



SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND FOR THE EMERGENCE OF BHAKTI MOVEMENT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RAJASTHAN

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ABSTRACT

Bhakti Movement has started from South India and spread whole north India in later centuries. Historians have different opinion for the rise of Bhakti movement. Social, political and economic conditions were important for the rise of Bhakti movement. Few historians saw it as counterpart of Protestantism and Islam, whereas other considered it alternative voice to safeguard Hinduism. This paper will discuss material base, political and social conditions for the rise of Bhakti.

KEYWORDS: *Bhakti, Sanatana, Vaishnavism, Brahmadeyas*

INTRODUCTION

Bhakti, a dissent movement against orthodox religious society, stood against traditional norms of the society, became itself a religion.¹ It was considered as one way to attain salvation along with *Gyan marg* and *Karma marg*. The Bhakti movement which has started from sixth century and later decayed got momentum in twelfth century and became popular movement. Bhakti movement was multidimensional and multilayer movement. The social values that Bhakti established are still prevalent in the society. Now it is matter of inquiry that why only in twelfth century Bhakti got momentum and not before and after that? Historians have looked at the Bhakti movement rise as a result of changes in the production patterns. Changes in the production patterns affected the social, political and cultural area, which further led to the changes in religion and historians looked upon Bhakti as an outcome of such process.

Gupta's were the upholder of *Vaishnavism* and during *Gupta* period Brahmanism spread and Buddhism shrink. Buddhists were forced to run to the hills and built caves to live. It became partial reason for the decline of *gupta's* as well. After the decline of the *Gupta* Empire, *Pandya* Dynasty (c. 550 BC -1345 A.D), *Chera* Dynasty (c.400 B.C-1314), *Chola* Dynasty (c.301B.C- 1279 A.D.) and *Pallava* (275-882 A.D) Dynasties were very important, those adopted the Hinduism and spread it to the other parts. *Harsha* was the devotee of sun, who later on became patron of *Shaivism* and after some time became upholder of Buddhism. In such circumstances when Jainism and Buddhism were spreading in the country than Bhakti became the alternative voice for the safeguard of Hinduism.

Some other viewed that it was the Indian counterpart of protestant movement. So views are different on Bhakti. *Acharya Hazari Prasad Dwivedi* opined that it was indigenous movement. It was only the development of the tradition. He denied any type of influence of Christianity and Islam. *Rekha Pande* opined to look closely the material basis of Bhakti. According to *Rekha Pande* when Turks came to India than they brought new techniques of management and in such techniques *Iqta* system was to extract the surplus production. In Turkish rule feeling of regionalism spread in the people because of harsh tax collection which

¹ R. Champakalakshmi, *Religion, Tradition and Ideology: Pre-colonial South India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

further led to the feeling for Bhakti movement.² Although in post Ilutmish era nobles rose to the prominence and chaos and anarchy spread, nobles curbed the power of monarchs and started to act according to their will.

We can term this period as political turmoil, but it managed to strengthen the economic conditions of the sultanate which resulted in the increase of towns and markets. For Bhakti, the word movement used because its effect was not limited to the geography and linguistically but it had effected the every aspect of culture, art, music, literature, dance, painting and sculpture. Literature was most important aspect which got affected the most and example of it we can draw from the amount of literature which produced. Pan-Indian literature in vernacular languages and everyone contributed in it, without the difference of caste, class, gender and region.

Indeed, historians and other scholars are having different opinion about the rise of Bhakti but we cannot deny the role of material conditions of the particular time period for the rise of Bhakti. *Irfan Habib* in his article "*Medieval popular monotheism and its Humanism: The historical settings*", opined that in medieval India monotheism was new concept, which is not directly related to Islam or Hinduism. He looked Bhakti movement of North India as a new development and roots of this popular monotheistic movement were in changing socio-political and economic conditions, fostered by the establishment of Delhi sultanate.³

After the death of Harshavardhana, his empire scattered into small principalities. *Rajputs* spread in vast area comprising *Rajasthan, Gujarat, Himalayan regions, Vindhya and Kuimur* ranges etc. Ancient tribes replaced by *Chandels, Panwars, Solankis, Gurjars, Rastrakutas* etc. and Rajputs became the masters from Deccan to Punjab and Arabian Sea to Bengal. Political power centers also shifted east and west, *Delhi, Ahilwada, Gwalior, Kanauj and Ajmer* etc.

Medieval period has seen emergence of number of provincial and regional states. These states consists *Khandesh, Malwa, Kashmir, Bidar, Gulburga, Berar and Bihar* etc. In religious aspect also lots of changes took place, Buddhism, Tantrism, and Saktism confined to Bengal, while Jainism in Gujarat. Vaishnavism considered as heterodox system earlier and now appropriated by Brahminism and Shaivism (common folk religion) not limited to particular part of life. Brahmins strengthen the Vaishnavism and it influenced the life of *Rajputs*. *Rajputs* built magnificent temples for Vishnu but we found example of Siva importance also. Some Rajputs considered themselves *Diwans* of Siva, it shows that still Rajputs had firm belief in Saivism. Tarachand opined that Brahmanas transformed *Gonds, Bhils, Hunas, Sakas, and Scythians* etc. into Rajputs and for it they paid the price of their ascent from barbarianism to civilization. In this manner they paid the price as they considered the Brahmins as superior.⁴

Why did Brahmins felt need of absorb all these tribes into the Varna system? It precisely happened because they knew very well the importance of physically strong and mentally weak races. This process was reciprocal, on one hand it served the means of Brahmins and on the other hand it served the purpose of these tribes for the upward mobility in the society.

Vaishnavism paved the way for this conversion and those stood against Vaishnavism they given lucrative social status. Which they did not refused, so it was not price paid by *Gonds, Bhils, Hunas, Sakas and Scythians* to transform from barbarianism to civilization but it was untold ties between these and Brahmins. In such circumstances mobility was also taking place from north India to south India and vice versa. *Rastrakuta, Pala and Gurjar partiharas* fought to establish control over *Kannauj*, which was considered strategically very important at particular time period. *Hinduization* process was also prevalent at this time. Rajputs are the clear cut example of *hinduization* process, they served the interest of *Brahmana* and accepted their superior authority. *Rajputs* were not part of water tide compartment of the society. They

² Rekha Pande, *Religious Movements in Medieval India: Bhakti creation of alternative spaces*, (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2005), p.66.

³ Irfan Habib, 'Medieval Popular Monotheism and Its Humanism: The Historical Setting', (*Social Scientist*, Vol. 21, No. 3/4 Mar. - Apr., 1993), pp.78-88.

⁴ Tarachand, *Influence of Islam*, (Allahabad: The Indian Press, Limited, 1936), pp. 129-143.

were out of the *Varna* system and they absorbed in the Hindu norms and the society. Myths and legends constructed for the emergence of *Rajputs*. Between seventh to twelfth centuries, state was weakening and new landed magnets were emerging, 'It was precisely the period when land grants reached to zenith. During *Mauryan* period, certain lands granted as *Brahmadeyas* but gradually with the weakening of state, administrative rights also got transferred. **R.S. Sharma** tries to understand the nitty-gritty of land grants. Kings wanted to acquire religious rights and receivers, monks, pundits needed to perform religious duties. A serious crisis occurred in the society. With the power, erode of central authorities, some groups of the society were trying hard to go up in the social ladder. In this process *Varnasankra* problem occurred in the society, it termed as *Kali Yuga*. *Vaishya* were the land holding community and they were levied by heavy taxes and there condition was degraded to the *Sudra* status. Artisan class accumulated money from trade but they denied good social status in the society. In this manner resentment was increasing in the society and *Varnasankra* process started to take place.⁵ Land grants were merely to curb this process of *Varnasankra*. We should also not forget that land grants also created problems because land grant holders passed this grants to others so problem was getting severe and severe. A new mediator class was emerging in the society and growth of the new landed elites, emergence of feudal elements, decline of long distance trade, emergence of new power houses and decline in central authority and land grants were common phenomenon in that time society.⁶

Growth in the making of magnificent temples was taking place, enormous wealth went in the hands of *Brahmins* and administrators and enormous magnificent temples were outcome of it. To curtail the *Varnasankra* process in the society all revenue rights as well as administrative rights transferred through *Brahmadeya* grants. Divine hierarchy also started and *Vishnu*, *Shiva* and *Durga* figured as supreme deities and *Indra*, *Yama* and *Varuna* reduced to the *Lokapala* position. Practice of *Panchayatana*, worship of collectively *Brahma*, *Ganapati*, *Vishnu*, *Shakti* and *Shiva* known by name *Panchayatana* started. These divine hierarchies were based on the worldly hierarchy. When we closely look the socio-economic-political conditions than we can figure out that *Tantrism* also emerged because of material conditions. *Tantrism* intended to satisfy the material needs for physical procession and to cure disease of devotee. *Tantrism* and other similar sects were emerging because they paved the path for *Sudras*, untouchables and *Vaishyas* (degraded to the status of *Sudras*) to attain salvation and upper social mobility. These changes were making the way for the transformation from ancient to medieval. In these new changes, landlords were becoming the mediators between state and peasants. Landlords played important role in shaping society, religion, art, architecture and literature. They also shaped the conditions for decline of trade, emergence of *Varnasankra* (mixing of castes), chaos in society, feudalism etc.

There is need to inquire the nature of *Bhakti* movement. Some historians agree that *Bhakti* was against feudalism in nature. *Bhakti* opened its doors for every one by giving the slogan –'one should not ask about caste'. The one who utters the name of *Hari*, belongs to *Hari* and not with any caste.⁷ It tried to provide the only one common ground for everyone. Saint literature propagates the idea for a society where man-women are equal, caste-less and classless society, absence of *dharma* upholders, people should not die with illness and famine, and base of the society should be love and brotherhood. Saints spread all these ideas and firmly stood against feudal norms of society. **K. Damodaran** opined that the principal that all people are equal in the eye of god, whether he/she belongs to low class or upper class, became a focal point of this movement and it accumulated together people those were fighting against *Brahmanical* society, caste-ism and feudal tendencies. *Bhakti* movement not only helped for the development of diverse languages and diverse religious society and culture but it led the movement against feudal oppression and suppression.

⁵ R.S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, (New Delhi: Macmillan Publishers India Limited, Reprint-2009).

⁶ R.S. Sharma, *India's Ancient Past*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.287-292.

⁷ As quoted in Gopeshwar Singh, *Bhakti Andolan ke Samajik Adhar*, (New Delhi: Bhartiya Prakashan Sansthan, 2002), p.24.

‘जात - पात पूछे ना कोई, हरि को भजै सो हरि को होई’

Growing resentment of people can be seen in the development of *Nathpanthis* movement, *Tantrism* and *Shakti* worship in the different parts of sub-continent. *Siddha* and *Nathpanthis* tradition provided the base for **Kabir das's** *apbramsa Kavya*. We should not forget here that feudal tendencies were prevalent in Indian subcontinent but situation changed with the coming of Muslims. Muslims did not spare any one and tyranny spread. Turks came to India with the egalitarian concept and defeated Rajputs. It was period of political turmoil and insecurity. New changes took place in the technology, craft production, Seri culture, carpet weaving on the vertical loom and these base structure changes, led the superstructure changes in the society. Development in the trade and urbanization were main devises.

According to **Ram Vilas Sharma** Indian Saint *Sahitya* is closely associated with *Lokadharm Pratistha* and *Sants Lokdharm* doesn't strengthen feudal system but weaken it, Saint broke the *Purohit* supremacy on religion. Weavers, poor farmers, untouchables and professional skilled workers realized that they can survive without *Sastras*, because of this reliance only *Tulsidas*, *Surdas*, and *Raidas* started to force people to come together without religious superstitions and it happened because of the growth of trade and transport facilities. Feudal system was declining with the growth of trade, urbanization, transportation facilities and coins circulation. In 15th, 16th and 17th Centuries, trade centre got established; new cities emerged as the point of trade and cultural exchange. Now new social life's focal point were cities and *Jagirdars* got transferred from one place to another. Construction of roads, canals, emissary facility for news transfer and direct tax collection from farmers were major changes through which alienation from villages narrowed down and feudalism started to decline.

Jat's were the landholding community and their social condition was not better than Sudra's. Population of artisans and Jat's were main base for monotheistic idea. New technological innovations were attractive features of Muslim invasion. Land holding communities became capable to strengthen their social status. *Rahat* (Wheel) was main technical innovation through which they improved the conditions. With the assistance of these new technologies they spread out of *Sindhu* areas. Punjab was new place for landholders and to attain the social status they accepted the monotheism, which gave them better social status. New rulers came along with new innovations; paper, stirrup iron, horseshoe, technique of stitching cloths, new technical innovation in building of house (arch and dome) and development in the making of clothes.⁸

Acceleration in the urban-ism started to take place with the improvement in trade activities. Turks improved the conditions of farming and craft production. Trade activities accelerated with the coming of Turks and it altered the social system. Here we should keep in mind that Turks brought elite culture along with them and these administrative people were fond of luxury goods. Attachment with the aestheticism gave birth to the individual job for the amir's of sultanate.⁹

Every city had markets where regularly fairs took places. In these fairs, traders usually met with each other and discussed about trade. Delhi market was important because it was linked with inner as well as outer trade. Delhi was famous as splendour city and there were lots of state owned *Karkhanas* in Delhi. In *Gujrat* and *Bengal* also cloth industry flourished a lot and here white cotton, silk, velvet, satin etc. cloths produced. *Kambe's* (Gujrat) cotton cloths were very good and low cost. Even today these cloths are very famous. *Dhaka's* muslin was very famous, for all these developments spinning wheel was responsible which came from China.

Satish Chandra says that Bhakti movement cannot be called collective movement. It had different perspective for God and disciple, society and ruler class. He had firm belief that there was strong connection between north India and South India. *Rastrakutas*, *Gurjar Partihara's* and *Pallavas* were fighting to establish control over *Kanauj*, *Upper Ganga* valley and adjacent areas. To establish a thought, discussion (*Sastrarth*) was necessary and *Shankracharya* is example of it, from north India lots of *Nathpanthis* and *sadhus* travelled

⁸ Irfan Habib, 'Medieval Popular Monotheism and Its Humanism: The Historical Setting', (*Social Scientist*, Vol. 21, No. 3/4 Mar. - Apr., 1993), pp.78-88.

⁹ Irfan Habib, Presidential Address, Section II, "Technology change and Society, 13th and 14th centuries, Varanasi Session, (Proceedings of Indian History Congress, 1969).

to south. So mobility was there in early medieval time between north India and South India.¹⁰ North and south Bhakti movement's emergence was in the specific time periods material conditions and not related with any external factor. In *Varna* system, fluctuation was taking place and emergence of *Rajputs* was silent agreement between *Brahmin* and *Rajputs*. Every ruler supposed to give protection to the Brahmins, it was rule according to Dharma and to uphold the Varna system.¹¹ But apart from king *Sung*, other ruler's weather they adhered to Hinduism or Buddhism or Jainism exercised the freedom in religious matters, and gave religious grants to Buddhist, Jains and Brahmins equally. *Rajputs* and *Brahmin* agreement was the sign of change in this situation.

Buddhist places/temples and Jain temples got convert into Hindu temples. Intellectual freedom did not curbed until it was not threat for social system. Tantrism, Sakti worship, Nathpanth and Sahajayan are the examples which did not disturbed by state until these did not became threat to the social system. Brahmins presented the statues as God and not as the replication of god, whom they only can control and Brahmins only can curse those doubts statues power. In these conditions, Turks broke statues and disobeyed Brahmins. People now realized that these statues are not having any power, statues cannot protect themselves how can protect us, such ideas inclined the people to move towards Bhakti. Brahmins got affected the most with the coming of Turks and *Nathpanthis* got benefit. Most of the sultanate rulers were not against the Hindu religion and *Nathpanthis* reached to the paramount at this time.

He opined that the development of popular monotheism in north and north-east was the result of extra-tax collection, development of city, emergence of artisan class, stitching cloths, weaving, wheel introduction and other technical developments. Artisan class was not satisfied with the status in the traditional society and adopted a new way of life (Bhakti) for the social uplift and masses from them were ready to support the egalitarian movements run by *Dadu*, *Nanak dev*, *Kabir das*, and *Raidas* etc. Although **Satish Chandra** accepts it mass base support but he denies to call it lower class movement. Instead of it he says that it was getting the support from a mass base and supporters were from every class of society. *Nirgun Bhakti* started to shrink in 16th, 17th century onwards and *Sagun Bhakti* became very popular. Incarnation of *Vishnu*, *Rama* and *Krishna Bhakti* became popular. It can be looked as the win over city radical reformers by village traditionalists.¹²

In south India trade was flourishing and merchants were associated with guilds. *Manigramam* and *Ayyavole* were two merchant guilds in medieval south India. These two guilds name occurred in the records over centuries. Literary, archaeological and language nuances studies are important to reach on conclusion that merchant guilds were associated with the administrative authorities and we can get insights about genealogy of merchants, function and caste groups those consist in guild. Status of merchants and traders were increasing between 9th to 14th centuries in medieval south India, social composition of the guilds was very diverse.

In guilds, merchants were not only from *Vaishya Varna* but they belonged from all sections of society, for example *Kannada Brahmins* travelled from one part to another. Language of different areas were different but they were comfortable with it.¹³

South India was linked with the overseas trade as well. We found in operation foreign trade ports, Chola wars took place to spread the reach to foreign trade. Prosperity was increasing. Villages were not the self-sufficient economy centers but there was growing demand in the rural areas and purchasing capacity was increasing.¹⁴ With all these changes we should not forget that society was becoming more ritualistic. Complex rituals and rights practiced and lots of castes termed as *Chandala* because they were not fitting in

¹⁰ Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005) pp. 285- 289.

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 285- 295.

¹² Ibid, 294-296.

¹³ Meera Abraham, *Two Medieval Merchants guilds of South India*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publication, 1989), p.11.

¹⁴ Ibid,

the *Varna* system. Recital of *Vedas* by *Sudra* and *Vaishya* would be resulted in the cutting off their tongue. Although *Islam* propagated the idea of egalitarianism but in *Islam* as well caste-ism practiced and we can see clearly Muslims divided into *Sharif Zats* (high castes) or *Ajlaf Zats* (low castes). Structure of new cities designed in a manner, where *Masjid* was at the centre and systematic construction took place but in these new cities also we can see caste distinctions clearly.

Samaraiicca Kaha of *Haribhadra Suri* and *Kuvalayamala* of *Udyotana Suri* are the important texts to analyse the status of trade and urbanization in Rajasthan. Traders were indulged in long distance and maritime voyages for high quality goods trade. Caravan employed for long distance trade. Regional centers consists *Konkan*, *Ujjayini*, *Tamralipta* and *Tagara* regions and trans-oceanic centers included *Kataha*, *Ratnadvipa* etc.¹⁵

So when we looks closely the socio- economic conditions for the rise of Bhakti movement then everyone accepts the materialistic conditions for the rise of Bhakti in medieval period. *Ramvilas Sharma*, *Irfan Habib*, *K. Damodaran*, *Harbans Mukhia* all believes that trade and industrial activities increased in medieval time period. Increase in the trade broke the rigidity of caste system and emergence of new castes took place and in the social order fluctuation was taking place. Lots of new caste groups emerged, those were got enormous wealth from trade activities. In such caste groups *Gujarati Banye*, *Rajasthani Marwari traders and Multani* were important.¹⁶

Dr. Ramvilas Sharma opined that whenever in India urbanization flourished with the spread of trade and exchange, than caste system and work based on *Varna* system became weak. Trade prosperity was the situations in India when Bhakti movement came into being. Here dichotomy occurs in their ideas, on one hand they opined that although conditions were worst in the society and in such circumstances Bhakti movement was emerging in the society and on the other hand they shows prosperity in the society. If there is prosperity then there is stable rule and in the stable rule conditions state can exercise more power on the people so it becomes very hard for individual to stand against the state.

Although, when we go in the nitty-gritty of Bhakti movements and its social and political base, we suddenly picks the example that with the coming of the Turks feudalism declined and conditions became favorable for the Bhakti movement but we totally deny the role of *Nathpanthis*, *Munis*, *Saktism* etc. These provide the base for the Bhakti movement and Bhakti movement accepted lots of ideas from these in distorted version. We cannot deny the social conditions and contributions for the rise of Bhakti. These social conditions changed due to the materialistic conditions. Hence the materialistic conditions played a major role in the rise of the Bhakti movement.

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¹⁵ B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *Making of early Medieval India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997). p, 42

¹⁶ As quoted in Gopeshwar Singh, *Bhakti Andolan ke Samajik Adhar*,(New Delhi: Bhartiya Prakashan Sansthan, 2002), p.74.



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