



Understanding Liberation in the Bhakti Movement

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Abstract

It was during the Bhakti Movement, the idea of Moksha, which is fundamental to Indian religious thought, experiences a profound metamorphosis. In stark contrast to their earlier ideas based on ritual renunciation or monistic abstraction, Bhakti intellectuals from various regions and sects re conceived liberation as a relational, emotional, and corporeal experience. Therefore, emancipation becomes less about escaping the world and more about maintaining a relationship with the divine, the community, and oneself. This provides a humanized and transforming alternative to traditional metaphysical liberation. The study engages how devotional surrender in bhakti parallels the idea of productive love- a mode of being that affirms life and breaks the alienation of the modern self. The paper positions Bhakti liberation not only as a spiritual emancipation but as a existential freedom rooted in relational being. In doing so, it bridges mystical devotion and modern humanistic thought, offering a cross cultural rethinking of what it means to be free.



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Introduction

Religion is as old as human civilization; and it has guided humans in every walk of their life through civilizations. With the growing complexities in the course of the history of human civilizations, religion was vested into the hands of few who were generally the elite and the privileged sections of society. With the passage of time, religion along with its institutions, started affecting the political, social and economic facets of the people. Under such circumstances, the idea of freedom – its extent and the restrictions on peoples' lives -- becomes prominent. Freedom, may sound a very modern concept; but the urge for it has been an integral part of every stage of human

civilization, including those from the ancient past and cut across time and space. This, indeed an integral part of human consciousness across time and space had brought about reforms and changes in religion and its practices as such. In religion, Liberation is understood as the ultimate goal to be attained. Every religion considers liberation to be the stage where a human escapes the cycle of birth and rebirth, and all religion holds life in this material world as a cause of pain and sorrow and suffering in this world.

The term Bhakti derives from a Sanskrit root, 'Bhaj' which defines to divide, distribute, alert or apportion to, as well as to serve, honor, revere, love and adore.

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It is also an intense emotional attachment or likening towards a personal God. Bhakti as an idea is ancient in India. The *Bhagavad Gita* mentions that one should give up all religious paths and take refuge in God alone, and it discussed ways to know God fully and practice yoga and take refuge in God (Pande, *Religious Movements in Medieval India*, 2005). It developed into a movement, starting in the 7th century in the state of the southern part of India and slowly travelling to the different parts of the country. The Bhakti movement was based on the idea of attaining liberation through the means of Bhakti, where the devotion towards the supreme was regarded as the only way of reaching to God. It is in this context the importance to understand the Liberation in the Bhakti movement.

The study of the Bhakti movement has been one of the most important area of scholarship of our time. A significant amount of works has been produced over a period of time which gives an insight into the importance of the movement. The available literatures on this subject mainly focuses on the study of the social, political and economic aspects but lacks in terms of locating the possibilities of liberation in the societal sense or merely in the individual.

Hiren Gohain, in his work *The Labyrinth of Bhakti and Some Questions of Medieval Indian History*, puts an insight into the social structures and its impact on the development of the Bhakti movement. The idea of liberation is well dig by Eric Fromm in his work *The Fear of Freedom* where the concept of Freedom as a need of an individual as well as the need of the society has been identified. It is understood how the cost of the freedom is bore by the other.

Uma Chakravarti's *Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State* remains a foundational work for women's studies. The essay focuses on early India and Pre-Bhakti textual traditions, through its conceptual language and theoretical lens helps in understanding the subversive and transformative dimension of the Bhakti Movement. The movement's embrace of female devotion, rejection of caste hierarchy, and vernacular spirituality all become more apparent when viewed in the context of patriarchal hierarchies.

Materials and Methods

The research has been carried out mainly using secondary sources, and using the seminal works of eminent scholars. This includes both books and articles. It has also used some of the songs by eminent Bhakti saints.

Results and Discussions

Bhakti was a personal Devotion in order to attain liberation. Liberation was understood as a conceptualized union with the divine, wherein the devotee merged with the God through Love and devotion. It was the bhakti movement which democratized the idea of liberation, stating that anyone, regardless of caste, gender or social status could attain Moksha through sincere devotion. The analysis of numerous research showed that, despite being ancient in Indian contexts, the concept of Bhakti was becoming more and more popular and developing into a movement that sought independence or emancipation. The movement was sparked by the people's growing dissatisfaction and their incapacity to obtain God. It is also known that the Bhakti Movement empowered people to ask questions and seek freedom, both at the individual level and social level. It resulted in the pursuit of both materialistic and metaphysical liberty. One of the most revolutionary aspects of the bhakti movement's concept of Liberation was its inclusivity stating that the liberation was available to all regardless of social position. his was a drastic change from the old ritualistic and caste-based structures, which frequently prevented a sizable portion of the populace from advancing spiritually.

Bhakti as a concept is ancient in Hinduism and in many other Indian or Indic religions, so to say. The Bhakti movement of the medieval period was an idealistic expression of the socio-economic realities of the time. The changes as well as the developments in the social structures were the impact of both the internal conditions as well as the external influences.

Why was the need for liberation or freedom articulated during this period and how did Bhakti help realize such ideas? Politically the period can be seen as a phase when the centralized form of government was on decline which led to the growth of provincial

and petty states in India. This essential feature of feudalism in Western Europe – the decline of the unified administrative structure along with trade and communication getting decimated – was beginning to be seen in mediaeval Indian society as well and the strengthening of feudal institutions taking forms to further exploitation.

What characterizes this medieval society is the lack of freedom. Every individual in the society was chained to his role in the social order. A man in such society had little or no freedom to move socially from one class to the other. The established social order in the society based on birth, the caste system which created a seclusion in the society also laid the basis for a hierarchical order where the Brahmins stood on the top controlling the religion; they were accorded the status of being the messenger to God. In order to maintain their status quo, complex rituals and rites, the performance of which was left exclusively to them aided their superior status and exploitation of a large mass of people who happened to be the cultivating class.

The individual, in this society, was neither free nor was he alone; all walks of life, steeped in unfreedom were held as the norm for the community as such. This helped a certain stability and hence an incentive for the non-Brahmin ruling classes to ensure it in perpetuity. As Erich Fromm, would describe modern society, in having a distinct, unchangeable, and unquestionable place in the social world from the moment of birth, man was rooted in a structuralized whole, and thus life had a meaning which left no place, and no need, for doubt. A person was identical with his role in the society; he was a peasant, an artisan, a knight, and not an individual who happened to have his own occupation. (Fromm, *et al.*, 2012)

The lack of Freedom, and at the same time their inability to improve their social condition as well as the lack of connecting with the divinity shows that they were in a state of *alienation*. The term '*alienation*' does not possess a clear-cut definition; apart from the fact that it carries different meanings with the different schools of thought, *alienation* also signifies differently in different stages of the civilization, or more specifically in the different modes of production. In a feudal society, as it prevailed in those when the Bhakti movement emerged, it is possible to perceive *alienation* as a state of being or

the feeling of estrangement of the people from the aspects of their human nature as a consequence of the division of labor and living in the society of stratified social classes.

In simple terms, it is an individual or a group who do not fit in with the majority, and chooses or are made to stay away from the mainstream. "*Alienation* literally connotes the sense of 'divide', or the dichotomy between I and the other' manifesting in forms of contradictions in the social, economic, political and religious domains." (Debnath, *et al.*, 2021) Among the various forms of *alienation*, Ludwig Feuerbach, discusses the concept of *alienation* from the religious standpoint. Feuerbach realizes that the acceptance of a historical form of religion and God have together estranged men from their actual nature. (Debnath, *et al.*, 2021)

There was suffering and pain in the society, and there was the religion, which persuaded that the suffering and the cause of it more tolerable by explaining it as a result of their cycle of rebirth, which was again a result of their actions and deeds in their previous lives, and there in capabilities to attain liberation or *Moksha*; and liberation was possible only with an end the cycle of rebirth and suffering. Religion, as such, fostered a sense of guilt, and made them believe that it was an individual's actions which causes pain and suffering keeping all the other agencies safe and irresponsible for the worldly chaos.

It was in this context that the Bhakti movement, was thought to improve the deteriorating society and an ideology to free from the bondages to any particular sect or scriptures emerged in mediaeval India. Bhakti as a mode of devotion and a means to attain God and seek liberation belonged to all sections of the society. The movement carried an appeal to all the groups as they gave expressions to a new feelings of freedom and independence. It also offered the means which empowered the individual to survive with the insecurities.

It is here that it becomes a necessity to understand the social groups to which this ideology of Bhakti appealed to. Bhakti became popular among certain sections of the society, they were usually the ones who were alienated from the society, marginalized, sidelined and overlooked; they were, predominantly the productive classes of the society and yet left with

no control over their produces. It must be underlined that the sanction for this exclusion was obtained from the caste order or the *varnashrama dharma*. Attaining God was held as beyond their reach and they were ordained to depend on a mediator, the priestly class. They believed that devotion, or Bhakti, was the only path to salvation. Bhakti, was for them a single minded devotion growing ultimately to intense love.

The age old caste system and its impact on the society was immense. A major chunk of the society was regarded as untouchables and were deprived from even the basic freedom in both the economic and social sense in the society. Religion and access to God was one major aspect.

Another social section, similarly placed in that order, were the women; it must be mentioned that the subjugation of the women in the society was not a medieval concept or an ancient one. Uma Chakravarti mentions that the subordination of women assumed a particularly severe form in India through the powerful instrument of religious traditions which shaped social practices. A marked feature of the Hindu society is its legal sanction for an extreme expression of social stratification in which women and the lower castes were subjected to humiliating conditions of existence. (Chakravarti, *et al.*, 1993)

It was an idea which came into being since the establishment of the society and from the very beginning of the human civilization. The stratification of the society was evident and was visible in the mechanisms of the society.

As explained by Uma Chakraborty in her conceptualization of Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India, the idea explains how the caste and gender hierarchies continued to be the organizing principles of the Brahmanical social order. She says 'caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organising principles of the Brahmanical social order.' (Chakravarti, *Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and State*, 1993) which also happens to be the main group that the Bhakti movement had a significant impact on.

From the Land grants of the VII-VIIIth centuries, we see that the system of Feudal hierarchy is already established, the peasants are enslaved by means of various imposts, and rent (both in money and in produce), while, the feudal lords are given, not merely the right to collect taxes, but definite plots of land as well. (Kosambi, 1955) Feudalism was on the rise, and it was the land grants which led to the growth of it. The growing feudal exploitation and oppression, where the peasants produce as well as the surplus being appropriated by the nobility, led to the worsening condition of the peasants. Along with the peasants, the artisan classes were also affected. In other words, the producing classes – the peasants and the artisans -- who were the preys of the oppression. As a result of the expansion policy there was a considerable growth in towns and alteration in agrarian relations. In an economy their labor and surplus production were customarily and naturally appropriated by the ruling groups. As a result, they were alienated from their produce.

With all these, how did the Bhakti movement operate and how far was it successful in promising liberation? Hinduism defines three paths—the path of action, knowledge, and devotion, also known as karma-marga, jnana-marga, and the Bhakti-marga—and suggests a variety of ways to achieve salvation. Bhakti, in this sense, has been defined as 'the worship of a personal deity in a spirit of love as a personal faith in a personal God, Love for him as for a human being, the dedication of everything to his service and the attainment of *Moksa* by this means, rather than by knowledge, sacrifice or works'. (Chand, *et al.*, 2013)

The Bhakti movement sought to bring the devotee and God closer to each other. It was essentially meant to keep the mediator out of the relationship between man and God; and also on a philosophical premise of non-duality between the mind and the matter. In other words, *ad-vaita*.

In this movement premised against the inevitability of the mediator or any priest, the thrust was on the individuals' devotion as against action or knowledge as a means to liberation. Nammalvar an Alvar philosopher says that: It cannot be conceived that He possess this (quality) and that He does not have

that (quality); He is in the earth (and all the regions below it); He is in the sky (and all the regions above all); He pervades all non-sentient entities having a physical form and also all sentient beings devoid of any physical form; He is associated with all objects grasped by sense organ but He is beyond their grasp. Such is the supreme person who is everywhere and at all times and who is endowed with auspicious attributes. (Chari, 2009) We can find philosophers and saints, who mostly belonged from the lower sections of the society, emerging as saints in its course. They narrated their philosophy in the languages of the productive classes (as against Sanskrit which was the language of the priestly class and access to learning it prohibited for the productive classes); they also used forms which were usually in the lyrical form, poems. The *Bhajans* were their forms of expressions, usually composed in the local language making it to be understood by all the sections of the productive classes and the objective was to make sure that it could be related to by all.

Ravidas was a man of Benaras who lived in the fifteen or sixteen century, he still qualifies today as a great untouchable saint of North India. Ravidas was special- apart from being a leatherworker, chamar he was a singer and a poet whose hymns evidently had a truth in it that even the Brahmins came to hear him. In praising God he habitually contrasted the divine presence to his own: God, he said, was finer than he, as silk was to a worm, and more fragrant than he, as sandalwood was to the stinking castor oil plant. (Juergensmeyer, 2021)

Ravidas says-

This bodily world is a difficult road-hilly, overgrown- And I've only this worthless bullock to rely on.

*This request I make of ram: protect my wealth as
I go along.*

Who is the peddler for ram?

My daily pack of loaded-

I am a peddler for ram;

I traffic in his easy ecstasy:

I've loaded myself with the wealth of Ram's name

While the world is loaded down with poison.

You who know both shores of the sea,

Chart my course through heaven and hell

So death will not ambush me with his stick

Nor trap me in his snare.

The world's fading yellow dye, says the tanner

Ravidas,

But Ram is an indelible red.

Ravidas raises a crucial questions about the social order, yet he does not purpose any religious legislation that would change the current social order. His Bhakti vision seems to be not so much that God desires to reform society as that he transcends it utterly, and that in the light of the experience of sharing God, all social distinctions lose their importance. Ravidas's bhakti, then, is an answer to caste Hinduism, but not explicitly a call for its reforms. When he speaks of earth his emphasis is quite different. He characterizes life in this world as an inevitably difficult journey and asks God for help along the way. Death stands waiting at the end of the road, he knows and when it strikes, even one's closet relatives scurry to keep their distance. As for the body it is a fiction of air and water, nothing more merely a hollow clay puppet. For Ravidas remarkably there is a friend who answers that lonely call, someone who is at times confusingly, disconcertingly near, someone to whom people are tied by what he calls on several occasions "the bond of love", That friend of course is God. (Juergensmeyer, 2021)

Kabir himself had not wanted to be identified as either Hindu or Muslim: he referred to himself in his verse as *Kori* and *julana* (a hindu as well as muslim weaver). He calls God Ram and Rahim. He associated himself with a movement that conformed neither to Hinduism or Islam, but to a universal religion. Kabir also believed in a God without attributes. It was due to the concept of God in Kabir's mind that he discarded idol worship and its associated rituals. Kabir admitted the existence of Maya by saying "worldly life is like a dream, but believing the world to be real, I attach not myself to it..."

The Bhakti movement also had an impetus to the vernacular language, and replaced Sanskrit which was then the mode of preaching or conveying the message. Sanskrit was the language of the God, and the language of the elites which could not penetrate into the world of the common people. Kabir discarded Sanskrit, the language of the Vedas and Upanishads, and the language of Brahmins. As an alternative medium of expansion, he emphasized

the importance of bhasha, the language of the masses. Kabir said 'Sanskrit is like the water of a well, whereas bhasha is flowing water.'

The Bhakti movement can also be regarded as the movement of rationality as it infused a sense of questioning and raising doubts among the people. It provoked people to question their place in society, the reason for their suffering, and why, despite their hard work and efforts, they were unable to rise up the social scale.

Kabir says- Adam who was first, did not know Whence came mother Eve Then there was no Turk (muslim) nor hindu;... Then there was no race, nor caste. If thou thinkest the Maker distinguished castes: Birth is according to these penalties for deeds. Born a sudra, you die a sudra; It is only in this world of illusion that you assume the sacred thread. If birth from a Brahman mother makes you Brahman, Why did you not come by another way? If birth from a Turk makes you Turk, Why were you not circumcised in the womb? If you milk black and

It was when people realized that the salvation could be achieved not only through action and knowledge but also through devotion; through this a sense of individuality was developed. The growth of individualism helped them break the societal ties and help them or encouraged to rise individually seeking a personal god, and breaking away from collective devotionism as well as relying on the priest for devotion. It was anubhava jnana or direct knowledge from personal experience which Kabir believed. He Emphasized:

People were dead by studying books, but no body could become the learned. Those who understood the meaning of one word of God, became the learned.

The Bhakti saints, protested in a loud voice against the various injustices meted out to them by society. Their core theme was that Religion is but a part of the social milieu and has to be accessed on the basis of needs of the society at a particular point in time. The creation of a casteless society was the need of the time and hence a clamor for the total change. (Pande, *et al.*, 1987)

The Bhakti movement worked at different levels. It tried to reorganize Hinduism; along with this, it tried to establish a cordial relationship between the Hinduism and the Islam. The advent of Islam in India, had a profound impact on the social, political, religious as well as the cultural life. The period can also be seen as the age of synthesis and interaction. The lofty ideas of Islam was seen by some as a threat to Hinduism, and at the same time it invoked a sense of enquiry into their own religion.

Conclusion

As an era of transition, the period impacted a significant portion of mankind and brought about a number of changes in society. It is acknowledged that they needed both- materialistic freedom, which could help them move up the social scale and give them a sense of security, and metaphysical freedom, which could satisfy their spiritual needs. It was the balance between both the worlds that could provide a sense of liberation to the people.

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