

Devotional Paths to the Divine

You may have seen people perform rituals of worship, or singing *bhajans*, *kirtans* or *qawwalis*, or even repeating the name of God in silence, and noticed that some of them are moved to tears. Such intense devotion or love of God is the legacy of various kinds of *bhakti* and Sufi movements that have evolved since the eighth century. In class VI you would have read about the Bhakti poems of Alvars and Nayanars who were worshippers of Vishnu and Siva, respectively. Soon kings and chiefs built large temples for these gods and made land grants and other gifts to perform various rituals. Temple worship became elaborate, complex and expensive. Specially trained priests performed the rituals. People belonging to some castes were not allowed to even enter the temples. Soon, a reaction set in against such rituals and inequalities. New ideas on devotion to god emerged. Read on to know about it.

Philosophy and *Bhakti*

Shankara, one of the most influential philosophers of India, was born in Kerala in the eighth century. He was an advocate of *Advaita* or the doctrine of the oneness of the individual soul and the Supreme God which is the Ultimate Reality. He taught that Brahman, the only or Ultimate Reality, was formless and without any attributes. He preached renunciation of the world and adoption of the path of knowledge to understand the true nature of Brahman and attain salvation.

Ramanuja, born in South India in the eleventh century, was deeply influenced by the Alvars. According to him the best means of attaining salvation was through intense devotion to Vishnu. Vishnu in His grace helps the devotee to attain the bliss of union with Him. Ramanuja also to a large extent ensured a place for people of lower castes in temple worship. He propounded the doctrine of *Vishishtadvaita* or qualified oneness according to which the soul even when united with the Supreme God remained distinct. Ramanuja's doctrine greatly inspired the new strand of *bhakti* which developed in north India subsequently.

Basavanna's *Virashaivism*

We noted earlier the connection between the *bhakti* movement and temple worship. This in turn led to a reaction that was best represented in the *Virashaiva* movement initiated by Basavanna and his companions like Allama Prabhu and Akkamahadevi. This movement began in Karnataka in the mid-twelfth century. The Virashaivas argued strongly for the equality of all human beings and against Scriptural ideas about caste and the treatment of women. They were also against all forms of ritual and idol worship.

These are *vachanas* or sayings attributed to Basavanna:

*The rich
Will make temples for Shiva.
What shall I,
A poor man
Do?
My legs are pillars,
The body the shrine,
The head a cupola
Of gold.
Listen, O Lord of the meeting rivers,
Things standing shall fall,
But the moving ever shall stay.*

- ◆ What were the major ideas expressed by Basavanna?
- ◆ What is the temple that Basavanna is offering to God?

The Saints of Maharashtra

From the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries Maharashtra saw a great number of saint-poets, whose songs in simple Marathi continue to inspire people. The most important among them were Jnaneshwar, Namdev, Eknath and Tukaram as well as women like Sakkubai and the family of Chokhamela, who belonged to the “untouchable” Mahar caste. This regional tradition of *bhakti* focused on the Vitthala (a form of Vishnu) temple in Pandharpur, as well as on the notion of a personal god residing in the hearts of all people.



Fig 23.1 A fireside gathering of ascetics.

These saint-poets rejected all forms of ritualism, outward display of piety and social differences based on birth. In fact, they even rejected the idea of renunciation and preferred to live with their families, earning their livelihood like any other person, while humbly serving fellow human beings in need. A new humanist idea emerged as they insisted that *bhakti* lay in sharing others' pain. As the famous Gujarati saint Narsi Mehta said, "Vaishnavas are those who understand the pain of others."

This is an *abhang* (Marathi devotional hymn) of Sant Tukaram:

*He who identifies
with the battered and the beaten,
Mark him as a saint,
For God is with him.
He holds
Every forsaken man
Close to his heart,
He treats
A slave
As his own son.
Says Tuka,
I won't be tired
to repeat again,
Such a man
Is God
In person.*

- ◆ Why do you think Tukaram considers the friends of the poor and suffering as the real devotees of God?

Here is an *abhang* composed by Chokhamela's son:

*You made us low caste,
Why don't you face that fact, Great Lord?
Our whole life – left-over food to eat.
You should be ashamed of this.
You have eaten in our home.
How can you deny it?
Chokha's (son) Karmamela asks
Why did you give me life?*

- ◆ Discuss the ideas about the social order expressed in these compositions.

Nathpanthis, Siddhas and Yogis

A number of religious groups that emerged during this period criticised the ritual and other aspects of conventional religion and the social order, using simple, logical arguments. Among them were the *Nathpanthis*, *Siddhacharas* and *Yogis*. They advocated renunciation of the world. To them the path to salvation lay in meditation on the formless Ultimate Reality and the realisation of oneness with it. To achieve this they advocated intense training of the mind and body through practices like *yogasanas*, breathing exercises and meditation. These groups became particularly popular among low castes. Their criticism of conventional religion created the ground for devotional religion to become a popular force in northern India.

Islam and Sufism

The saints had much in common with the Sufis, so much so that it is believed that they adopted many ideas of each other. Sufis were Muslim mystics. They rejected

outward religiosity and emphasised love and devotion to God and compassion towards all fellow human beings.

Islam propagated strict monotheism or submission to one God. It also rejected idol worship and considerably simplified rituals of worship into collective prayers. At the same time Muslim scholars developed a holy law called *Shariat*. The Sufis often rejected the elaborate rituals and codes of behaviour demanded by Muslim religious scholars. They sought union with God much as a lover seeks his beloved with a disregard for the world. Like the saint-poets, the Sufis too composed poems expressing their feelings, and a rich literature in prose, including anecdotes and fables, developed around them. Among the great Sufis of Central Asia were Ghazzali, Rumi and Sadi. Like the *Nathpanthis*, *Siddhas* and *Yogis*,

the Sufis too believed that the heart can be trained to look at the world in a different way. They developed elaborate methods of training using *zikr* (chanting of a name or sacred formula), contemplation, *sama* (singing), *raqs* (dancing), discussion of parables, breath control, etc. under the guidance of a master or *pir*. Thus emerged the *silsilas*, a genealogy of Sufi teachers, each following a slightly different method (*tariqa*) of instruction and ritual practice.

A large number of Sufis from Central Asia settled in Hindustan from the eleventh century onwards. This process was strengthened with the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate, when several major Sufi centres developed all over the subcontinent. The *Chishti silsila* was among the most influential orders. It had a long line of teachers like Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer, Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki of Delhi, Baba Farid of Punjab, Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi and Bandanawaz Gisudaraz of Gulbarga.

The Sufi masters held their assemblies in their *khanqahs* or hospices. Devotees of all descriptions including members of the royalty and nobility, and ordinary people flocked to these *khanqahs*. They discussed spiritual matters, sought the blessings of the saints in solving their worldly problems, or simply attended the music and dance sessions.

Often people attributed Sufi masters with miraculous powers that could relieve others of their illnesses and troubles. The tomb or *dargah* of



Fig 23.2 Mystics in ecstasy.

a Sufi saint became a place of pilgrimage to which thousands of people of all faiths thronged.

- ◆ If you have ever been to a dargah describe it to your friends in the class. How do people show respects to the *Pir* and what do they pray for there.

New Religious Developments in India

The period after the thirteenth century saw a new wave of the *bhakti* movement in north India. This was an age when Islam, Hinduism, Sufism, various strands of *bhakti*, and the *Nathpanths*, *Siddhas* and *Yogis* influenced one another. We saw that new towns and kingdoms were emerging, and people were taking up new professions and finding new roles for themselves. Such people, especially crafts persons, peasants, traders and labourers, thronged to listen to these new saints and spread their ideas. Some of them like Kabir and Baba Guru Nanak rejected orthodox customs and beliefs.

Poets like Bammera Potana, Annamacharya, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Tulsidas and Surdas accepted existing beliefs and practices but wanted to make these accessible to all.

Potana who lived the life of a peasant in the village Bammera near Warangal, composed the famous *Mahabhagavatamu* in Telugu. Potana was called a '*Sahaja Kavi*', a natural poet. He wrote to express his natural devotional feelings in a lucid poetry.

Thallapaka Annamacharya (1408–1503) was a popular saint-composer of Andhra Pradesh and is revered as '*pada kavita pitamaha*'. Annamayya dedicated his life for composing and singing the glories of Lord Venkateswara of Tirupati. His compositions were mostly extempore in spoken dialect unlike in the classics of the age which were written in the classical (*Grandhika*) style. In '*Annamacharya Charitramu*' it is said that Annamayya composed thirty two thousand *keertanas* on Lord Venkateswara.

In his *keertanas*, he took up subjects such as morality, dharma and righteousness. He was one of the first few who opposed the social stigma towards the untouchable castes in his era. In his sankeertanas, "*Brahmam Okkate Parabrahmam Okkate...*" and "*E Kulajudainanemi Evvadainanemi...*", he describes that the relationship between God and human is the same irrespective of the later's color, caste and financial status, in beautiful yet powerful usage of words.

తందనాన ఆహి - తందనానపురె

తందనాన భళా - తందనాన

బ్రహ్మమొక్కటె పరబ్రహ్మమొక్కటె పర

బ్రహ్మమొక్కటె పరబ్రహ్మమొక్కటె ...

నిండార రాజు నిద్రించు నిద్రయు నొకటే

అండనే బంటు నిద్ర అదియు నొకటే ...

మెండైన బ్రహ్మణుడు - మెట్టుభూమి యొకటే

చండాలుడుండేటి సరిభూమి యొకటే ...

- Annamacharya Keertana

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1534) was a Vaishnava saint and social reformer in eastern India (present day Bangladesh and West Bengal). Chaitanya was a notable proponent for the Vaishnava school of *Bhakti yoga* (meaning loving devotion to Krishna/God) based on the philosophy of the *Bhagavata Purana* and *Bhagavad Gita*. He propagated community singing of Bhajans and dancing with devotion. He worshipped the forms of Krishna and popularised the chanting of the ‘*Hare Krishna*’ mantra.

Kancherla Gopanna (1620 - 1680), popularly known as Bhakta Ramadasu, was a 17th century devotee of Sri Rama and a composer of Carnatic music. He is one among the famous *vaggeyakaras* (same person being the writer and composer of a song) in the Telugu language. He is renowned for constructing a famous temple for Sri Rama at Bhadrachalam. He composed devotional lyrics to Rama which are popularly known as *Ramadaasu Keertanalu*. He wrote *Dasarathi Shatakamu*, a collection of nearly 108 poems dedicated to Lord Rama.

ఏ తీరుగ నను దయ చూచెదవో, ఇన వంశోత్తమ రామా
నా తరమా భవ సాగరమీదను, నలిన దళేక్షణ రామా
శ్రీరఘునందన సీతా రమణా, శ్రీతజన పోషక రామా
కారుణ్యాలయ భక్త వరద నిను, కన్నది కాసుపు రామా...

- Ramadasu Keertana

- ◆ Can you name some *vaggeyakaras* and their *Keertanas*?

Tulsidas conceived of God in the form of Rama. Tulsidas’s composition, the *Ramcharitmanas*, written in Awadhi (a language used in eastern Uttar Pradesh), is important both as an expression of his devotion and as a literary work. Also contemporary was Shankaradeva of Assam (late fifteenth century) who emphasised devotion to Vishnu, and composed poems and plays in Assamese. He began the practice of setting up *namghars* or houses of recitation and prayer, a practice that continues to date.

This tradition also included saints like Dadu Dayal, Ravidas and Mirabai. Mirabai was a Rajput princess married into the royal family of Mewar in the sixteenth century. Mirabai became a disciple of Ravidas, a saint from a caste considered “untouchable”. She was devoted to Krishna and composed innumerable



Fig 23.3 A painting of Mirabai.

bhajans expressing her intense devotion. Her songs also openly challenged the norms of the “upper” castes and became popular with the masses in Rajasthan and Gujarat.

A unique feature of most of the saints is that their works were composed in regional languages and could be sung. They became immensely popular and were handed down orally from generation to generation. Usually the poorest, most deprived communities and women transmitted these

songs, often adding their own experiences. Thus the songs as we have them today are as much a creation of the saints as of generations of people who sang them. They have become a part of our living popular culture.

- ◆ Have you listened to any such old *bhajans* in your mother tongue? Find out who composed them. Write down some of them and discuss their meaning in the class.

A Closer Look: Kabir

Kabir, who probably lived in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, was one of the most influential saints. He was brought up in a family of Muslim *julahas* or weavers settled near the city of Benares (Varanasi). We have little reliable information about his life. We get to know



23.4 A painting of Kabir working on a loom.

of his ideas from a vast collection of verses called *sakhis* and *pads* said to have been composed by him and sung by wandering *bhajan* singers. Some of these were later collected and preserved in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, *Panch Vani* and *Bijak*.

Kabir's teachings were based on a complete, indeed vehement, rejection of the major religious traditions. His teachings openly ridiculed all forms of external worship of both 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.

Kabir believed in a formless Supreme God and preached that the only path to salvation was through *bhakti* or devotion. Kabir drew his followers from among both Hindus and Muslims.

Here is a composition of Kabir:

*O Allah-Ram present in all living beings
Have mercy on your servants, O Lord!
Why bump your head on the ground,
Why bathe your body in water?
You kill and you call yourself "humble",
But your vices you conceal.
Twenty-four times the Brahmana keeps
the ekadasi fast,
While the Qazi observes the Ramzan.
Tell me why does he set aside the eleven
months
To seek spiritual fruit in the twelfth?
Hari dwells in the East, they say
And Allah resides in the West,
Search for him in your heart, in the heart
of your heart;
There he dwells, Rahim-Ram*

A Closer Look: Baba Guru Nanak

We know more about Guru Nanak (1469-1539 AD) than about Kabir. Born at Talwandi (Nankana Sahib in Pakistan), he travelled widely before establishing a centre at Kartarpur (Dera Baba Nanak on the river Ravi). Irrespective of their former creed, caste or gender, his followers ate together in the common kitchen (*langar*). The sacred space thus created by Guru Nanak was known as *dharmsal*.



23.5 Baba Guru Nanak as a young man, discussion with holy men.

The number of Guru Nanak's followers increased through the sixteenth century under his successors. They belonged to a number of castes; but traders, agriculturists, artisans and craftsmen predominated. This may have something to do with Guru Nanak's insistence that his followers must be householders and should adopt productive and useful occupations. They were also expected to contribute to the general funds of the community of followers.

The ideas of Guru Nanak had a huge impact on this movement from the very beginning. He emphasised the importance of the worship of one God. He insisted that caste, creed or gender was irrelevant for attaining liberation. His idea of liberation

was not that of a state of inert bliss but rather the pursuit of active life with a strong sense of social commitment. He himself used the terms *nam*, *dan* and *isnan* for the essence of his teaching, which actually meant right worship, welfare of others and purity of conduct. His teachings are now remembered as *nam-japna*, *kirt-karna* and *vand-chhakna*, which also underline the importance of right belief and worship, honest living, and helping others. Thus, Guru Nanak's idea of equality had social and political implications. This might partly explain the difference between the history of the followers of Guru Nanak and the history of the followers of the other religious figures of the medieval centuries, like Kabir, Ravidas and Dadu whose ideas were very similar to those of Guru Nanak.

Key words :

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|--------------------|---------------------|
| 1. <i>Advaita</i> | 5. <i>Bhakti</i> |
| 2. Salvation | 6. <i>Yogasanas</i> |
| 3. <i>Alvars</i> | 7. <i>Bijak</i> |
| 4. <i>Nayanars</i> | 8. <i>Abhang</i> |

Improve your learning

- Fill in the blanks:
 - Ramanuja was influenced by the _____.
 - _____, _____ and _____ were advocates of *Virashaivism*.
 - _____ was an important centre of the *Bhakti* tradition in Maharashtra.
- Describe the beliefs and practices of the *Nathpanthis*, *Siddhas* and *Yogis*.
- What were the major ideas expressed by Kabir? How did he express them?
- What were the major beliefs and practices of the Sufis?
- Why do you think many teachers rejected prevalent religious beliefs and practices?
- What were the major teachings of Baba Guru Nanak?
- For either the *Virashaivas* or the saints of Maharashtra, discuss their attitude towards caste.
- Why do you think ordinary people preserved the memory of Mirabai?

Project work :

- Find out whether in your neighbourhood there are any dargahs, gurudwaras or temples associated with saints of the *bhakti* tradition. Visit any one of these and describe what you see and hear.
- For any of the saint-poets whose compositions have been included in this chapter, find out more about their works, noting down other poems. Find out whether these are sung, how they are sung, and what the poets wrote about.