

Chapter- 8

POPULAR BELIEFS AND RELIGIOUS DEBATES

STUDY NOTES

In the eighth century, two new religious movements Sufism and Bhakti emerged.

Devotion to God without discrimination on the basis of caste was taught by the Bhakti and Sufi saints.

Both Sufism and Bhakti movements had several common traits and spread as popular movements at about the same time.

The Idea of a Supreme God

- Before large kingdoms emerged, different groups of people worshipped their own Gods and Goddesses. As people were brought together through the growth of towns, trade and empires, new ideas began to develop.
- The idea that all human beings are not equal at birth gained ground during this period.
- The idea of a Supreme God who could deliver humans from bondage through devotion or bhakti emerged.
- Gods and goddesses worshipped in different areas came to be identified with Shiva, Vishnu or Durga.

A New Kind of Bhakti in South India – Nayanars and Alvars

- The seventh to ninth centuries saw the emergence of a new religious movement, led by Nayanars (saints devoted to Shiva) and Alvars (saints devoted to Vishnu).
- They were sharply critical of the Buddhists and Jainas and preached ardent love of Shiva or Vishnu as the path to salvation.
- The Nayanars and Alvars went from place to place composing exquisite poems of praise of the deities enshrined in the village they visited and set them to music.
- The Chola and Pandya kings built elaborate temples around many of the shrines.

Philosophy and Bhakti

- Shankara, a philosopher, of Kerala advocated Advaita or the doctrine of the oneness of the individual soul and the Supreme God which is the ultimate reality.
- Ramanuja of Tamil Nadu advocated that the best means of attaining salvation was through intense devotion to Vishnu.

Basavanna's Virashaivism

- Virashaivism movement was initiated by Basavanna and his companions Allama Prabhu and Akkamahadevi in Karnataka in the mid-12 century.
- They argued strongly for equality of all human beings, opposed Brahmanical ideas on caste and treatment of women.

The Saints of Maharashtra

- Jnaneshwar, Namdev, Eknath, Tukaram, Sakkubai and the family of Chokhamela focused on the bhakti of Vitthala (a form of Vishnu).
- Some of these belonged to lower castes. They rejected all forms of ritualism, outward display of piety and social differences based on birth.

Nathpanthis, Siddhas and Yogis

- A number of religious groups that emerged during this period criticized the ritual and other aspects of conventional religion and the social order, using simple, logical arguments.
- Among them were the Nathpanthis, Siddhcharas and Yogis.

Islam and Sufism

- Islam propagated monotheism or submission to one God. 'It also rejected idol worship. Muslim scholars developed a holy law called Shariat.
- The Sufis rejected the elaborate codes of behaviour demanded by Muslim religious scholars.
- They sought union with God, as a lover seeks his beloved with a disregard for the world.
- Among the great Sufis of Central Asia were Ghazzali, Rumi and Sadi.
- Sufism introduced many popular orders or silsilas of which the most widespread was the Shariat and Chisti Silsilas.
- The Chisti silsila was among the most influential orders. A long line of teachers included Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti of Ajmer, Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki of Delhi, Baba Farid of Punjab, Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi and Bandanawaz Gisudaraz of Gulbarga.

New Religious Developments in North India

- The period after the 13th century saw a new wave of bhakti movement in North India.
- This wave was led by scholars like Tulsidas, Surdas, Kabir and Baba Guru Nanak
- This tradition also included saints like Dadu Dayal, Ravidas and Mirabai. Mirabai was devoted to Lord Krishna.
- A unique feature of most of these saints is that their works were composed in regional languages and could be sung.
- Kabir ridiculed idol worship and believed in one formless Supreme God with devotion as the path of salvation.
- Guru Nanak emphasized on the importance of one God and nam-japna, kirti-kama and vand- chhakna. The number of
- Baba Guru Nanak's followers increased through the 16th century under his successors.
- Shankara was an advocate of Advaita or the doctrine of the oneness of the individual soul and the Supreme God.

Various kinds of Bhakti and Sufi movements evolved since the eighth century.

Before the emergence of large kingdoms, different groups of people worshipped their own gods and goddesses.

Several people also showed their interest in the teachings of the Buddha or the Jainas.

Others felt attracted to the idea of a Supreme God. Such people sought the path of Bhakti to approach this Supreme God. As a result, Shiva, Vishnu and Durga came to be recognised as supreme deities. People began to worship them through elaborate rituals.

The seventh to ninth centuries saw the emergence of new religious movements, led by the Nayanars (saints devoted to Shiva) and Alvars (saints devoted to Vishnu) who came from all castes including untouchables.

They criticised the Buddhists and Jainas and preached ardent love of Shiva or Vishnu as the path of salvation.

Elaborate temples were built by the Chola and Pandya kings between the tenth and twelfth centuries. Thus, the Bhakti tradition got strongly linked with temple worship.

Shankara, a Bhakti saint, 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 preached renunciation of the world and adoption of the path of knowledge.

Ramanuja, another Bhakti saint, was deeply influenced by the Alvars. According to him the best means of attaining salvation was through intense devotion to Vishnu.

Virashaiva movement was initiated by Basavanna and his companions. This movement began in Karnataka in the mid-twelfth century. The Virashaivas were against all forms of ritual and idol worship.

The saint-poets of Maharashtra such as Janeshwar, Namdev, Eknath and Tukaram inspired people through their songs in simple Marathi. These saints rejected all forms of ritualism, outward display of piety and social differences based on birth. They also rejected the idea of renunciation and preferred to live with their families.

Several other religious groups such as Nathpanthis, Siddhas and Yogis also criticised the ritual and other aspects of conventional religion and the social order. They advocated renunciation of the world. They inspired people to lay in meditation on the formless Ultimate Reality and the realisation of oneness with it. They gave importance to yogasanas.

Sufis were Muslim mystics. They rejected outward religiosity and emphasized love and devotion to God and comparison towards all fellow human beings.

Islam propagated monotheism i.e. submission to one God. It rejected idol worship,

Muslim scholars developed a holy law called Shariat. The Sufis rejected the elaborate rituals and codes of behaviour demanded by Muslim religious scholars.

The Sufis too composed poems like the saint-poets. Some of the great Sufis were Ghazzali, Rumi and Sadi.

The Sufi saints developed elaborate methods of training using zikr (chanting of a name or sacred formula), contemplation, sama (singing), rags (dancing), discussion of parables, breath control etc. under the guidance of a master or pir. Thus, emerged the silsilas, a genealogy of Sufi teachers. The Chishti silsila is worth-mentioning in this regard.

The Sufi teachers held their assemblies in their Khanqahs or hospices (houses of rest for travellers). Here, they discussed spiritual matters.

Sufi shrines are visited by devotees of all backgrounds.

A new wave of Bhakti movement began in north India after the 13th century. This was an age when Islam, Brahmanical Hinduism, Sufism, various strands of Bhakti and the Nathpanths, Siddhas and Yogis influenced one another.

Kabir and Baba Guru Nanak rejected all orthodox religions. Others like Tulsidas and Surdas accepted existing beliefs and practices but wanted to make these accessible to all. Tulsidas's composition, the Ramcharitmanas, written in Awadhi, is important both as an expression of his devotion and as a literary work.

Surdas was an ardent devotee of Krishna.

Dadu Dayal, Ravidas and Mirabai were some other important saints of this tradition.

The works of these saints were composed in regional languages and therefore they became very popular.

We come to know about Kabir through his sakhis and pads, Kabir's teachings were based on complete rejection of the major religious traditions. He believed in a formless Supreme God and preached that the only path to salvation was through Bhakti or devotion.

Guru Nanak emphasised the importance of the worship of one God. He insisted that caste, creed or gender was irrelevant for attaining liberation. He used the terms nam, dan and isnan for the essence of his teachings which actually meant right worship, welfare of others and purity of conduct.

Words that Matter

Virashaivism: It was popular in Karnataka during the mid-twelfth century. Its followers argued strongly for the equality of all human beings and against Brahmanical ideas about caste and the treatment of women.