was a remarkable chapter in Bhakti Movement. He was specially influenced by Kabir. Nanak did not believe in idol worship and casteism of the Hindus. He worshipped a formless god. Sikhism, which is

based on human love and service, later became a warrior race under the leaderships of various gurus. The religious messages of Guru Nanak were included in the Guru Granth Sahib.

Bhakti Movement in North East India :

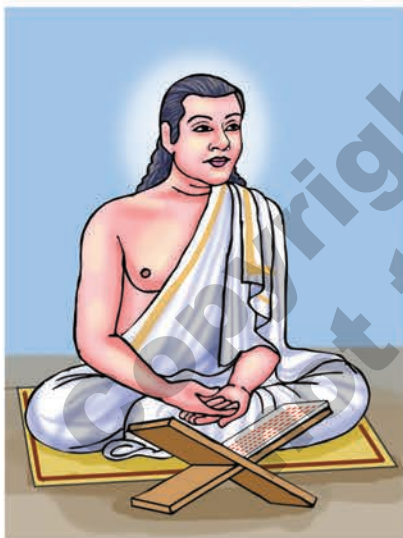


Pic- 4.7
Chaitanyadev

Towards the end of the 12 century A.D. the *Bhagavata* based *Bhakti* Movement became popular in Bengal through the **Geet Govinda** of **Jaidev**. Geet Govinda glorified the deeds and actions of Shri Krishna. This trend of Krishna worship which began with Geet Govinda was given shape and direction by **Chaitanyadev**. Chaitanyadev went on a pilgrimage to various places of India like Pandharpur, Somnath, Vrindavan, Dwarka, Mathura and Puri, before he came to Bengal and preached the philosophy of Bhaktism. He was a devotee of Shri Krishna and he did not believe in caste discrimination. He spread his teachings through his prayers conducted in groups, which is known as **Sangkirtana**.

Besides these names, other proselytes like Madhavacharya and Ballavacharya have played an important role in popularizing Bhakti Movement in North East India.

The spread of Bhakti Movement in Assam :



Pic- 4.8 Sreemanta
Sankardeva

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva was a scholar, social reformer, lyricist, composer, religious guru, writer and creator of new Assamese society. In the 15th century AD, the rigid rules of Hinduism in Assam, religious conservatives, high-level discrimination and so on created a lot of prejudice. During that time Sankardeva visited various shrines in India and also studied religious texts. During his travels he came in touch with the Bhakti movement that expanded in different parts of India.

That is why he is called the pioneer of Assamese language, culture and race. After his death, this devotional trend was taken forward by Mahapurush Madhavdeva and other pupils.

Activity :

- ✦ Make a list of all the books written by Srimanta Sankardeva. You may take the help of your guardian or teacher.

The Sufi Movement:

Just like in Hinduism, a liberal doctrine was created in Islam. In Islam many preachers have rejected religious orthodoxy and showed the way to worship peace and liberalism as the basis of religious origin. They remembered God with joy with the help of music, avoiding earthly property and happiness. This ideology is called **Sufism**.



Pic-4.9 The Shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya

At that time Sufi shrine or Ashram became a place of all kinds of social welfare discussions. The doors of the shrine were open to people of all faiths including king and his subjects. Mughal emperor Akbar, the great, often visited the dargah of Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer.

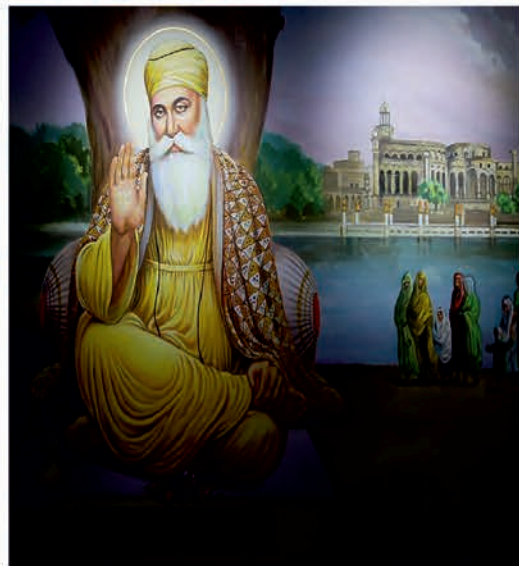
Activity :

- ★ 'The *Bhakti* Movement was instrumental in enriching the literature and culture of India' - Analyze the significance of the quoted sentence.

The Effects of the Neo- Religious Movements:

The Bhakti Movement and the Sufi Movement of medieval India had influenced not only the spiritual life of the people but also their social life. These movements had contributed immensely in reducing caste and status discrimination, superstitions and unnecessary ritualistic practices. Another important aspect of these movements is the status accorded to women. Since the foundation of *Bhaktism* and *Sufism* was liberal humanism, women too received the freedom to practice and preach religious doctrines. Apart from these, the *Bhakti* Movement had also played an important role in fostering Hindu-Muslim unity.

Another important contribution of this Movement is the rise of the regional languages. The preachers of this movement used the medium of regional languages to spread their messages. This not only enabled the common man to understand these precepts but also helped in developing the languages like Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Maithili, Tamil, Assamese, Brajawali etc. by bringing them into focus. The rise of



Pic-4.10 Guru Nanak

Sikhism was also a significant landmark of the *Bhakti* Movement.

Thus, many scholars believe that the *Bhakti* Movement played a major role in the regeneration of the medieval Indian society. Others believe that *Bhaktism* was a medium of the expression of new religious thoughts. On the whole, it can be said that the *Bhakti* Movement remains a process of analysis of the Indian society, religion, culture and traditional beliefs. The *Bhakti* Movement has also played a pivotal role in creating a national identity and unity among Indians.

Let us remember :

- ✦ The neo- religious movements of Bhaktism and Sufism of the 8 century A.D. influenced the concept of *Bhagavat Bhakti*, devotion towards one God.
- ✦ The Bhakti movement began in south India under the leadership of the *Alvars* and the *Nayanars*.
- ✦ The advent of Islam in medieval India had contributed to the ascent of *Bhaktism*.
- ✦ The chief founders of the Bhakti Movement are- Ramananda, Gyandev, Namdev, Eknath, Kabir, Meerabai, Surdas, Tulsi Das, Nanak, Srimanta Sankardeva and others.
- ✦ The teachings of Sankardeva helped in unifying the greater Assamese society.
- ✦ The ascent of Bhaktism in medieval India saw the rise of another contemporary movement in Islam known as Sufism.
- ✦ The fundamental concept of Bhaktism was the belief in one God and that God could be found through devotion and by taking His name rather than elaborate rituals.
- ✦ Bhakti Movement made an important contribution in the development of the regional languages, unification of social classes and the rise of Sikhism.

Exercise:

1. Answer the following questions-

- (a) What does the term *Bhaktism* mean?
- (b) What are the two reasons that gave rise to the *Bhakti* Movement?
- (c) What is the *Divya Prabandham*?
- (d) Write the names of four persons who led the *Bhakti* Movement in North India?
- (e) According to Sankardeva how can one achieve salvation?

2. Fill up the blanks by referring to your lesson.
- (a) Sankaracharya believed in _____.
 - (b) From the _____ century A.D., the Muslim Turks and Afghans had begun to migrate to India.
 - (c) Ramananda was the worshipper of _____.
 - (d) Tulsidas was regarded as _____.
 - (e) The religious poems composed by Kabir are called _____.
3. Write short notes on—
- (a) Sankaracharya (b) Gyandev (c) Ramananda (d) Nanak (e) Meerabai
4. Who were the Alvars? What was their main religious belief?
5. What was the fundamental tenet of Sufism? Write the names of two preachers who popularized Sufism in India.
6. Why was Kabir popular among both the Hindus and the Muslims?
7. Why did the preachers of *Bhakti* Movement try to introduce social reforms along with their religious precepts?
8. What do you think are the reasons behind the popularity of the *Bhakti* Movement in India?
9. Write within fifty words the contribution made by Srimanta Sankardeva to the Assamese society.

