

**DR. CHINTAN JAYVANT. ARYA**

**Ph.D. ENGLISH LITERATURE**

**BHUJ-KUTCH, GUJARAT**

**INDIA**

**THE BASICS OF BHAKTI AS A FORM AND PIVOTAL  
CHARACTERISTICS OF BHAKTI MOVEMENT**

**Abstract:**

The medieval Indian history faced drastic upheavals that affected common man's way of life. Many changes took place in almost all phases of life. However, the major changes in religion and religious theologies of the time affected a lot to socio-political life of the people. The most important religious development was the emergence of Bhakti Movement. The term Bhakti that is often used today sounds simple yet contains a profound meaning. There are different interpretations of Bhakti available as it has been presented in different context by different people. It was spontaneous and was outcome of retrospection by the reformers of medieval era. Surprisingly the works created by the poet-saints of medieval time shared tremendous resemblance in their objectives. They mainly advocated a new religion that led to reform of the vices that had taken place in ancient Vedic Brahminic religion. May be that is the reason they share many similar characteristics. Some of the great literary scholars even evaluated, interpreted, and represented the term and theology of Bhakti.

**Introduction**

It is interesting to note the basic understanding that has been recorded in the ancient *Bhāgvat* that simply explains it as a medium to reach 'Bhagvān'. If one refers to the approach of Vedic Brahminic theologians there are mainly three paths depicted to achieve salvation. They are,

- (a) The path of Jnāna ( ज्ञान - knowledge)

- (b) The path of Karma ( कर्म – religious performances)  
 (c) The path of Bhakti ( भक्ति – devotion)

Among these three, the path of Bhakti became very much popular, as it suggested the simplest methods of worshipping God, compared to the previous ones that were complex in nature, and far from the reaches of ordinary people.

### The Form of Bhakti

Bhagvān word is derived from ‘Bhāgvat’ and ‘Bhaga’ means six virtues- Jnāna (ज्ञान), Bala (बल), Aishvarya (ऐश्वर्य), Virya (वीर्य), Shakti (शक्ति), and Tej (तेज), while ‘Vān’ means the one who possess them. In short, Bhagvān is the one who posses these six virtues, and that is Purushottam Vishnu. *Bhagvad Gitā* records the following line,

“पुरुषः स परः पार्थ भक्त्या लभ्यसत्त्वनन्यया”

[गीता-८/२२]

It means that the God can only be achieved with Bhakti and no other means. The word Bhakti is made out of ‘Bhaja’, which means to take shelter. Here, meaning of Bhakti can be derived as ‘to take shelter and love’. The meaning was prevalent in the time of Rishi Pānini. As it is recorded in Mantra-23, Adhyāya-6 of *Svetasvar Upanishad* that,

‘यस्य देवे परा भक्तिर्यथा देवे तथा गुरौ’

[श्वेताश्वतरोपनिषद् – २३/६]

Here, Bhakti is described as the supreme love in God. Rishi Sāndilya and Nārada expressed similar views. Sāndilya said,

‘सा परानुरक्तिरिस्वरे’

[Thakkar: 25]

Meaning ecstatic love in Parameswara is bhakti. Maharsi Nārada is recognized as the foremost Bhakta (devotee) who recorded in his *Bhakti Sutra*,

‘सत्त्वस्मिन् परम् प्रेमरूपा’

[Thakkar: 27]

This means, to be one with God through love that is Premlakshanā (प्रेमलक्षणा) Bhakti. The shortest interpretation of Bhakti that can be derived from these two definitions is “affection fixed on God, Íswara”.

## Development of Bhakti and its Sub-types

Vedic Brahaminic philosophy gives two offshoots in the form of God i.e. Nirguna (formless) and Saguna (form). Subsequently, Bhakti also has two divisions i.e. Nirguna Bhakti (worshiping of formless god) and Saguna Bhakti (worshiping of form of god). According to philosophies prevailing in the Vedic Brahaminic religion there are mainly two divisions of Bhakti that is primarily because of its nature,

(a) Bhāva Bhakti-भाव भक्ति (also known as Premlakshanā Bhakti or Parā Bhakti)

(b) Vidhi Bhakti- विधि भक्ति (also known as Navdhā Bhakti).

Bhāva Bhakti is considered to be Moksha itself, and it is not just a means to achieve salvation. It is the supreme type of Bhakti as it is Niskām (निष्काम–selfless) Bhakti expected from any true Bhakta. The later is inferior to the Bhāva Bhakti, as this type describes steps and processes to achieve salvation.

Bhakti is a later development, besides it is not considered an ancient branch compared to other Vedic Brahaminic philosophies, yet in the medieval era, it became very popular. Due to its simplicity of nature it left its permanent reminiscence on Vedic Brahaminic religion. It liberated itself from the earlier reliance on Jnān and Karma and advocated that mere pure Bhakti is enough to achieve salvation. It even eliminated the rigid caste bias and established equalitarian way, due to this great mass of people of all strata got attracted towards it.

Later in Nārada's *Bhakti Sutra*, he has gone even further to Shāndilya by considering Bhakti as the state of mind that is in the extreme love of God. Here, Nārada believes that through Nirodh (emancipation from worldly deeds) one can do true Bhakti. Many others have commented on Bhakti. Shreedhar Swāmi (1200-1250 c. AD) criticized the Shringār (decorum) in the path of Bhakti in reference to the Rāsa Kridā of Krishna in *Bhāgvat*. He even interpreted 81 differentiations of Bhakti from three types Satva (सत्त्व), Rajas (रजस्), and Tamas (तमस्). In the same manner Bopdev, gave complex yet effective interpretation of Bhakti who rejected this concept of Shreedhar Swāmi in the 13th century. He gave two major divisions of Bhakti – (a) Vihit (विहित) (b) Avihit (अविहित). He further sub-divided Vihit Bhakti in (i) Shuddh (pure) and (ii) Mishra (mixed). He further said that the Avihit Bhakti is that which is done with Kāma (काम–lust), Dwesha (द्वेष–envy), Bhaya (भय–fear), and Sneha (स्नेह–affection). He stated that even though these types are not pure and virtuous they lead us to become one with God, and thus to the salvation.

## Major Characteristics of Bhakti Movement

Bhakti became very popular and different modules were constructed. It was rather a protest or a movement against upper Sanskritized class that had made God and religion a monopoly of rich and higher class. The first and the foremost point of Bhakti was its opposition of the complexity of worship and ceremonialism indicated in Vedic Brahminic religion that was later misinterpreted by few, and was utilized in the exploitation of the lower class of society. However it should be noted that it was a peaceful and scholarly reformation that mainly utilized literature and music their medium and mainly brought reform by flowing under current in the medieval society. It stood against the ceremonialism of religion that interrupted the path, which linked common man with the God. The biggest contribution of the Bhakti Movement was, it freed religion from the clutches of the monopoly of upper class and made it handy to common people. This removed the fog of mysticism that had surrounded the Vedic Brahminic religion. This new image of God presented by the advocators of Bhakti theory was transformed image of individual God or personal God that could be worshiped with individual efforts; hence, Bhakti theory brought God closer to the layman. The movement was not accidental outburst; it was a systematic campaign against certain socio-political and religious circumstances. The very first factor that initiated this movement was the mode of worship that had become very complex due to excessive and expensive ceremonialism in the Vedic or post Vedic timer. Kings, feudal lords, and other higher section of the society used to perform Yajyas along with the sacrifices under the presence or guidance of Purohits. Thus, performing Yagyas on the first hand advocated the mode of group worshipping of God. Besides that, the processions of sacrifices also irritated the advocators of non-violence. In opposition to this customs, the Bhakti theory emphasized on the simple adoration of the idols of God in the temples by offerings of flowers, sweets, fruits, grains, etc. along with the prayers and Bhajan-Kirtana. This transformation was revolutionary as it made worship an individual task. It advocated personal worshipping that was perhaps the influence of the highly praised virtue of non-violence in Buddhism, J ainism, and V aishnavism. With the mode of simple Bhakti, they engraved the double impact of saving animals from sacrificing them in the name of religion, and removing of complexity of religious ceremonialism. However, the biggest change it brought was freeing religion from the monopoly of Sanskritization. All ancient scriptures were in Sanskrit and that was the insurmountable hindrance for common man to understand the religion. Bhakti saints did most of their creations in the vernacular languages; hence, there was an immense growth in the literature

of vernacular languages. The emergence and influence of Buddhism and Jainism also played important role in the reinforcement of the Bhakti Movement as Váishnava sect followed the principals that were very much similar to them. The simplicity of philosophy preached by the poet-saints easily convinced the class that was exploited in the name of complex religious ceremonies. It was easy to adopt Buddhist path, as it welcomed the people of all class and creed equally compared to Vedic Brahminic religion that relied highly on the birth, the caste, and the sects. However, for the followers of Vedic Brahminic religion it was almost impossible to remove the saddle that had straight-jacketed them by birth. As a result, the rejection of biased caste system was highly emphasized in the Bhakti Literature of medieval time. One of the characteristics that initiated in the success of Bhakti Movement was the approach of poet-saints, as they did not oppose the main cause that they wanted to reform, but they presented the better option for the same. This amicable remedial approach was universally accepted without any resistance.

### **Music & Literature in Bhakti Movement**

Along with literary approach, music played important role in making this movement immortal. The reminiscence of this musical worshipping Bhakti Movement is still popular in India. The *Rāmāyana*, *Mahābhārata*, and *Puranās* played pivotal role in simplifying the Vedic Brahminic religious philosophies. With the help of myths and stories, the real essence of these complex religious doctrines was passed to the lower class of society. Literature was passed from one generation to another through oral medium and recitation. As a result, majority of literature created during this time was in poetic form, and the advocators of the Bhakti Movement took advantage of this tool. The *Bhāgvat Purāna* that narrates the life and incidents of Lord Krishna influenced a lot to Indian folk and classical music. The following line of *Shrimad Bhāgvatmahātmya* is written on *Padma Purāna*, where Bhakti is personified and tells her origin as well as growth to Nārada.

“उत्पन्ना द्रविडे साहं वृद्धिं कर्णाटके गता ।  
क्वचित् क्वचिन्महाराष्ट्रे गुजरि जीर्णतां गता ॥

[Bhāndev, 9]

Trans: Originated in the South India, it progressed in Karnātika, matured in Mahārāstra, and got older in Gujarāt.”

### **Effects of Bhakti Movement on Women & Downtroddens**

The development and expansion of Bhakti is indebted to *Panchrātra Samhitā*. These texts record different types of Bhakti, idol worship, etc. (Sen: 79) Later in the medieval era, the theory of Bhakti was popularized by Váishnav Āchāryas like Rāmānuja, Mādhava, Nimbārka, Cháitanya, etc. The biggest change that the Bhakti Movement brought was setting the platform for the rights of women and Sudras on the religious grounds. Traditional way of worship denied this right to women and Sudras, but Bhakti Movement rejected the path of asceticism and stressed the inner devotion, which they can practice in their day-to-day household, or even in the business. The poet-saints of lower castes had to pass through severe tests to achieve the acceptance in the society and only with their supreme devotion, greatness of their works, they received acceptance of people in society. It is interesting to note that the subject matter of these poems was mostly related to daily routine. For example, the women poets of the time composed their poems mostly on the meaninglessness and obstacles of the household. Remarkably even the male poet-saints composed their poems in the women tone, and addressed the almighty as beloved. This helped a lot to uplift the standards of women. Akkāmahādevi (1130-1160 c. AD), Mirā (1498-1547 c. AD), Janābai (13<sup>th</sup> c. AD), Bahinābāi (1628-1700 c. AD), etc. were the prominent women saints that contributed a lot in the movement.

Hence, medieval Bhakti Movement that took its initiative from Alawār and Nayanār tradition of South Indian saints proved as a game changer that completely transformed the path of worship laid down by the upper Sanskritized Class of society. It made music and literature its weapon and propagated the equalitarian religion with no demarcation or bias of caste or creed. This socio-literary movement affected a lot to the status of women and common man. The biggest contribution this movement did was simplification of Sanskritized theologies that had darkened the mist around religion making it handy for the common people.

**References:**

- Bhandev. *Dakshin ni Mira: Andal*. First ed. Rajkot: Pravin Prakashan Private Ltd., 2009.
- Hedayetullah, Muhammad. *Kabir: An Apostle of Hindu Muslim Unity*. Second ed. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2009.
- Sen, K.M. *Hinduism*. Third ed. London: Penguin Books, 2005.
- Thakkar, H.R., *Indian Theism*, First ed. Ahmedabad: University Granth Nirman Board, 1974.