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## Bhakti Tradition and Poetics of Introspection

### Abstract

The *bhakti* movement is among the most forceful instruments of change in the Indian history. The movement signaled the end of a worn out epoch and did much to subvert hierarchies by substituting the concept of redemption through devotion in place of ritualistic orthodoxy. It carried sublime philosophy, to the common masses, of the so-called lower classes, in vernacular languages and open doors for women poets. The movement continues to inspire our generation and enjoys prominence in terms of its reach, magnitude, popularity and spacio-temporal significance. The poetic tradition of this school is marked by a distinctive proclivity for introspection; out of the two schools: *nirguna* and *saguna*; the *nirguna* school of *bhakti* poetry shows a greater tendency towards introspection. The *nirguna* group of poets led by Kabir, promote the technique of introspective reflection as the key to self-realisation and god-realisation. This approach is significant as it breaks away from the convention of ritualistic orthodoxy, which exhibited a strong propensity for outward modes of realisation. Further, a key element of the movement was the popularisation of the percept of a 'personal God', which our mythological-fiction retains till date.

**Keywords:** *Bhakti* Movement, *nirguna bhakti*, *saguna bhakti*, Kabir, introspection

The contribution of the *bhakti* movement in restoring the decadent medieval Indian society with an ideology of harmony, is immense. The movement rippled to start in the present-day Tamil Nadu, in 6<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> CE, and swept its way towards North, assuming the shape of a pan India movement, which lasted as long as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It did much to revive the Hindu faith and fortifying its strength to face the numerous onslaughts, imminent in the course of time. The *bhakti* movement is still a

living tradition in India and continues to inspire poets and devotees. Few movements can match the movement, in terms of magnitude, popularity and spacio-temporal significance. The chief reason for such prominence of the movement, rests on its inward looking approach which cherishes the idea that God dwells within all hearts and consequently derides orthodox ritualism.

The movement bifurcated broadly into two parts: *nirguna* and *saguna*. The *nirguna* path, was more philosophical and regarded God as an abstract concept; while the *saguna* path, revered a 'personal God' as an embodied personal form, reincarnated as an *avatar*. In literature, the *nirgun bhakti* poetry has been further grouped into *Sant Kavya* ( Seer poetry, belonging to the Hindu faith) and *Sufi Kavya* (Sufi poetry, belonging to the Islamic faith). Poets of the *nirgun* tradition sought a spiritual union with God through practices such as asceticism, meditation, introspection, and universal love. The most revered seer poet of this tradition is the legendary poet Kabirdas or as he fondly remembered Kabir. Raidas (Ravidas), Nanak , Dadudayal, Malukdas, Sundar Das constitute the *nirgun* group of poets. The *nirguna* poet seers show a greater proclivity towards introspection. The writings of these poets have been transmitted to us in the form of sayings or as they are called "*baani*".

The counterpart school of *sagun bhakti* poetry, is dedicated to the worship of God in the form of an incarnation or a 'personal God'. It is thus a more substantiated, material form of the abstract *nirgun* perspective. The *nirguna* closely resembles the *Upanisadic* philosophy of an abstract, formless God; while the *saguna* resembles a manifest-God, as described in the epics such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The *saguna* can so be regarded as a tangible evolute of the intangible *nirguna*. The *sagun* seers follow a path of devoted self-surrender to reach to God. They further branch into: devotional poetry dedicated to Sri Ram and, to Sri Krishna. The tradition includes names like the poetess Mirabai whose phenomenal dedication to Sri Krishna is still fondly remembered and seer poets Goswami Tulsi Das and Surdas who sang in praise of Sri Ram. The *sagun* group of poets exhibit a lesser degree of inclination towards introspection, with respect to their counterpart, *nirguna* poets.

Nevertheless, whatever be the path, the ultimate aim of both the schools remains god realisation through a departure from the dogma of orthodoxy and a substitution of devotion in place of customary ritual. The *bhakti* tradition, on the whole is a more introspective school, with *nirguna* and *saguna* schools thus differing in degrees than in sense. The *bhakti* poetry on the whole is particularly significant as

the *bhakti* poets departed from the traditional mode of expression in Sanskrit and began to write for the masses in vernacular. The *bhakti* poets wrote for all including the hitherto segregated lower castes and carried the message of love, devotion, compassion and humanity to all. The expression in vernacular thus opened doors of religious compassion not only for the lower classes but also made way for prominent women poets such as Meerabai, Andal in Tamil, Akka Mahadevi in Kannada and Lad Ded in Kashmiri, to name a few. The movement thus signaled the end of a worn out epoch of the patriarchal Sanskrit orthodoxy and did much to subvert hierarchies by substituting: devotion for ritual; vernacular for Sanskrit; matriarchal for patriarchal; lower caste for higher caste outlook; emotional for intellectual; boundless musical ecstasy for rules of *raag* and *taal* and so on. The *Sufi* poetry, a sub-category of *bhakti* poetry best illustrates the harmonious spirit of the movement which blended the opposite poles of Hindu and Muslim faith. Thus, the movement remains among the most forceful instruments of change in the Indian history.

A distinctive feature of the *bhakti* tradition is its introspective orientation, which subverted the orthodoxy of a omnipotent, external God to an inward dwelling internal God. This typical trait most strongly impacted and subverted the existing poetic tradition and is thus the focus of this paper. Though both the sub schools *nirguna* and *saguna* are essentially inward looking, the *nirguna* school is exclusively introspective. I hence examine the introspective proclivity of the *nirguna* school as a new paradigm of contemporary literature in this paper.

It is notable that most of the *nirguna* school of poets, who belonged to the so-called lower castes, express the most sublime philosophic thought in the most colloquial manner. Kabir, the principal poet seer of this group, who has followers known as *Kabirpanthis* to this day, penned his characteristic *dohas* in the local dialect, expressing the most profound spiritual truth with an unbelievable ease, and sonorous rhyme and rhythm, for the uneducated common man. His *dohas* would have been to a contemporary *grihasta* (householder). The representative poet of the *nirguna* group accentuates the introspective character of self – realisation and God – realisation through a recess into the depths of one's own soul. He instructs the *bhaktis* or the devotees seeking God abstain from the ritualistic worship of using flowers and counsels them to seek God within, through his poetic composition :

Do not go to the garden of flowers!

O Friend! go not there;

In your body is the garden of flowers.

Take your seat on the thousand petals of the lotus, and there gaze on the Infinite Beauty. (*One Hundred Poems of Kabir, IV, I.58*)

He reiterates the same message when he sings: “Your Lord is near: yet you are climbing the palm-tree to seek Him” (*One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, XXI, II.33). In a rather controversial song he puts forth the question: “O servant, where dost thou seek Me?” and answers much to the indignation of the contemporary pseudo-religious orthodoxy:

Lo! I am beside thee.

I am neither in temple nor in mosque;

I am neither in Kaaba nor in Kailash:

Neither am I in rites and ceremonies, nor in Yoga and renunciation.

If thou art a true seeker, thou shalt at once see me; thou shalt meet me in a moment of time. (*One Hundred Poems of Kabir, I.13*)

The contribution of Kabir in refashioning the conventional dogma of ritualistic orthodoxy into a cult of intense introspective spirituality is immense.

Likewise, Guru Nanak propagated a monotheistic doctrine of *nama* (name) and *bhakti*. His simple *bhakti* philosophy maintained that taking the name of lord is an adequate criteria for being bestowed with the grace of God. A popular saying attributed to seer poet Ravi Das, a disciple of saint Ramananda, reflects the idea that if the heart of a devotee is pure then there is no requisite of a purgative ritual of taking a holy bath in the sacred river Ganga, known for its purgative quality, is eliminated. Sankaradeva’s *Ek-Sarana – Nama – Dharma* instilled the belief in a formless God among the people of Assam. Dadu, a Brahman from Rajasthan, worshipped Rama and Sita, in a formless state and abstained from idol-worship. He followed the path of chanting the name of the lord Rama as the means of attaining spiritual liberation.

Most of the *bhakti* poets like Kabir, Nanak and Tulsidasa were inspired by the ideas of Ramanuja who in turn preached the *Visishtadvaita* doctrine initiated by his *guru* Yamunacharya. Ramanuja’s philosophy was against Sankarcharya’s philosophy of *advaitavad* (monoism) and *maya* (illusion). He believed that the Supreme Being is one and is the creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe and that one could attain salvation through the path of *bhakti*. After Ramanuja, Nimbarkara propounded the philosophy of *bheda-bheda*. In his *bheda-bheda* which contended that the God (world soul) and individual soul (*atma*) had similarities yet were distinct.

Subsequently, Madhabacharya rejected the philosophy of Sankaracharya's monism and Ramanuja's *Vishistadvaita* and advocated Vaishnavism. Thus the ideas of the *bhakti* poets of both the schools – *nirguna* and *saguna*, emanated from a common source and later branched into the tangible and the intangible forms. Consequently, even the *saguna* group of poets maintain the introspective tendency though at a distance.

The legacy of *bhakti* poetry was inherited by the seer poet Rabindranath Tagore, who can be regarded as a most significant *bhakti* poet from a literary standpoint. As a child Tagore was deeply influenced the Bauls or the mendicant singers, Buddhist descendants of the *bhakti* tradition; who wandered from village to village, singing songs of devotion which revealed that the dwelling place of God was within one's own heart and not in the outward institutions, ritual and places of worship. He was considerably influenced by similar views contained in the *Upanishads* and analogous thoughts propagated by the Bengali Vaishnav poets. Tagore translated several poems of Kabir in his collection, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*. In continuity of the *bhakti* tradition, set by Kabir, he denounces ritual and orthodoxy in the following lines of *Gitanjali* :

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!

Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?

Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!...

... Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense!

What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained?

Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow.

He derides ritualistic tendencies and advises a seeker to look inside and introspect in yet another poem of his collection, *Gitanjali*:

The traveler has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end.

My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said 'Here art thou!' (23)

The *bhakti* poetics, particularly its *nirguna* form, is essentially an introspective inner confluence of the *Jeevatma* (human soul) and the transcendental *Paramathma* (Supreme Soul). The two schools of *bhakti* swing forth like the eternal rhythms of seasons; of light and darkness; of dawn and dusk and the final play of birth and death; to restore the finite with the infinite. The introspective chemistry

renders the deepest meaning and restores to humanity, the prime-ordinal oneness of human nature.

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