

A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON BHAKTI AND SUFI MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT:

The main aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of the two religious Bhakti and Sufi movement. The Bhakti and Sufi Movements played a crucial role in creating a composite culture whose legacy can be seen to this day. The Bhakti movement has its originated in eighth-century South India and the Origins of Sufism can be traced to the early days of Islam in seventh-century in Arabian Peninsula. The Bhakti movement swept over East and North India from the 15th century onwards. It shared direct emotional and intellection of the divine. Sufism spans many continents and cultures, laid emphasized on simplicity and austerity.

KEY-WORDS: *Polytheism, Brotherhood, Ceremonies, Fanaticism, Equality, Toleration, Free thought, Submission.*

MEANING AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

‘Bhakti’ means burning love or devotion for God. The devotees (Bhakts) of God do not believe in cast-distinctions and class-hatred and believe in the brotherhood of all humanity. They believe in the unity of Godhead and discard all sorts of ceremonies and rituals. These doctrines of Bhakti were not new to the Indians and are even propounded in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita. But such emphasis began to be laid on the Bhakti movement in the 11th and the 12th centuries AD when the Indian came into contact with the Muslims. Because of the prevailing evils in the Hindu society- such as caste-hatred or untouchability, idolatry or image worship and polytheism or worship of many Gods etc. the Muslims were able to win over thousands of Hindus to their fold. Thus Hinduism found itself in a precarious condition. But fortunately for the Hindus a large number of reformers came to the fore-front. They tried to remove all the evils in their religion and told the common masses that ‘unity of Godhood and ‘brotherhood of man’ were not the exclusive possessions of Islam, but they were the main principles of the Vedanta religion¹. It is noted out that this movement was going on here even before the coming of the Turks and which continued till the time of Akbar. This movement stressed the establishment of the mystic relationship between God and man. Some historians say that Bhakti Movement is as old as Aryan Vedas but the movement took roots from the seventh century AD². Moreover, having lived side by side for many centuries both

the Hindus and the Muslims lost much of their fanaticism and tried to live as good neighbors³. The exponents of the Bhakti movement in Medieval India were mystic saints who had many things in common. They were non-sectarian in the sense that they were not affiliated to any particular sect. they had no desire to set up separate religious sects of their own. They were free from bondage of any particular creed. They had no blind faith in any sacred scriptures. They attained greatness by individual exertion. They did not follow any rituals or ceremonies. Most of them condemned idolatry. They believed in one God. They realized the unity of God although different names such as Rama, Krishna, and Allah etc. were used by different religions. Their views were that Bhakti or devotion to god was the only means of salvation. Bhakti implied single-minded, un-interrupted and extreme devotion to God without any ultimate motive. The love of a devotee was compared to the devotion of a servant to his master, love between friends, and affection of a mother for her child and the passion of a lover for his beloved. God was the source of all joys or eternal bliss. He did not live in temple but in the hearts of men. Approach to god through personal love and devotion was the foundation of religious life⁴. The Hindus had by this time came to know the hollowness of many of their cherished principles such as untouched-ability, caste-pride, image-worship and useless religious ceremonies, and so they were ready to meet the Muslims half-way. The Muslims too had realized as they had also to live in India they must have to give up the policy of persecution. In this way they were also ready for friendship. The ground was ready and the religious reformers in both the communities took the advantage of such a good opportunity. The Bhakti reformers among the Hindus and the Sufi saints among the Muslims first of all laid emphasis on those principles which were somewhat common or familiar to each other. Consequently they laid emphasis on good actions, equality of all human beings and worship of one all-powerful God. In this way the Bhakti movement got a great momentum⁵.

DEVELOPMENT OF SUFISM AND ITS ORIGIN

Sufism, the religious philosophy of Islam, is described in the oldest extant definition as the apprehension of divine realities, and Muhammadian mystics are fond of calling themselves *Ahl al-Haqq*, the followers of the real. Just as the Christian type cannot be understood without reference to Christianity, so the Muhammadian type must be viewed in connection with the outward and inward development of Islam. The word “mystic”, which has passed from the Greek religion into European literature, is represented in Arabic, Persian and the Turkish, the three chief languages of Islam, by ‘Sufi’. The term, however, are not precisely synonymous, for ‘Sufi’ has a specific religious connotation, and is restricted by usages to those mystics who profess the Mohammadan faith⁶. Sufism is a reform movement within Islam which laid emphasis on toleration, free thought and liberal ideas. The Sufis believed in the equality of all human beings, whether Muslims, Hindus or the followers of any other creed. According to them all religions were ‘the manifestation of the desire to the known truth’. The spirit underlying all the religions was one and the same, though they might have different forms. So the Sufis were in favor of toleration and did not preach the persecution of other people only because of their different religions. They were against orthodoxy of any kind and regard free thought as the primary condition to spiritual advancement. In a way Sufism was very much like the Vedantic philosophy. In fact this liberal movement among the Muslims started in Persia, the house of Shia, where some religious men and holy saints arrived at the conclusion that there was no fundamental difference between the Shias and the Sunnis, and likewise between Islam and other religions. They felt that different religions were like different ways which reach the same goal, i.e., the attainment of God’s favor. They preached the brotherhood of man and emphasized on the principle of toleration and taught people to live like good neighbors. Slowly and slowly these Sufis began to pour India where they were greatly honored because

here in India reformers of the Bhakti Movement were already busy preaching somewhat similar principles to the people of India. So the number of these liberal minded Muslims and Sufis began to increase⁷.

However, by the eleventh century Sufism evolved into a well-developed movement with a body of literature on Quranic studies and Sufi practices. Institutionally, the Sufis began to organize communities around the hospice or khanqah (Persian) controlled by a teaching master known as sheikh (in Arabic), Pir or Murshid (in Persian). He enrolled disciples (*murids*) and appointed a successor (*khalifa*). He established rules for spiritual conduct and interaction between inmates as well as between laypersons and the master⁸.

CHIEF PRINCIPLES OF BHAKTI MOVEMENT

Some of the chief principles of the Bhakti Movement were as follows: (a) God is one and he alone should be worshipped. (b) By following the path of the true devotion (or bhakti) one can find salvation. (c) A true Guru is indispensable for realizing God or getting the salvation. (d) Much emphasis is laid on the Rama-cult and the Krishna-cult. Both Rama and Krishna were regarded as an incarnation of God on earth. (e) All men are equal and there is no question of superiority or inferiority among them. There is brotherhood of mankind. (f) The image-worship, caste-distinction and class hatred were denounced. (g) Blind faith, useless ceremonies and showy religious rites were severely attacked and much emphasis was laid on the right actions⁹. (h) Majority of Saints of Bhakti movement tries to generate an atmosphere of goodwill between Hindus and Muslims. Ballabcharya wanted to bring about harmony between the Hindus and Muslims remaining aloof from the politics. His door was open for all alike, be he Sudra Brahmin, Muslim, rich or poor. (i) The Bhakti Saints did not consider Sanskrit or any other language as superior to other language and placed their views in the language of the common man. They believed rightly that language is only a medium for exchange of ideas. Kabir in fact adopted words of many languages. Therefore many scholars describe his language as mixed¹⁰.

CHIEF PRINCIPLES OF SUFISM

The principles of Sufism resemble very much with those of the Bhakti cult and it appears as if the Vedantic philosophy had greatly affected it. (a) God is one and all powerful, and all men are His children. (b) If anyone wants to get the love and blessings of god he should try to love mankind. An English poet has similarly remarked, to love god is to love mankind. (c) True faith depends upon right living. Only good actions lead to good results and so one should try to do good acts rather than run after rituals and useless religious ceremonies. (d) All religions are inherently good because they all aim at the attainment of god's love. Different religions are only the different manifestations of the desire to know the truth. (e) All men are equal and all distinctions based on caste, color and creed are to be condemned. (f) Like the Vedanta philosophy Sufism laid emphasis on the principle that individual souls are manifestations of the supreme soul in which they are finally immersed. (g) Free way of thinking is a great blessing and is very necessary for the spiritual advancement¹¹.

EFFECTS OF SUFISM AND BHAKTI MOVEMENT

The Bhakti movements created far-fetching effects, the chief among them are however, the following- (a) *Removing the Bitterness between Hindus and the Muslims*: Most of the Bhakti reformers laid a great emphasis on the equality of all religions and preached the principles of coexistence. As a result of their teachings much of the bitterness between the Hindus and Muslims were removed. The Hindus began to worship the Muslims saints and

the Muslims began to show respect for the Hindus. (b) *Checking the Speed of Conversion*: The ideas of unity Godhead and brotherhood of man greatly appealed to the low caste, among the Hindus and consequently they began to embrace Islam with a rapid speed. But fortunately these Bhakti reformers came to the fore-front and told the people that those principles were not new to the Hindus but were contained in the Upanishads and the Bhagvad-Gita. They warned the Hindus that they should give up their evils, such as caste-distinctions, image-worship and worthless rituals, etc., in order to save themselves from extinction. (c) *Wholesome effect on Indian Rulers*: The Bhakti movement created a good influence on the Indian rulers, who began to treat all their subjects alike, generously and impartiality. It created such national rulers as Sher Shah and Akbar and encouraged national way of thinking. (d) *Rise of Vernacular Literature*: The Bhakti reformers adopted the common language of the people and preached in it instead of preaching either in Sanskrit or in Persian. In this way a great impetus was given to the development of the vernaculars. (e) *A Great Setback to the Superiority of the Brahmanas*: The Bhakti reformers preached against ritualism, sacrifices, and unnecessary religious rites, equality of all men and superiority of none. In this way the Brahmanas received a great set back to the superiority¹².

Sufism, however, played a great part in promoting the feeling of toleration among the Muslims. It greatly encouraged the feeling of Hindu-Muslim unity. It led to the popularity of the Bhakti movement, because many principles of Sufism were similar to those of the Bhakti cult. It had a great liberalizing effect on the state policy of many Indian rulers. It was under the influence of Sufism that many Indian rulers like Sher Shah Suri and Akbar gave up much of their orthodoxy and began to treat all their subjects' alike. The Hindus began to venerate the Muslim saints and the Muslim on their part began to show respect to the Hindu Gods¹³.

SOME PROMINENT SUFI AND BHAKTI REFORMERS

It has been mentioned that the early Sufis in India were those who migrated to this country were from Persia. Among them the first name is that of *Hazrat Khawaja Muin-ud-Din Chisti*, who was born in 1142 AD in Central Asia and later on migrated to India. He instructed the people to live in co-operation with each other and to respect each other's religion. When he died in 1236 AD he was buried at Ajmer. His Durgah at Ajmer has become an important place of pilgrimage for the Muslims in India and abroad. *Hazrat Khawaj Nizam-ud-Din Aulia*, of Delhi, *Salim Chisti* of Sikri, etc. were some other great Sufi reformers who urged the people to rise above their narrow-mindedness and to develop in them the spirit of free thought. 'Ishwar' and 'Allah' is one and the same thing and so the people should not fight over this question any more. Equally important Sufi Saints were *Hazrat Baba Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki*, *Hazrat Baba Farid-ud-Din Ganjshakar*, *Hazrat Qutub-i-Alam Shabzvari*, *Hazrat Ali Hamdani* and *Hazrat Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali* who taught the people to treat all men alike and respect each other's religion without any differences whatsoever. These saintly people had also many Hindu followers and both the Hindus and the Muslims venerated them. Later on Akbar also encouraged this Sufi movement. He held Shaikh Mubarak and his two sons *AbulFazal* and *Faizi* in great esteem because they were all Sufis and held liberal views. It was they who exerted a powerful influence on Akbar's mind and saved him from orthodox group. It was they who encouraged Akbar to found Din-i-Ilahi. These Sufis continued to flourish up to the reign of Shah Jahan. Frequently though they received some hindrances but all went in vain. Eminent poets like Amir Khusru and Malik Muhammad Jayasi also sung in praise of the Sufi principles¹⁴.

Some prominent Bhakti reformers who used to play an important role to promote this movement were as follows. The Chief among them are *Kabir*, *Ramanuja*, *Ramananda*, *Namdeva*, *Guru Nanak*, *Vallahachraya*, *Chaitanya*

and Mira Bai. (a) **Kabir:** Perhaps the most important reformer of the Bhakti movement was Kabir. He was the most famous disciple of Ramanand and flourished in the first half of the 15th century AD. He was born at Benaras around 1398 AD and was a weaver by profession. His teachings are contained in his '*dohas*' which are still sung with great pleasure even up to this day. In them he preached against caste distinctions, supremacy of the Brahmans, image worship, rituals and ceremonies, pilgrimage to the so-called holy places and insincerity and hypocrisy. Against image worship he says: "*If by worshipping stones one can find God, I shall worship a mountain, better than these stones (idols) is a stone of the flour mill with which men grind the corn*". Similarly, against insincerity and hypocrisy he remarks, "*It is not by fashion and repeating prayers and the creed that one Goethe to heaven, the inner veil of the temple of Mecca is in man's heart, if truth he knows.*" Kabir makes no distinction between the Hindus and the Muslims. They are pots of the same clay and are following different routes only to reach a common goal. Bathing in the Ganges and pilgrimage to Mecca are useless if the heart is not pure. He reproached both the '*Maulvis*' and the '*Pandiits*' alike and spared none. One can attain freedom from transmigration by means of Bhakti or sincere devotion of God. (b) **Ramanuja:** The first great reformer of the Bhakti movement was born in about 1166 AD in Madras and preached the gospel of Vaishnavism in the south in the 12th century AD. He preached his followers to worship Vishnu, the incarnation of God with full devotion¹⁵. According to him the way to Moksha lies through Karma, Gyan and Bhakti. The performance of duty without any selfish motive purifies the mind¹⁶. (c) **Ramananda:** He used to flourish in India in the 14th century and belonged to a Brahmana family of Allahabad, was the founder of Bhakti movement in north India. He was the first reformer to preach in Hindi, the language of the masses. He used to say: '*JatiPatiPuchchaina Koi, hariKoBhaje so harika Hoi*'. (d) **Namdeva:** He was the first in Maharashtra to preach against caste, image-worship and rituals and ceremonies. According to him the God of the Hindus, Muslims as well as the Brahmana and the Chandalas is one and the same and so all are equal. He had many Muslim disciples, too and died at the ripe age of eighty. (e) **Guru Nanak:** The founder of the Sikh faith in India took his birth at Talwandi (Punjab) in 1469, preached against image-worship and caste distinctions and laid emphasis on the unity of God. About hypocrisy and conceits he said: '*Religion consisted not in wandering in foreign countries or in bathing at places of pilgrimage. Abide pure amidst the impurities at the world; thus shall thou find the way to religion.*' (f) **Vallabcharya** preached that there was no difference between the '*Atma*' and the '*Paramatma*' (or God). "It is by means of Bhakti that one can get salvation and merge in him." (g) **ChaitanyaMahaprabhu** an inhabitant of Nadia (1485 AD) preached the Bhakti Cult in Bengal was an ardent devotee of Krishna and preached the worship of Krishna among the people. In this connection he said: "*If creature adores Krishna and serves his Guru, he is released from the meshes of illusion and attains to Krishna's feet.*" (h) **Mira Bai** was a great worshipper of Krishna who preached in '*Brijhasa*' the common language of the people and her devotional songs are very sweet and still very popular among the masses. Owing to her sweet devotional songs she did a lot in popularizing the Bhakti cult¹⁷.

A COMPARISON OF SUFI AND BHAKTI MOVEMENT

Mentions have already been made in the aforesaid pages about the background of the development of Bhakti and Sufi movement. A discussion has already been made about this two religious movement. The Bhakti emphasizes a personal devotion for one god. They were worshippers of Krishna. They approached him with a love based on parental, filial, friendly and devotional attitudes. Vallabha formed a sect based on Sri Krishna-Radha in the 16th century AD. Krishna-Bhakti was also given much attention by Sri Chaitanya (AD 1485-1533) who was a contemporary of Vallabha. However Sri Chaitanya's worship was of the ascetic kind and popularization of the chanting of Hari (Sri Krishna), as a way to spiritual liberation. Namdeva (end of 14th century AD) and

Ramananda were further important Bhakti Saints. The North Indian School was popularized by the disciples of Ramananda such as Kabir who used local language for preaching. Mirabai herself was initiated by Ravidas as disciple of Ramananda¹⁸. In a nut-shell it can safely say that, “with some difference in details all these reformers of the Bhakti cult preached the fundamental equality of all religions and unity of the Godhead; held that the dignity of man depended on his actions and not on his birth; protested against excessive formalities of religion and domination of priests; and emphasized simple devotion and faith as the means of salvation for one and all¹⁹.” *Let us now turn to Sufism*, which is a discipline which aims at the personal experience of the unity of God. Sufism began around the 8th century with Saints such as Hazrat’ HabibAjami (AD 738). Some scholars feel that Sufism is not against the Islamic law. In fact the process of Sufism is closely interwoven in the Islamic law. Sufism can be explained from the viewpoint of three basic religious attitudes found in the Quran. These are the attitudes of *Islam, Iman and Ihsan*. The attitude of Islam is that of submission to the will of Allah and the teachings of the Quran. Iman designates a further penetration into the religion and strong faith in the teachings. *Ihsan* is the highest stage of spiritual ascent. These are the three stages of religiosity in Islam. It can be summed up with the words of *Dr. Ishwari Prashad*: “The Sufi saints believed and preached that the diverse creeds were only the manifestations of the desire to know the truth and laid stress upon the spirit underlying all religious rather than upon the forms in which they are clothed. The Sufi doctrine marked a rebellion against the letter of the law and its exponents urged free thought as the primary condition of the spiritual attainment. Sufism is very much like Vedanta philosophy which teaches that the individual souls are only manifestation of the supreme soul in which they are finally immersed²⁰.”

It is noted that the Sufi and the Bhakti movements coalesce in various areas. Both the movements’ main motto is to attain the unity of God or to reach heights through devotion. It can be said with the words of Kabir that “They are pots of the same clay and are following different routes only to reach a common goal”.

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