
UNIT 16 RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS TRENDS: C. 300 CE TO 1206*

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16.0 OBJECTIVES

The main purpose of this Unit is to introduce the changes in the field of religion in early medieval India. It focuses on the *Bhakti* movement and Tantrism. After going through this Unit, you should be able to:

- understand the rise of Puranic Hinduism in various forms;
- understand the conditions that gave rise to the *Bhakti* movement;
- understand the trajectory of the *Bhakti* movement;
- learn how *Bhakti* ultimately did not bring about a drastic change in social conditions;
- understand the rise of Tantrism and its assimilation; and
- learn how Tantrism has a lasting legacy in different traditions.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

You have learnt about the evolution of Hinduism in previous Units. The 6th century BCE witnessed the rise of several heterodox traditions including Buddhism, Jainism and the *Ajivikas*. The spread of Brahmanism continued throughout the subcontinent as well. The period preceding this witnessed the incorporation of local and tribal deities into the Puranic, Brahmanical pantheon. Brahmanism was reinforced and pushed forward primarily through the granting of land-grants by rulers to the *Brahmanas*, allowing their penetration into tribal

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lands and the expansion of the kingdom and administration. Certain elements within Brahmanism had become oppressive and the religious practice was focused on external rituals. The people belonging to the lower castes and women in general suffered due to this religious oppression. It was under these circumstances that the *Bhakti* movement and Tantrism arose.

It is important to consider how such an oppressive system came into being and consolidated itself. The prevailing allocation of resources like land supported the hegemony of an elite section of society. Thus, economic exploitation extended to socio-religious domain as well. Women were viewed as impure. Their abilities to evoke desire and procreate were viewed as impediments to the spiritual progress of men. The perpetuation of such patriarchal beliefs curtailed their participation in ritual life and other spheres as well.

Both *Bhakti* and Tantrism are umbrella terms for wide ranging phenomena with a variety of manifestations. Historians differ greatly on what each term constitutes. Yet a few common threads may be generalized upon. The various movements espousing *Bhakti* aimed at transcending caste, class and gender difference to a varying degree. The emphasis was on love and devotion rather than textual knowledge as a means to salvation. Tantrism began as a series of beliefs and practices where the feminine in the form of the principle of *Prakriti* and goddesses came to be the focus of worship. It later merged with different mainstream traditions.

16.2 PURANIC HINDUISM

With the decline of Vedic Brahmanism, several sects emerged which together constituted Puranic Hinduism. Puranic Hinduism is, therefore, a belief system and formalized religion with multiple strands that went on absorbing and synthesizing local religious cultic beliefs and practices. This enabled it to bring people belonging to diverse groups under its fold over a vast geographical area. We know that multiple strands make up Puranic Hinduism because of the large pantheon of gods and goddesses. Puranic Hinduism existed along with Tantric beliefs and practices.

The transition from the existing Vedic Brahmanism to Puranic Hinduism was not sudden or quick, but rather it was a slow process of assimilation, negotiation and incorporation of local cults. The transition to a new system did not mean that all old ideas relating to Vedic Brahmanism were entirely abandoned. Yet, the difference between Vedic Brahmanism and Puranic Hinduism is easily identifiable when we look at the differences between textual accounts of both. You have examined the sources of Vedic Brahmanism in the previous Units. The sources of Puranic Hinduism are a class of texts called the *Puranas*. The *Puranas* started getting composed from 3rd and 4th centuries CE. Their composition continued till early modern times. We, therefore, understand the transition from Vedic Brahmanism to Puranic Hinduism by looking at the differences between the *Vedas* and the *Shastras* on the one hand, and the *Puranas* on the other. Since pre-existing thought did not completely disappear, it may be said that Vedic Brahmanism remained as one of the constituents of Puranic Hinduism.

You may ask the question: why was such incorporation and assimilation necessary? One of the answers to this question is tied to the economic conditions

prevailing at the time. The *brahmanas* had received land-grants of *brahmadeyas* and it was important for them to engage local people and assimilate their cultic beliefs and practices. Recognising and incorporating local gods and goddesses, therefore, was a key method of expanding Brahmanism and the reason behind its large pantheon.

Mythology and folklore were also important means to bring the cults within the Brahmanical fold. We know this because the *Puranas* are full of mythological stories that could appeal to a wide audience. The contents of the *Puranas* are more popular than didactic.

There were several changes that took place in religious activity in the transition from Vedic Brahmanism to Puranic Hinduism. This period witnessed many changes, like an increase in ritual activity and now the rituals performed were also distinctly different from the Vedic performances. The performance of *puja* and collective rituals became central as the importance of performing sacrifices decreased. Image worship and worship within temples also became important. The inclusion of leaves and flowers of plants found in forest areas in *puja* activities is a marker of the relationship between Brahmanism and the cults it imbibed. Similarly, the act of making pilgrimages and pilgrimage places gained prominence. We know this from the *Puranas* that mention a vast number of pilgrimage sites. The placement of such pilgrimage sites was also strategic in that they were specifically located in areas away from the core Brahmanical zone. This was a step towards the engagement of Brahmanism with local cults.

The main sects of Puranic Hinduism will be discussed here. They are: Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism. All three were able to absorb many local cults and traditions into their respective folds. Local deities were explained as incarnations of the three main gods.

16.2.1 Vaishnavism

The first mention of Vishnu comes in the *Vedas*, where a few hymns are dedicated to him. More mention is made of him in the class of texts called the *Brahmanas*. These texts treat Vishnu as the highest god. While it spread extensively in the sub-continent, it was particularly prominent in eastern parts of the sub-continent.

As has been discussed above, local cults were absorbed into each of the three strands of Puranic Hinduism. Vaishnavism came to imbibe the cults of Narayana, Jagannatha, Venkateshwara and others. The different incarnations of Vishnu represent a medium for the inclusion of cults. Some historians argue that the inclusion of the Buddha as an *avatara* of Vishnu stems from attempts to bring Buddhists within this fold. Similarly, a Jaina *Tirthankara* was also added.

Vaishnavism gained prominence from the two important *avataras* of Vishnu – Rama and Krishna – which was primarily promulgated through the *bhakti* movement. The Krishna tradition of the *Mahabharata* and the Rama cult of the *Ramayana* assimilated social groups by incorporating their folk narratives in the Epic narratives. But, their deities were always subservient to the Brahmanical deities.

16.2.2 Shaivism

Shaivism gained prominence in several parts of the sub-continent, particularly in Kashmir. The process of assimilation in Shaivism was different. Cults assimilated by Shaivism are identified by the adding of the prefix *Isha* or *Ishvara* in front of the name of a local god, like Bhuteshwara or Chandeshwara. Some historians argue that the children of Shiva were actually major gods of local cults who were incorporated into the larger Puranic narrative. Thus, his son Skanda, also known as Kumara, is worshipped as Subrahmanya, Murugan and Kartikeya. Similarly, his wife Parvati is said to have originally been a mountain goddess.

Another way of identifying cultic incorporation within Shaivism is by looking at the bodily ornaments of Shiva as well as his attire. His attire has also been described as of tribal origin by some historians. They point to the snake as being an essential part of the person of Shiva. Further, Shiva's strong association with fertility may have been derived from local fertility cults and their practices.

16.2.3 Shaktism

Unlike the other two sects, Shaktism did not begin by revolving around a deity. It originally began as the female principle – Shakti – in Brahmanism. As a principle, she was the consort of the three chief gods. Thus, she was Saraswati to Brahma, Lakshmi to Vishnu and Parvati or Durga to Shiva. It was only in the early centuries of the Common Era that Shakti became Devi and was worshipped as such in a cult dedicated solely to her worship. Since the worship of the female principle as mother goddess is believed to have been common among groups that were as yet untouched by Brahmanism, the Shakti cult developed a large following and further was central to Tantrism. The prime text of Shaktism is the *Devi Bhagavata Purana*.

There is no prominent female deity in the *Vedas*. The brief mention of female deities in early literature is not independent of male deities. While the idea of Energy in the consort of Indra does exist, it does not come to completion till a later time. We are, therefore, able to determine the non-Brahmanical origins of the goddess figure from the fact that earlier Brahmanical texts do not mention her. The goddess is named in several *Puranas* and most notably in the *Devi Mahatmya*. The multiple goddesses from various cults gradually came to be identified as one main goddess. While Shaktism employs the female principle as a universal divine figure, whether this improved the condition of women is debateable.

Thus, Vedic Brahmanism was replaced by Puranic Hinduism. The resultant change led to the creation of an enlarged pantheon and a new system of belief. This system was made up of elements of various cults that vastly expanded the scope of Puranic Hinduism. Changes also occurred in religious performance as modes of worship, the nature of rituals and the space for performance were altered. Tantric elements also started seeping into Hinduism around this time. The new ideas brought on by Puranic Hinduism were propagated by various mediums but mainly through the *Bhakti* movement, which will be discussed in the next section.

16.3 THE *BHAKTI* MOVEMENT

The *Bhakti* movement is of crucial importance in studying the history of Indian religion because it was one of the most extensive and widespread religious movements in the sub-continent. They never united into a single phenomenon at a particular time and place.

It spread from the South to the North. It was started by the Shaiva *Nayanars* and the Vaishnava *Alvars* in present-day Tamil Nadu around the 6th century. Thus, the earliest *Bhakti* movements were led by the *Alvars* who were devotees of Vishnu and the *Nayanars* who were devotees of Shiva. In the initial phase the *Bhagavata* movements of the South consisted of very few non-Brahmins and women, but this changed later. These early movements were co-terminus with the rise of early medieval kingdoms like those of the Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras who supported it. In north India, on the other hand, heterodox traditions did not receive political patronage at this time.

The *Bhakti* movement had various perspectives on god and the relationship between god and the devotee. *Bhakti* involved devotion to a personal god. The main point was that the relationship between a devotee and his or her god was not mediated through a priest. Thus, the *Bhakti* movement did away with the middleman. In certain *Bhakti* traditions god was considered to be so close that he became a part of the individual.

Love and devotion to god is envisioned in terms of different relationships. For the *Warkaris* the relationship is envisaged as that of a child (the devotee) with that of its parents, primarily the mother. Sometimes, it is separation from god or pain of that separation (*viraha*) that drives devotee's actions. In the Vaishnavite and Shaivite traditions the desire of the soul for god is viewed as a relationship of love. The concept of *viraha* provided an avenue to incorporate folk songs dealing with conjugal separation.

Prior to this, the stress had been on the ritual performances of the householder or the abstention of ascetics. This new alternative focussed more on personal devotion to a supreme deity. *Bhakti margā* involved deep devotion and love towards the supreme. Similarly, modes of worship ranged from internal spiritualism to worship and rituals in temples. So, while many *bhakti* traditions rejected externalised religious practices, all did not. Some poet-saints, thus, advocate seeing god in all human activities rather than in purely ritualized ones.

Hence, *bhakti* cannot really be generalised upon. Each *bhakti* group was different in the beliefs it espoused. The literature of each tradition bears a common thread but each is different in style and tone of composition. The leaders of the *bhakti* movement came from different groups and genders. Several of its leaders were non-Brahmins. They were different from renunciants. While their relationships with their families did not end, they were detached from all ties. In this sense, they looked down upon the family and sometimes, upon women from the angle of conjugality. While they did not associate with the performance of magic, miracles were a part of their hagiographies.

Some would argue that one of the connecting features between all the movements that make up the larger *bhakti* movement is the centrality of the saint-poets to each of these traditions. The hallmark of the traditions is that their composers

were saint-poets who expressed themselves through spoken words and songs in regional languages. Thus, they expressed themselves in the language of ordinary people. Their poems and songs were compiled by followers after their demise. As these traditions were formed, followers kept removing old ideas that were no longer meaningful and adding new ones. Most of the sources come down through an oral tradition, transmitted from one person to the other. These movements opened up a sacred space for the traditionally underprivileged in their respective contexts. This space had traditionally been closed to them, since being illiterate they had no access to written religious texts, and could thereby only access them via mediators. Hence, an important contribution of the *bhakti* movements was providing spiritual knowledge in a vernacular medium and the strengthening of oral traditions through musical and poetic compositions. The northern tradition used short poems called *padas* that could be set to *ragas*. Therefore, some historians argue that the aim was not to overturn the existing social order but to create new sacred spaces within the existing social order.

Important Points

- *Bhakti* practitioners espoused complete devotion to a supreme god.
- Salvation was no longer restricted to upper caste men and was open to women and men of lower castes.
- The religious leader changed from *Brahmana* officials to saint-poets.
- Sanskrit was no longer the only language for religious texts and texts were translated to and composed in vernacular languages.
- Both Brahmanical hegemony and patriarchy were challenged but not overthrown.
- The *Bhakti* movement emphasized lived experience over doctrine.

16.3.1 The *Nayanars* and the *Alvars*

As has been previously mentioned, the *bhakti* movement began with the movements of the *Nayanars* and *Alvars*. They espoused devotion to Vishnu and Shiva respectively. As the movement progressed, local cults with tribal deities were assimilated into Vaishnavism and Shaivism. Murugan, a tribal deity, was brought under the Brahmanical fold as a part of this process. Mayon was the tribal deity included in Vaishnavism. Local chiefs from both traditions were incorporated as lesser *Brahmanas*. For its ability to encompass more extreme sects, Shaivism developed a broader base. Some historians argue that those following Shaivism came from the lower rungs of society as compared to Vaishnavism.

These sects received political patronage which was seen in the construction of temples and the installing of idols. These sects vociferously opposed all other traditions including the Buddhist and Jaina traditions. Some historians argue that this may have been the case because all traditions were competing for political patronage. The Chola rulers, for example, supported both Brahmanism and *bhakti* by providing land-grants and constructing temples. Although initially asserting their similarities, the traditions of the *Alvars* and the *Nayanars* later became quite hostile towards each other as well.

They received support from the peasant masses. The hymns of the *Alvars* and *Nayanars* were written in the metre of folk songs and, hence, were part of the

more popular musical tradition. The vernacular medium was stressed against the use of Brahmanical Sanskrit in order to promote the relationship of the individual with god without a *Brahmana* intermediary.

One of the direct consequences of these *Bhakti* movements was the rise of Tamil linguistic consciousness cutting across various divisions.

16.3.2 The *Virashaivas*

In Karnataka, the *bhakti* movement arose under the *Virashaivas*. Started by Basavanna in the 12th century, its followers came to be known as the *Lingayats*. They were against caste hierarchy and the notion of pollution attached to certain groups. It stood against Brahmanical superiority and to a certain extent patriarchy. Once Basavanna became a minister under the Kalachuris, the *Brahmana* orthodoxy strove hard against his egalitarian movement leading to bloodshed and banishment.

It was far more successful than others in rising against Brahmanical oppression and patriarchy. However, as far as the larger picture was concerned, it only succeeded in affecting the pre-existing structures to a certain extent. This movement was based on the belief that women and men of the lower castes were closer to divinity than upper caste *Brahmana* men. The ultimate goal in terms of gender was transcending it by becoming androgynous. Therefore, Virashaivism did not believe in gender and caste distinctions. Its earliest founders included Basava, a Brahmin, Satyakka, a sweeper and Kakkayya, a butcher.

Thus, while religious equality was stressed, equality itself did not extend to economic or occupational equality. The lack of belief in caste and gender hierarchies was visible from birth. While Brahmanical initiation ceremonies were restricted to *Brahmana* males, in Virashaivism each baby received a *Shivalinga* and had the Shiva *Panchakshari* whispered into their ears irrespective of caste and gender.

16.4 GENDER IN THE *BHAKTI* TRADITION

Along with its objections to caste, *bhakti* also broke down prevailing notions of gender. While it did challenge these notions, it never succeeded in overthrowing patriarchal oppression. The various *bhakti* traditions dealt with gender in various ways and the extent to which patriarchy was questioned and challenged, differed.

As per the Virashaivite tradition women bear no pollution since the *Shivalinga* removes all impurity. Yet, in practice women did not assume religious equality. They could not conduct religious ceremonies and could not head the religious institution of the *matha*. However, women saints did exist and came from all caste groups. In fact, several women saints were *shudras*, including untouchables. Some were unmarried while others were married with husbands equally devoted to Virashaivism. It is important to note that Virashaivism had the largest women following of all the traditions.

The trope of bridal mysticism in which the devotee envisioned themselves married to god, was an important device. Andal was the only woman saint of the *Alvars*. Her love for Krishna took on the form of bridal mysticism since she imagined herself as the bride of her god in a spiritual marriage.

Gender was also transcended by imagining Shiva as the eternal bridegroom and the devotee a virtuous wife. Hence, Basava also wrote of himself as a bride. Shiva as *Ardhanarishvara* (half male and half female) represented the first goal to be attained while the ultimate goal was transcending sex to the point of androgyny and asexuality. Akka Mahadevi herself stated that she was female in form but male in principle.

Akka Mahadevi is also important for the sheer extremism of her belief in Virashaivism. She attained the ultimate goal of transcending sexuality. Another example may be sought from the Shaivite tradition. Karaikkal Ammaiyar, a female Shaivite saint, took her asceticism to an extreme where she assumed skeletal dimensions. Thereafter, she has become incorporated into the Brahmanical mainstream as a goddess whose boons provide children.

Another trope for posing an indirect challenge to patriarchy was by opting out of the traditional roles in the household. Where the worldly husband was rejected, Shiva was declared as spiritual husband. This may be seen in the instances of Akka Mahadevi and Karaikkal Ammaiyar given above. In spite of challenging patriarchy by choosing to be spiritual rather than householders, several women still viewed their spiritual existence as members of a family.

16.5 DECLINE OF *BHAKTI* MOVEMENT

In terms of its expansion the movement had a lot of success. It spread over vast parts of the sub-continent and incorporated people from various sections of society. In the process it succeeded in diminishing the influence of Buddhism and Jainism in the south. However, the movement ultimately ended as it gradually got subsumed under the patriarchal, Brahmanical order it had arisen against.

Various reasons have been given to explain the lack of success of the *Bhakti* movement in enabling large-scale social mobility. Some historians argue that it may have been because the democratic values espoused by the movement were far too alien for people to engage with. Some others argue that in a way *bhakti* did not challenge the *varna* hierarchy strongly enough. Some strands allowed a *shudra* to assume Brahmanical knowledge, but the problem remained since it did not challenge Brahmanical supremacy and made Brahmanical learning the ultimate aim. The extent of rejection of external practice varied.

As has been discussed, the southern *bhakti* movements received political patronage, unlike the northern ones. It is this political patronage extended to the *Nayanars* and the *Alvars* that may have resulted in the movement losing the values it espoused. Gradually, the hegemonic groups of *Brahmanas* and the landed class returned as ritual officiants. Thereby, the original intent of the movement to remove the middle man between god and the devotee was lost.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What were the conditions that gave rise to the *Bhakti* movement?

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2) How successful do you think the *Bhakti* movement was?

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16.6 TANTRISM

All the religions that existed in the sub-continent at that time developed a Tantric form. This goes to show the special ability of Tantrism to seep into and become a part of mainstream religion. So, it cannot really be called a parallel tradition. It created new religious systems like Shaktism under Hinduism and *Vajrayana* under Buddhism. Mother goddess cults also found favour owing to the Tantric emphasis on fertility.

Connections are often drawn between tribal rites and rituals and Tantrism, particularly those relating to mother goddess cults. The origin of Tantrism is often traced to these. Some historians trace Tantric rituals to *Ajivika* practice that later got embedded in the *Pashupata* sect. Despite these murky origins, the first strands of Tantrism began around 500 CE and the first texts called the *Tantras* were composed around 800 CE. Prior to this, the earliest indirect textual evidence comes from the 7th century in Sanskrit texts like Banabhatta's *Kadambari* and *Harshacharita*, Mahendravarman's *Mattavilasa* and Dandin's *Dashakumaracharita*. The earliest epigraphical evidence is an inscription of Vishnvarman found at Gangadhar in Rajasthan and dating to 423 CE. The Tantric religion seems to have thrived between the 8th and 18th centuries. The effect of Tantrism on mainstream practices could be seen by c. 1000 CE. The Tantric religion is derived from the *Tantras*, *Agamas* and *Samhitas*. Since these texts are composed in Sanskrit, it is assumed that their main audience was literate and urban and hence belonging to the upper castes. Yet Tantrism was more than that. It included popular magic based practices, including those drawn from the *Shakta* and *Hatha Yoga* traditions. The sources for these traditions are also vernacular and, hence, gave access to a wider audience. Therefore, Tantric religion would also have included members of lower castes and even people from rural areas. It was mainly followed in the northern parts of the subcontinent, with less evidence from the south. Its greatest following was in present-day Bihar, Bengal, Assam, Kashmir, Nepal, Tibet, Punjab and Rajasthan.

Just as with *bhakti* it is important to trace the reasons for the rise of Tantrism. Some scholars contend that mainstream religion had become incomprehensible. It could no longer adequately satisfy the religious needs of the people. This paved the way for the rise of Tantrism.

Tantrism involved the introduction of folk elements of religion into the mainstream. This also included cultic and tribal practices. Thus, Tantrism saw the introduction of tribal goddesses and practices into the mainstream. Another reason particularly for the inclusion of goddesses is related to the Tantric focus on the female principle.

Tantric Buddhist monasteries flourished in Bihar during the 7th century CE. The Tara cult is an important part of Tantrism. She is considered to be the Shakti female counterpart of the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara. Tantric elements entered Vaishnavism as a tantric mother goddess was brought in as the consort of Vishnu. The *matrikas* are also a part of Vaishnavism in that Vaishnavi is said to be one of them. Various categories of practice can be included under Tantric religion. These include shamanic and yogic ones, *Shakta* worship, worship of the *Matrikas* and Tantric forms of Brahmanical and Buddhist goddesses, and those of the schools of the *Kapalikas* and the *Kaulas*. The *matrikas* are a group of seven goddesses considered to be mothers. The Tantric sect of the Shaiva *Siddhantas* was called *Agamanta* Shaivism. It flourished in the 11th century and had the Chola kings as patrons.

As with *Bhakti*, Tantrism is an umbrella term for a variety of beliefs and practices. However, commonalities between the various strands of Tantrism are less nuanced and far easier to identify. There are two basic principles that form the basis of all Tantrism:

- 1) Firstly, Tantrism does not accept the authority of the *Vedas*.
- 2) Fertility.

As has been argued above, Tantrism arose to satisfy the religious needs of the people which were not being met by intellectual religion or elaborate ritual. In Tantrism, in general, the female principle of *Prakriti* is of greater importance than the male one (*Purusha*). Each principle is conceived as man or woman and the union of the two leads to creation.

The other principles that differed from one tradition to the other may be briefly discussed. It began rejecting the caste system and patriarchy. Some of their most prominent teachers came from the lower rungs of society. Liberation was to be attained by sincerity to work and profession irrespective of what that was. Menstrual blood was not considered polluting but instead considered sacred.

Tantra did not believe in idol worship because the body served as a microcosm of the universe. The human body contains both the female and the male principle and it is achieving the union of the two that is the ultimate goal of Tantric practice. Hence, the maintenance of the body was crucial and, ultimately, death was to be overcome.

Women could become spiritual leaders in Tantric cults. They were, thus, conversant with principles and beliefs in Tantrism. Caste lines were to be transgressed. The Shakti in Tantrism has been identified as the consort of mainstream gods like Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu; Radha, the consort of Krishna; Devi, the consort of Shiva and the different goddesses associated with the *Bodhisattvas*.

The outreach of Tantrism cannot be gauged. It did have some success in enabling Brahmanical expansion into new places, including tribal communities. Some historians credit Tantrism with bringing women into Buddhism and Jainism.

Important Points

- The word *Tantra* was initially used to refer to a guiding principle, but it later came to be used in a religious sense.

- *Deeksha* (initiation) was an important part of Tantric belief, and it was looked upon as a sort of rebirth.
- *Tantra* treats the human body as the epitome of the universe. It was extensively associated with medical, alchemical and other sciences closely associated with the body.
- Time was central in Tantrism.
- It rejected Vedic asceticism.
- Fertility cult was central to it and this extended to the fertility of the land.

In the course of time Tantrism began to discriminate on the basis of class. Legitimate learning coming from texts, it started to drive away the illiterate. In its later days it was mainly followed by more economically privileged individuals. It was not restricted purely to the realms of the spiritual but extended to more mundane day-to-day activities. Tantrism ended as it gradually got Sanskritised and received royal and political patronage. So, whilst its legacy is visible, its larger appearance has diminished and vanished.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) How did Tantrism differ from other traditions in its treatment of women?

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- 2) Why did Tantrism merge with other religious traditions?

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16.7 SUMMARY

Bhakti movement critiqued the oppression of the social order but never the social order itself. The importance of the *bhakti* movement lies in its providing a powerful ideology and the integration of various social groups. Transgression and transcendence went hand in hand in the *bhakti* movement. Thus, *Bhakti* critiqued the social conditions that existed at that time. It established that the importance of people lay in what they did and not what they were born into.

Tantric practices did not discriminate between people on the basis of caste or gender. Women attained a different kind of prominence as it had a large number of female deities. Tantrism allied itself with various religious traditions ultimately continuing down in mainstream practice and belief.

The two phenomena are similar in some ways. The figure of the religious leader changed from the *Brahmana* to the saint-poet in *Bhakti* whilst Tantrism looked to be inclusive by emphasizing the folk and the female. The medium changed from Sanskrit scripture to the vernacular and popular. It initially stood against Brahmanism and for social equality. However, towards the end it came to be used by the ruling elites for reinforcing and justifying social inequality. The radical flavour of the movement was, thus, lost towards the end. Similarly, Tantrism initially stood against Vedic dominance and patriarchy but political patronage reduced its radical strain.

The path of salvation that was once open only to men of the three upper *varnas* now came to be open to all through a different path. Ultimately, both traditions attempted to provide for equal opportunities to worship for all. Their popularity prompted change in Brahmanism and other traditions.

16.8 KEY WORDS

- Deeksha** : initiation in Tantrism.
Prakriti : the female principle.
Purusha : the male principle.
Shaivism : the cult of Shiva and its regional manifestations.
Vaishnavism : the cult of Vishnu with its regional manifestations.

16.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sec. 13.2
- 2) See Sec. 13.5

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sec. 13.6
- 2) See Sec. 13.6

16.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Ramaswamy, Vijaya (1997). *Walking Naked: Women, Society, Spirituality in South India*. Shimla.

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