
**BLOCK 2 INDIAN INTELLECTUAL
INFLUENCES**

Unit 5 Buddha

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UNIT 5 BUDDHA

Structure

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Suggested Readings

5.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit would enable you to understand:

- Buddha and His Period;
- Growth and Decline of Buddhism;
- Resurgence of Buddhism; and
- Interpretation of Buddhism by Ambedkar.

5.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will discuss about Buddha and his period, growth, decline and resurgence of Buddhism and Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism. Buddhism is among the greatest religions of the world. It is a missionary religion which had spread to most of Asia which included Sri Lanka, China, Tibet, Japan, Thailand, Burma, South-east Asia, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and India. The founder of this religion was the Buddha (the Enlightened) who spread his message of peace, love and brotherhood in his life and prepared a group of followers who would disseminate his message after his life.

5.3 BUDDHA AND HIS TIMES

The period in which Gautama (later the Buddha) was born, and his creed was established, witnessed profound economic, social and political changes. Iron was being used on an increasingly large scale to clear forests and to expand agriculture leading to growth in population. Trade was increasing and a large mercantile class was being formed. There was an increase in urbanisation and large cities were being established. At a political level, more and more lineage groups were forming kingdoms and empires.

The cultural-religious milieu of this period was distinguished by two important trends:

- Shramanic (ascetic) and
- Brahmanic (priestly).

In the Shramanic tradition, the Shramanas or the ascetic-renouncers abandoned the family and society, and became wanderers in search for God and the meaning of life. They went to live in forests in seclusion and moved from one place to another interacting with other ascetics.

The Brahmanic tradition, on the other hand, encouraged householders' religious practices, even though it was not opposed to asceticism. This was a period when the practice of sacrifices was spreading fast as more and more areas came under Brahmanical cultural influence. The idea of a society divided into four *varnas* – Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras in that order – was also being accepted at a wider level.

The two main points on which the Brahmanic tradition was in conflict with the Shramanic tradition were observance of regular sacrifices (*yajnas*) and a hierarchical caste structure. The Brahmans claimed pure descent from the Vedic days as the keepers and upholders of the Vedas, and as priests. The Shramanas, however, contested the idea of hereditary succession by asserting that a person became Brahman by virtuous and moral conduct, and not by birth. While the Brahmanic tradition gradually placed more and more disabilities on the lower social orders, particularly the Shudras, by even excluding them from many religious observances, the Shramanic tradition was open to all and generally preached equality. Both, however, believed in the ideas of karma and rebirth, although they sometimes interpreted them differently. There was a lot of interaction between both traditions and regular exchange of ideas was common.

The Buddhist tradition, as it emerged in this environment, attempted to assimilate the best of both the traditions. In Buddhist literature, both the Shramanas and the Brahmans were accorded equal respect, even though it identified a Brahman with quality and not birth. Both the categories, along with that of the Buddhist monk, were identified with persons who had achieved self-control, were compassionate, and lived a virtuous and moral life. Buddhism criticized pure and completely detached asceticism as well as priestly ritualism and the culture of sacrifices.

The Buddha, founder of Buddhism, was born as Siddhartha Gautam in c. 566 BCE in Kapilvastu on the border of Nepal and India. His father's name was Suddhodana and mother's name was Maya. The *ganasangha* (tribal republic) to which he belonged was known as the Sakya. It was an oligarchy and his father was the chief of this polity. At the age of 16, Siddhartha was married to Yasodhara. They had a son later on who was named Rahul. Soon after Rahul's birth, Siddhartha became a renunciate at the age of 29. He kept wandering for a few years when he ultimately sat down to meditate and received enlightenment at the age of 35 at Bodh Gaya in Bihar. He gave his first sermon at Sarnath near Varanasi known as 'Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dharma'. He also proclaimed himself as Tathagata ('one who has attained what is really so'). After that, he spread around his teachings and died in c. 486 BCE at the age of 80 in Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh (Keown 1996: 17-23).

The Buddha questioned the idea that the Vedas were infallible, he criticized the practice of sacrifices and rituals for attaining salvation, and he rejected the hierarchical principle of the varna order. He preached the following Four Noble Truths:

- 1) Life is suffering.
- 2) Suffering is caused by craving.
- 3) Suffering can have an end.
- 4) There is a path which leads to the end of suffering' [Keown 1996: 44].

Buddhism envisages an endless chain of cause and effect. Everything which takes birth is full of sorrow (*dukkha*), is impermanent (*anicca*) and lacks self-essence (*anatta*). Nirvana from the cycles of birth and rebirth is the ultimate goal. The eight-fold path which would take one out from this cycle is known as 'the middle way' (Keown 1996: 50-53). Thus, the two most important ideas associated with Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths and the middle path. Moreover, in Buddhism, there is no God and no soul, no ritualism and no magic. Buddhism accepted members of all castes and women into the Sangha. At this level, at least, social inequalities were abolished.

5.4 DEVELOPMENT AND EXPANSION OF BUDDHISM

According to tradition, after the death of the Buddha, the Buddhists held their first council at Rajagriha in c. 400 BCE in order to determine the real teachings of the founder. This attempt eventually resulted in the collections of his teachings in three baskets (*tripitika*).

The Second Buddhist Council was held in c. 383 BCE at Vaishali which resulted in a split within the religion between *Sthaviras* (the elders) and *Mahasamgikas* (great assembly).

Under the reign of Emperor Asoka, who had become a follower, Buddhism became firmly established in North India and the Emperor also sent emissaries to various parts of Asia to spread the creed of the Buddha. It was in this period that the Third Buddhist Council was held at Pataliputra in c. 250 BCE.

In the course of time, three important schools developed within Buddhism:

- Theravada (the doctrine of the elders),
- Mahayana (the great vehicle)
- Vajrayana.

Theravada was the first to evolve, claiming to be based on original teachings of the Buddha. This school of Buddhism holds predominant influence in South Asia (as in Sri Lanka and Myanmar).

Mahayana developed later with many famous Buddhist philosophers belonging to this trend. It was more philosophical and transcendental. It also did not consider the Buddha just as a historical person but established him as the purest God. It also laid less stress on monastic life and allowed lay followers in their meetings and listened to their views. Mahayana philosophers introduced the idea that anybody from any caste and status could become enlightened (*bodhisattva*). The most famous Buddhist philosopher belonging to the Mahayana was Nagarjuna (in 2nd century CE) who is reputed to have established the trend known as Madhyamaka or the 'Middle Path', which was a sophisticated improvisation of the similar original teaching.

It was under the aegis of Mahayana that Buddhism spread to South India, Central Asia and China between 200 BCE and 200 CE. It is more prevalent in Tibet, Central Asia, China and Japan.

Vajrayana developed still later having many features of the *tantra*. In contrast to Theravada school, Vajrayana refused to strictly follow monasticism and rejected its puritanical attitude towards women. It focused on human body and considered the unity of male and female important for achieving salvation. Like other schools of Buddhism or even more so, and in conformity with *tantric* tradition, Vajrayana was opposed to caste discrimination and welcomed anybody to join it.

For about a thousand years, from around 400 BCE to 600 CE, Buddhism was the most dominant cultural influence in South Asia. It continued to influence art, architecture and literature till the middle of first millennium CE. Great Buddhist universities were founded in India. The greatest of these was the Nalanda University where, at any given time, over ten thousands students studied logic, grammar, epistemology, medicine and religion. It was a great centre of learning and continued to flourish from the seventh to the twelfth century.

5.5 DECLINE OF BUDDHISM IN INDIA

It is astonishing that Buddhism declined and disappeared in its country of origin even as it spread far and wide in various parts of Asia exercising major influence and even dominance on the religious and cultural lives of several countries. Various scholars have given their opinions on this issue.

According to A.L. Basham, Buddhism faced enormous challenge from a 'reformed' Hinduism which absorbed innumerable local gods into its pantheon as avatars of Vishnu and Shiva. Even the Buddha was declared to be the ninth avatar of Vishnu thus bringing him within the Hindu fold. This move was supported at another level by the new philosophical upsurge within Hinduism, pioneered by Acharya Shankara, which focused on building of institutions to support the religion. The influence of Buddhism had declined in the lives of the common people and it had become mostly restricted to the monasteries.

Finally, with the Muslim invasion, monasteries and Buddhist institutions were destroyed and monks killed. With the monks running away to inaccessible areas like Tibet for shelter, Buddhism was extinguished from the country where it had originated and wielded such large influence for more than a thousand years.

B. R. Ambedkar also was of the opinion that it was Muslim invasion which dealt final blows to Buddhism in India, after it was weakened by resurgent Hinduism, leading to its disappearance.

According to Carl Olson, the decline of Buddhism happened during the Gupta period. The Buddhist monasteries had flourished when they had received social and political support by the people and favourable kings. When the kings, after the fall of the Mauryan dynasty, turned away from Buddhism, 'monastic life became more precarious and its leadership gradually eroded'. The emergence and growth of many Hindu devotional movements gradually won over the lay followers of Buddhism leading to the decline of its social support. The resurgent Hinduism also adopted many ideas of Buddhism attempting to absorb it within its expanding fold. The long wave of invasions from the North-west region beginning with the Huns in the sixth century continued until the thirteenth century (by the Turkish invaders) which destroyed monasteries and images of worship, killed monks and nuns, and obliterated the centres of Buddhist learning. All these developments led to the wiping out of Buddhism from North India, although it survived in South India until the seventeenth century. And of course, it continued to flourish in East and South-east Asia. (Olson 2005: 8-9).

Damien Keown also considers that since 450 CE onwards, Buddhism suffered due to the successive invasions by the Huns who destroyed Buddhist monasteries in Afghanistan and North-west India. Later since the tenth century, the Muslim Turkish invasions dealt a decisive blow to Buddhism as the attackers destroyed the monasteries and universities, burnt the libraries, and destroyed the idols of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas and other art works in North-west, North and then East India. (Keown 1996: 70).

Gail Omvedt, on the other hand, disputes the 'sword of Islam' thesis and argues that it was the preceding confrontation between Buddhism and Hinduism which had severely weakened Buddhism. Moreover, she argues that as major missionary religions, both Buddhism and Islam had much more at stake and were more in competition not only in India but the world over than Hinduism ever had with Islam. In fact, she argues, Brahmanical Hinduism reached an accommodative understanding with the Islamic regimes in India if the Muslim rulers allowed the caste system to function as usual. According to her, the Muslim rulers were quite accommodating in this regard to work as upholders of the Varna order almost as the Hindu rulers had been.

5.6 REVIVAL OF BUDDHISM IN MODERN INDIA

Revival of Buddhism in India began with the interests displayed by some Orientalist scholars and some other European intellectuals in Buddhism in the late nineteenth century. The leaders of the Theosophical movement, H. S. Olcott and H. P. Blavatsky, contacted the Asian Buddhists in 1875. They were successful in energising two important Sri Lankan Buddhist scholars, David Hewaviratne and Anagarika Dharmapala, to work towards the revival of Buddhism in South Asia. The extensive work by William Rhys Davids on Buddhist canonical texts greatly helped in the process. In 1891, Dharmapala came to India and attempted to restore traditional Buddhist places of worship such as Bodh Gaya. In the same year, Mahabodhi Society was formed in Colombo. In India, many scholars began exploring our Buddhist past. Famous historians like Rajendralal Mitra, R.G. Bhandarkar and Hari Prasad Shastri were important early intellectuals who wrote on Buddhism. Later, Sarat Chandra Das was involved more deeply in writing and spreading information about Buddhism. In 1882, he published a journal for the Buddhist Text Society and, in 1893, Anagarika Dharmapala gave him the responsibility of editing the *Maha Bodhi Journal*. K.A. Keluskar published a popular book on the Buddha in 1898. This was the first book on the Buddha which Ambedkar read later on. Dharmanand Kosambi became a Buddhist in 1902 and wrote many important works on the Buddha and Buddhism. One of his important books, *Bhagwan Buddha* (1940), had an impact on Ambedkar's thinking on the subject.

The Tamil Dalit leader Iyothee Thass was one of important early figures who led the movement for the revival of Buddhism in India. By the 1890s, Iyothee Thass was firmly interested in Buddhism and in 1898 he visited Sri Lanka to be more acquainted with the doctrine. He was instrumental in linking Buddhism to the masses, particularly in Tamil Nadu in the early decades of the twentieth century. His writings and movement enabled Buddhist ideas to spread beyond the confines of intellectuals and middle classes. He claimed that the Tamil Dalit caste Paraiyars were the original inhabitants of Tamil Nadu and they had been Buddhist in the Ashokan period. He also argued that the Paraiyars were originally Buddhists who had descended from the Buddha's own clan, the Sakyas. He was instrumental in founding the Sakya Buddhist Society which attracted members from both the Dalit and non-Dalit castes.

Laxmi Narasu was another important Buddhist activist and scholar at the turn of the century. He published an important book, *The Essence of Buddhism*, in 1907 in which he tried to re-interpret Buddhist dogmas regarding karma, dharma and sorrow (*dukkha*).

During the 1920s, many other Dalit leaders and intellectuals were attracted towards Buddhism, claiming it as their original religion. However, the overall reach of Buddhism remained limited and by the 1930s, various other forms of devotional faiths were adopted by Dalit movements in many parts of the country (Omvedt 2003: 234-41).

5.7 AMBEDKAR AND BUDDHISM

According to Gail Omvedt, 'Ambedkar's movement towards Buddhism began in 1908, when he first received a book on the Buddha's life. He followed it with reading on Indian tradition and whatever Buddhist texts he could get access to, with discussions, with visits to the ancient sites of Buddhist caves in Maharashtra. It reached a climax in 1935 when Ambedkar announced, 'Although I have been born a Hindu, I will not die a Hindu.' And it culminated in October 1956 in the city of Nagpur in central India when he and 400,000 followers took the 'three refuges' of traditional Buddhism and an additional 22 vows.' (Omvedt 2003: 244). However, it seems that this journey had not been so continuous. Various alternatives and strategies were adopted to fight against the caste oppression which varied from reform within Hinduism, as exemplified in temple entry campaigns, to the choice of Christianity, Islam or Sikhism as an alternative religion. It was only around the mid-1930s that Buddhism began to be seriously considered by Ambedkar as a comprehensive alternative to Hinduism. In 1933, he showed an inclination to consider Buddhism as an alternative religion. He also named his house 'Rajagriha' which was a centre of the Buddha's teachings (Omvedt 2003: 258).

Even when Ambedkar had become convinced about the greater appropriateness of Buddhism, he did not adopt it simply. He instead radically re-interpreted Buddhism in the light of modern ideas, and imbued it with a post-enlightenment sensibility where secularism stood along with the ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity. For him, Buddhism was based on reason, not on revelation or rituals.

Ambedkar's re-interpretation of the Buddha's teachings derives authority from the great teacher himself as he told his disciple, Ananda, not to rely on any scripture or paths shown by others, but to find one's own path based on reason and experience:

O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp. Hold fast as a refuge to the Truth. Look not for refuge to anyone besides yourselves. And how, Ananda, is a brother to be a lamp unto himself, a refuge to himself (Cited in Omvedt 2003: 9).

Ambedkar argued that while other prophets promised salvation, the Buddha was the only one who made no such promise. He distinguished between *mokshadata* (the provider of salvation) and *margdata* (the one who shows the way). According to Ambedkar, the Buddha wanted each individual to find his or her own path.

Ambedkar declared that the 'purpose of Dhamma is to reconstruct the world' and presented Buddhism as the religion which transformed the world. He attempted to rescue what he thought were the original teachings of the Buddha, the fundamental principles of the creed, from what he considered the spurious interpretations as well as from the distortions brought about by the process of Brahmanical cooption of the Buddha.

Thus, Ambedkar did not adopt the prevalent Buddhist ideas about the Four Noble Truths by declaring that they were not part of the original teaching of the Buddha. He considered such ideas as pessimistic and escapist. Sorrow in the world is not self-inflicted by the individual. In fact, he argued, suffering in the world arose due to oppression of one group or individual by another group or individual. He asserted that Buddhism did not preach a constant condition of sorrow; instead Buddhism was about the way to eliminate sorrow and suffering from the world.

He also rejected the conventional Buddhist notion of karma as the cause of rebirth. He argued that since Buddhism rejected the existence of soul, it is not possible therefore to entertain the idea of rebirth. Moreover, the ideology of karma justifies status quo and the caste system.

Ambedkar also questioned the role of the Buddhist Sangha as a monastic institution where the renouncer-monks sought spiritual self-realisation. Instead, he wished to reorient the Sangha towards social service to the larger community. Ambedkar did not think that the Sangha was a self-contained and isolated world of the monks and nuns. Instead, he visualised it as a social service centre which worked for the uplift of the poor and the oppressed. Thus, he argued that 'a *bhikkhu* who is indifferent to the woes of mankind, however perfect in self-culture, is not at all a *bhikkhu*'.

Ambedkar placed more emphasis on the Buddhist idea of the 'middle path' between the strict asceticism-renunciation of the world and a hedonist-luxurious life. He emphasised the Buddhist virtues such as love, kindness and compassion towards fellow human beings.

Ambedkar conceived Buddhism as a this-worldly religion rather than an other-worldly religion. According to him, Buddhism was capable of delivering liberation to the oppressed people through its teachings of equality and justice. For him, Buddhism was truthful, ethical and rational. It did not believe in any god but relied upon the individual to be his / her own guide. At the same time, Ambedkar saw in Buddhism 'a theory of social action' which 'can be a plausible ground for a Buddhist concept of social justice' (Verma 2010: 57). Thus, both the individual and the social were parts of his conception of Buddhism.

He went to the extent of considering Buddhism as working against and as providing solution to the exploitation and oppression of human beings. According to Gail Omvedt, Ambedkar 'held out the Sangha as the ideal Communist society, and he believed that through the morality of Dhamma humans could transform themselves and reconstruct society' (Omvedt, 2003: 2). He argued that not only Buddhism strove for equality, it's 'goal was, in essence, a welfare state, with a major aim of providing wealth to the destitute' (Omvedt 2003: 257). Ambedkar called his radical re-interpretation of Buddhism as Navayana, to differentiate it from the existing schools within Buddhism – Mahayana, Theravada and Vajrayana. Although his re-interpretation was thoroughly original, he also derived from the early-twentieth century interpretations of Buddhism by Iyothee Thass and Laxmi Narasu. The result of Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism was published after his death as *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957). In this, he presents Buddhism not just as a spiritual but also as a rational system which would work to transform the world and free the people from sorrow.

Ambedkar visualised a fundamental conflict between Hinduism and Buddhism. While he identified Hinduism with inequality and unreason, he extolled Buddhism as a rational

religion of equality and brotherhood. According to him, the decline and defeat of Buddhism resulted in a sharp division of society into castes and the spread of untouchability. Most of Buddhists, argues Ambedkar, who refused to be absorbed by the now-dominant Brahmanism were declared to be untouchables. In his famous essay, *The Untouchables* (1948), he argued that the Dalits were Buddhists who were condemned as untouchables by a resurgent Brahmanism.

On 14 October 1956, Ambedkar embraced Buddhism along with his family and around 400,000 followers at a *deeksha* (conversion) ceremony held in Nagpur. Ambedkar was instrumental in helping the process of revival of Buddhism in India and his death was held as '*Mahaparinibbana*' (the great voyage) by his followers.

5.8 LET US SUM UP

In sum up we have learned about the Buddha and his life and Buddhism and Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism. The Buddha was born in an atmosphere of important economic, social and cultural changes. The ascetic and priestly traditions were in constant conflict with each other. The Buddha, after attaining enlightenment, preached about the prevalent suffering in the world and suggested ways to alleviate this suffering. He adopted a middle path which rejected both the strict ascetic principles of complete dissociation from the world and the Brahmanical ideas of sacrifices and rituals as the way for attaining salvation. The teachings of the Buddha were collected by his followers after his death giving shape to a form of creed and religion which became very influential in India and in most of Asian countries. For various reasons, Buddhism declined in India, even when it flourished in many other countries. A revival of Buddhism in India took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which became much strengthened after Ambedkar adopted Buddhism along with many lakhs of his followers in 1956.

5.9 QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Discuss the teachings of the Buddha in the context of the conflicting ideas of his times.
- 2) Discuss the rise and decline of Buddhism in India.
- 3) Critically analyse Ambedkar's re-interpretation of Buddhism.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Gail Omvedt. *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*. New Delhi: Sage, 2003.

Carl Olson. *The Different Paths of Buddhism: A Narrative-Historical Introduction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005.

Damien Keown. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Vidhu Verma. 'Reinterpreting Buddhism: Ambedkar on the Politics of Social Action', December 4, 2010, No 49, *Economic & Political Weekly*.

UNIT 6 KABIR

Structure

- 6.1 Objectives
 - 6.2 Introduction
 - 6.3 Life of Kabir
 - 6.4 Kabir's Teachings
 - 6.5 Kabir's Influence on Ambedkar
 - 6.6 Let Us Sum Up
 - 6.7 Questions to Check Your Progress
- Suggested Reading

6.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit would enable you to understand:

- Kabir and the historical context in which his ideas developed;
- Important aspects of Kabir's teachings; and
- How his teachings influenced Ambedkar.

6.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit you will learn about Kabir and his ideas and teaching and influence on Ambedkar. India is a land of great poets and philosophers whose ideas contributed to understanding the true values of human life. Sant Kabir, was one such illustrious thinker, great reformer and mystic poet, who urged people to recognize human values ignoring divisions in society in the name of religion and caste. His ideas on religion and caste, particularly his emphasis on human values, left a deep impression on Dr. B. R. Ambedkar when he was a young boy. Later in his writings, Dr. Ambedkar acknowledged Kabir as one of his masters. Dr. Ambedkar devoted his life to providing equality, dignity, self-respect and justice to all socially oppressed people and in this mission of his life he greatly admired Kabir.

In this unit we will first learn about Kabir and the historical context in which he was born. Then we will talk about his ideas, particularly on religion, caste and humanism. Finally we will explain how Ambedkar found Kabir's teachings relevant for eradicating social evils and establishing human dignity and equality.

6.3 LIFE OF KABIR

Many legends exist about Kabir's life but some facts are widely accepted. He was born in Varanasi around 1398 A.D. and grew up in a Muslim weaver family. Before we discuss his journey towards sainthood, we need to understand the times in which he lived.

Fifteenth century north India witnessed political uncertainty following the decline of the Sultanate of Delhi. Timur's invasion of Delhi and subsequently the rule of the Lodis created political instability and lawlessness. Common people were the victims of political uncertainty. There were also tensions between the Muslim rulers and the Hindu chieftains, enmity between followers of the two dominant religious traditions was very much in existence. Attempts made to convert people, particularly those who were socially oppressed, to Islam created social tension.

This was also the period when the bhakti movement flourished in North India. Ramananda, an important proponent of the bhakti tradition, brought into Northern India the wave of bhakti tradition that had swept South India earlier.

The bhakti movement had started and flourished in South India between 7th and 12th century A.D. Rejecting ritualism and scriptural instruction, the bhakti tradition preached personal devotion to God as a means of salvation. Religion was freed from Brahmanical domination and was made accessible to common people. The gospel of humanity, equality and universal brotherhood were the major contributions of the bhakti movement. In contrast to orthodox ritualism of Brahmanical tradition and intellectualism of the Vedanta philosophy, Ramananda proclaimed the path of bhakti as the means to realize the ultimate truth. His personal god was Ram and he asked his followers to chant 'Ram Nam' in order to attain salvation. *Nathpanthis* and the Shakta tradition also influenced the society of that period. Varanasi, being a major pilgrimage centre of Brahmanical domination, was very much swayed by these changes.

This introduction to socio-cultural context of the fifteenth century North India is important to understand Kabir's ideas. Kabir's compositions reflect his understanding of the times he lived in and also diverse religious traditions. Kabir was the product of his time and was instrumental in bringing changes and enabling people to understand the true value of human life devoid of any form of orthodoxy.

Though Kabir in early life became a disciple of Ramananda, he remained a householder and used to earn his livelihood by weaving clothes, which was his family craft. Kabir, naturally inclined towards meditation and spiritualism, had a strong desire to become Ramananda's disciple. It is said that Kabir being a Muslim was apprehensive that Ramananda may not accept him as his disciple. He knew Ramananda went to the river Ganges for bath and decided to lie on the steps of the bathing *ghat* in order to draw his attention. Ramananda stepped on him by accident and uttered in surprise 'Ram! Ram!', the name of the God he worshipped. Kabir took this as his initiation as a disciple of Ramananda and in his songs he acknowledged his indebtedness to Ramananda as his teacher.

However, as we know that Varanasi in the fifteenth century was the centre of many religious traditions like Brahmanical Hinduism, Sufism, Tantrism, Bhakti movement and others and all these influenced Kabir's spiritual ideas which are reflected in his teachings. Whatever formal training he might have received from Ramananda, Kabir is believed to have been in touch with various holy men of his time. He recognized the value of both Hindu and Muslim scriptures and contemporary religious traditions probably shaped his belief and faith in composite character. He was opposed to ritualism and orthodoxy in any form. He considered himself, 'at once the child of Allah and of Ram'. He was not literate but his words were meaningful and full of wisdom which even common people could understand. He did not choose the life of an ascetic but earned his living from the loom.

He married and lived with his family like a common man. But he did not hesitate to criticize orthodox ideas and expressed through songs and poems his passion for divine love. P. D. Barthwal writing about Kabir says the following:

...Kabir, who, though born of Muslim parents, had spent much of his time in the company of the Hindu Sadhus and had learnt his lessons in Vedanta at the feet of Ramananda and those in Sufism in the association of Saikh Taqi. In him [Kabir] both Vedanta and Sufism joined hands to proclaim that God is one and imageless, that he is not to be found in rituals and forms which are but veils of falsehood hiding Him from us, but is to be realized as one with us being enshrined in our own hearts, and forming the substance in all that exists. And the Bitterness of the preliminary controversies apart, there was nothing in the new thought, against which the sense of a Hindu or that of a Moslem could reasonably revolt.

(Barthwal 1978: 15).

Kabir's ideas invited strong reactions from orthodox groups of different religious traditions and he was persecuted for his non-conformist ideas. It is said that representatives of Hindus and Muslims once approached the court of the Emperor Sikandar Lodi and alleged that Kabir was corrupting people through his ideas and he claimed to possess divine power. But Sikandar Lodi was tolerant and did not punish him although Kabir was asked to leave Varanasi to maintain peace. It is said that he roamed around many cities of Northern India and breathed his last at Maghar near Gorakhpur. When he died, his followers started fighting about the last rites. The legend is that when they lifted the cloth covering his body, they found flowers instead. The Muslim followers buried their half and the Hindu cremated their half. Whether he was Hindu or Muslim, Kabir said:

**Hindu kahu tu hun nahi, musalman bhi nahi.
panch tattwa ka putala, gaibi khele mahi.**

If I say I'm Hindu, I am not, and also I am not Moslem. The body is made up of five gross elements and the Divine Being who is dwelling in it is 'I am.'

His simplicity, use of vernacular language and everyday metaphors had major appeal among common people and soon he had a large following among various sections of society, particularly socially oppressed groups. Later on followers of Kabir formed Kabir Panth to popularize his ideas.

6.4 KABIR'S TEACHINGS

Teachings of Kabir were compiled by his followers. Kabir did not compose any systematic treatise, rather his work consists mostly of short verses expressed in vernacular in the form of *padas*, *dohas*, and *ramainis*. His *dohas* or simple two-line verses replete with illustrations from everyday life represent his philosophy of life. These short poems are in the *Bijak*, the sacred book of Kabir Panthis, the followers of Kabir. And the *Bijak* is one of the earliest of the major texts in modern Hindi. The compiler of Kabir's teachings might have considered *Bijakas* the most suitable title for the compilation of Kabir's verses because it refers to a document by which a hidden treasure of religious knowledge can be revealed. Kabir through his teachings tried to break the hegemony of fundamentalists in all religions and his simple words gave confidence to large number of people who were socially oppressed to stand for equality and justice.

His anguish against the divisiveness in society because of caste and creed is very much visible. He taught that humanity is above all religions and God is the father of all. Therefore he asked people not to fight with each other because they were all brothers. For Kabir, neither does Hari exist in the east nor Allah in the west. They are one and reside inside the human heart. Kabir advised everyone to seek truth within their own hearts. Living with his family and earning through his loom, he advocated dignity of labour and preached that simple life and complete devotion to God is the way for realization of the absolute truth of life. Evelyn Underhill, in his introduction to the translation of *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* by Rabindranath Tagore, the great poet, writes in the following words about Kabir's religious philosophy.

The "simple union" with Divine Reality which he perpetually extolled, as alike the duty and the joy of every soul, was independent both of ritual and of bodily austerities; the God whom he proclaimed was "neither in Kaaba nor in Kailash". Those who sought Him needed not to go far; for he awaited discovery everywhere, more accessible to "the washerwoman and the carpenter" than to the self-righteous holy man. Therefore the whole apparatus of piety, Hindu and Moslem alike the temple and mosque, idol and holy water, scriptures and priests were denounced by this inconveniently clear-sighted poet as mere substitutes for reality...

(*One Hundred Poems of Kabir*. Translated by Rabindranath Tagore. Delhi, 1985, pp. 5-6).

Kabir primarily preached religion of love without any distinction of caste and creed. He was an enlightened saint who suggested that True God resides within a righteous person. He denounced caste system and idolatry. From this discussion, we find that the core of Kabir's religious philosophy was his firm belief in humanism. Here I would like to quote some of his verses from his *Bijak* which will further explain his teachings.

Saints, I see the world is mad.
 If I tell the truth they rush to beat me,
 if I lie they trust me.
 I've seen the pious Hindus, rule-followers,
 early morning bath-takers-
 killing souls, they worship rocks.
 They know nothing.
 I've seen plenty of Muslim teachers, holy men
 reading their holy books
 and teaching their pupils techniques.
 They know just as much.
 And posturing yogis, hypocrites,
 hearts crammed with pride,
 praying to brass, to stones, reeling
 with pride in their pilgrimage,
 fixing their caps and their prayer-beads,
 painting their brow-marks and arm-marks,
 braying their hymns and their couplets,
 reeling. They never heard of soul.
 (Hess and Singh. 2015:42).

Brother, where did your two gods come from?
 Tell me, who made you mad?
 Ram, Allah, Keshav, Karim, Hari, Hazrat-
 so many names.
 so many ornaments, all one gold,
 it has no double nature.

(Hess and Singh. 2015:.50-51).

There is nothing but water at the holy bathing
 Places; and I know that they are useless,
 For I have bathed in them.
 The images are all lifeless, they cannot speak;
 I know, for I have cried aloud to them.
 The Purana and the Koran are mere words;
 Lifting up the curtain, I have seen.
 Kabir gives utterance to the words of experience;
 And he knows very well that all other
 things are untrue.

(Tagore 2005: 50-51).

Pandit, look in your heart for knowledge.
 Tell me where untouchability
 came from, since you believe in it.
 Mix red juice, white juice and air-
 a body bakes in a body.
 As soon as the eight lotuses
 are ready, it comes
 into the world. Then what's
 Untouchable?
 Eighty-four hundred thousand vessels
 decay into dust, while the potter
 keeps slapping clay
 on the wheel, and with a touch
 cuts each one off.
 We eat by touching, we wash
 By touching, from a touch
 The world was born.
 So who's untouched? Asks Kabir.
 Only he
 Who has no taint of Maya.
 (Hess and Singh. 2015:.42- 55).

Who's Brahmin? Who's Shudra?
 Brahma *rajas*, Shiva *tamas*, Vishnu *sattva*...
 Kabir says, plunge into Ram!
 There: no Hindu. No Turk.'

(Hess and Singh 2015:67)

Reading the above poems you definitely get the impression that Kabir was ahead of his times. One can see the voice of protest and dissent to the existing socio-religious practices in Kabir. Kabir the mystic was essentially a reformer and at the same time a symbol of social revolt. People later on started worshipping Kabir as a god although Kabir himself was against idolatry. In Kabir's philosophy, the emphasis was on humanity and universal brotherhood.

6.5 KABIR'S INFLUENCE ON AMBEDKAR

Ambedkar's father, Ramji Sakpal, was a follower of Kabir and in Ambedkar's household, devotional songs of Kabir were sung every day. Ambedkar grew up as a child listening to these devotional songs and witnessing the belief of elders in the bhakti tradition. This had a lasting influence on Ambedkar's life. As he started experiencing social discrimination at school because of his birth in a Dalit family, Ambedkar felt the need to raise his voice for social equality and human dignity. In this journey Kabir's teachings shaped his ideas.

Kabir was one of the three masters who contributed towards shaping his life. He admitted that as a young boy he was greatly influenced by Kabir as his father was a devotee of Kabir. He believed that it was Kabir who truly grasped the essence of Buddha whom Ambedkar considered his first and best master. Though Kabir lived in and around Varanasi, his ideas spread to different parts of India. The fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan Dev, had incorporated many verses of Kabir into the Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib.

After Kabir's death his followers compiled his teachings and spread his ideas. His ideas had strong appeal particularly among the socially oppressed people. Temples were built and singing of Kabir's verses became part of people's life. Far away from North India, in the family of Ambedkar, Kabir had a special place. Ambedkar's parents encouraged him in childhood to recite Kabir's poems. In Ambedkar's writings on contemporary socio-religious practices one can find the reference to Kabir's spirit. Arguing on the need for abolition of caste, Ambedkar wrote:

There have been many who have worked in the cause of the abolition of Caste and Untouchability. Of those, who can be mentioned, Ramanuja, Kabir and others stand out prominently. Can you appeal to the acts of these reformers and exhort the Hindus to follow them?...Reason and morality are the two most powerful weapons in the armoury of a reformer. To deprive him of the use of these weapons is to disable him for action. How are you going to break up Caste, if people are not free to consider whether it accords with reason? How are you going to break up Caste, if people are not free to consider whether it accords with morality?

(Vasant Moon 1989: 74).

One can find the reflection of Kabir's ideas on religion and social division in the name of caste and creed in Ambedkar's struggle against the caste system and various prejudices practiced in the name of Hinduism. The ultimate goal of these two great historical figures

was a religion of humanity above anything else. Both advocated abolition of caste and untouchability. Ambedkar was not against religion, but he was against the misconception and misrepresentation in the name of religion.

He said,

...you must give a new doctrinal basis to your Religion – a basis that will be in consonance with Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, in short, with Democracy. I am no authority on the subject. But I am told that for such religious principles as will be in consonance with Liberty, Equality and Fraternity it may not be necessary for you to borrow from foreign sources and that you could draw for such principles on the *Upanishads*.

(Vasant Moon 1989: 77-78).

6.6 LET US SUM UP

You have learnt about Kabir, the great poet and philosopher. Born around fifteenth century in Varanasi and brought up in a family of Muslim weaver Kabir through his teachings made significant contribution towards the spread of bhakti tradition in India. As opposed to the orthodox cult, his religion of love had an immense appeal to a large number of followers. We explained the historical context in which Kabir lived and presented important facets of his teachings. His followers belonged to different sections of society and different parts of India. Ambedkar's family greatly admired Kabir and as a child Ambedkar was inspired by his ideas. Influence of Kabir in his life was acknowledged by Ambedkar himself in his writings and his socio-religious philosophy is the testimony of Kabir's influence on him. We end with a poem of Kabir:

The pundit and the torch-bearer-
 Either of two in darkness gropes,
 To others he doth give the light
 But he himself in darkness goes.

(Karki 2001: 47).

6.7 QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Explore the historical context in which Kabir developed his ideas?
- 2) Discuss the important aspects of Kabir's teachings
- 3) Analyse the teachings of Kabir influenced Ambedkar?

SUGGESTED READINGS

P. D. Barthwal. *Traditions of Indian Mysticism based upon Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry*, Delhi, Heritage, 1978.

Mohan Singh Karki. *Kabir: Selected Couplets From The Sakhi In Transversion*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 2001.

Vasant Moon. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. I. Bombay, 1989

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Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh *The Bijak of Kabir*. Trans. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015

UNIT 7 JYOTIBA PHULE

Structure

- 7.1 Objectives
 - 7.2 Introduction
 - 7.3 Social Reformer Jyotiba Phule
 - 7.4 Educator Mahatma Phule
 - 7.5 Builder of Alternative Culture
 - 7.6 Jyotiba Phule's Influence on Ambedkar
 - 7.7 Let Us Sum Up
 - 7.8 Questions to Check Your Progress
- Suggested Readings

7.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit would enable you to understand:

- Phule's ideas and works as a social reformer;
- His critique of caste-patriarchal system and religion;
- His critique of existing education system and his contribution to the field of education;
- His attempt to create an alternative culture; and
- His influence on Ambedkar.

7.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit will introduce about Jyotiba Phule contribution as social reformer, anti caste movements, education and influence on Ambedkar. Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) was an exemplary social reformer and revolutionary thinker of modern Maharashtra. He, by rooting himself in the anti-caste tradition of India, had initiated a formidable movement against caste system and religious tyranny which Gail Omvedt has described as 'cultural revolt of modern Maharashtra'. His ideology and activism represented the spirit of modernism where values like humanism, rationalism, individualism and scientific temper were cherished. Many emancipatory movements espousing human rights had begun under his ideology and leadership.

By establishing Satyashodhak Samaj, he inculcated a spirit of anti-caste radicalism among the Shudra-atishudra masses. He raised the issue of exploitation and oppression of peasants and organised peasant movements in Maharashtra. His efforts to spread awareness among the industrial working class and had given rise to the first working class union in Mumbai. He challenged Brahmanical cultural hegemony and initiated the struggle for alternative culture.

7.3 SOCIAL REFORMER JYOTIBA PHULE

Let us discuss social reforms done by Phule. In the nineteenth century, ideas of social reform were engrossing every sphere of society including religion, society, economy and politics. Social reformers who wanted reforms to take place in all these fields acknowledged religious reforms as the precondition for all reforms. They inaugurated religious reform movements based on rationalism, individualism and humanism. In the social sphere, they introduced women's reforms abolishing inhuman, irrational practices and customs; in the economic sphere, they sought to change capitalist industrialization and emphasized the importance of the propagation of western physical sciences and in the political sphere they sought a change espousing the values of democracy, republicanism and secularism.

The early social reformers emerged from the upper strata of society. Their conception of social reform revolved around issues related to family; they wrote and spoke against irrational customs like *sati* and ban on widow remarriage, and argued in favour of women's education. However, they never could muster the courage to act as they preached. Moreover, they never protested against caste and untouchability (Ambedkar, 2013: 219). In contrast, Phule with his piercing critique of social and religious institutions and committed activism brought about a radical turn in the milieu of social reforms.

When other social reformers were advocating reforms in consonance with religious scriptures, he was criticizing them as a caucus of few interested elites. When reformers were giving merely lip-service to the cause of women's education, he started a school for girls. When due to ban on widow remarriage, young widows were falling prey to illicit relations and were committing infanticide, Phule started an asylum for them and their children (Keer, 1973: 98-101). He opened his well for the untouchables and demolished proscriptions based on the principle of purity-pollution (Phule, 1980: 145-46).

He derided the Vedic myth of the origin of *varna* as unscientific and irrational and rejected the Brahmanical theory of divine origin of caste. Moreover, his logic for rejecting *varna*/caste hierarchy was drawn from the first century Buddhist text called *Vajrasuchi*. The crux of his argument against caste was based on the Buddhist tenet that 'as there are different species in the animal world there are no such a difference in human world' (Bagade, 2010:71).

There were several arguments defending hierarchy of caste and he demolished each of them. The argument for 'occupational division of caste' held that caste inequality was convenient and useful. Phule countered this by questioning, 'if Brahmin's three sons are taking up three different occupations, will they be of three different castes? If a Brahmin woman as a part of her daily chore is removing the excreta of a child, will she be treated as untouchable' (Phule, 1980:336)?

He refuted the hereditary basis of caste by demonstrating that the sons of great kings, emperors and artists never possessed the same qualities and achievements as their parents (Phule, 1980:218). By drawing attention to the immoral conduct of Brahmins, he disputed the logic of caste hierarchy based on purity-pollution which considered Brahmins pure and untouchables impure (Phule, 1980:314-16).

The most meticulous part of his critique of caste was unravelling of the exploitation and oppression of the caste system. He not only brought out the material aspects of caste exploitation but also pointed out the social and cultural relationships of domination and

subordination of caste which formed basis of material exploitation. By uncovering the exploitation techniques employed by Brahmin priests and moneylenders, he initiated a struggle against caste and untouchability.

Phule offered a scathing critique of patriarchy. He unravelled the complex processes of women's subjugation. According to him 'men's tendency of aggression, want oneness and deceit was responsible for the genesis of women's slavery.' He stated that 'to subjugate women men had used violence and had implanted their selfish and distorted renderings of women in the religious scriptures. He notes that women were enslaved through hegemonic discourse of negative constructions in three ways:

- depicting women's nature (*stri-swabhav*) as weak, cruel, evil etc.
- portraying women's behaviour (*stri-charit*) as scheming and adulterous
- projecting women's ethical conduct (*stri-dharm*) as *pativratas* or loyal, dedicated and servile wives.

Against such kind of male positioned narrative and against the entrenched patriarchal domination, Phule applauded women's motherly attributes (like sacrifice, dedication, hard work, and kindness) and contended that 'women are superior to men' (Phule, 1991:345).

The inequality between men and women was characteristic of Hindu religion. Patriarchal order entrusted responsibility of *Pativrata dharm* on women but exonerated men from such a responsibility. It allowed Brahmin men to marry as many times they wished but prohibited Brahmin widows from remarrying. Phule condemned all kinds of practices and customs that supported men-women inequality. By putting a poignant question that 'there are several instances of wives in grief of deceased husband had committed *sati* but could anybody cite a single example of a man who in sorrow of deceased wife has ever committed *sati*' (Phule, 1980:359)? He was as if on a mission to constantly expose the inequality and injustices inflicted on women.

Phule had also revealed the linkages between caste and gender. He juxtaposed everyday labour of Shudra women with everyday activities of Brahmin women (Phule, 1980:584-586). This comparison certainly cautions us to be wary of using women as a single category. Women were exploited in different ways under caste-gender hierarchy. He pointed out that under the purity-pollution scale of the caste system, Brahmin or high caste women were exempted from productive labour and the drudgery of labour was always inflicted on low-caste women.

He offered scathing attack on Brahmanical religion. He rejected divinity of Vedas and commented that 'if Vedas would be made public, little girls would destroy its credibility' (Phule, 1980:398). By employing scientific and moral logic, he criticised myths and their divine heroes and by demonstrating irrationality and exposing exploitation he denounced religious rituals. He condemned religious scriptures for inflicting inequality and injustice on the *Shudra-atishudras* and women. He exposed the cunning, crafty and exploitative nature of priest-craft. And he rejected all the illusory notions of traditional religion such as rebirth, *karmsidhant*, heaven and hell as the concoctions of scheming priests (Bagade, 2006:330).

To give an organised form and public expression to the fight against religious tyranny and caste oppression, Phule established Satyashodhak Samaj on 24 September 1873. Phule called his religion universal true religion which allowed every individual to become member

of the Samaj without making any discrimination based on caste and religion. The main concern of the Samaj was to

- abolish the slavery of the Shudra-atishudra masses
- make them aware of their human rights
- undertake their improvement (O'Hanlon, 1985:231-32).

Satyshodhak Samaj espoused the principle of monotheism, rejected mediation (of the priest) between creator and devotee, opposed idolatry and advocated philanthropic activism. It launched a vitriolic attack on Brahmanical hegemony, rejected all kinds of irrational, inhuman faiths, customs and traditions. It propagated universal ethics based on equality, liberty and fraternity and provided an alternative scheme of rituals.

7.4 EDUCATOR MAHATMA PHULE

Phule began the project of emancipatory education by establishing institutions namely 'Native Female School' which started a school for girls in 1848 and 'The Society for Promoting Education of Mangs and Mahars' which started a school for untouchables in 1851. As there was no female teacher available, Phule trained his wife Savitribai, who became the first female teacher of India. Both faced several adversities including paucity of funds and government apathy and violent opposition put up by orthodoxy. Fighting against all odds, Phule and his wife Savitribai ran several schools and worked relentlessly in the field of education.

Phule honestly believed that social change can occur through education. For him, 'the defining character of human being is to possess intelligence and knowledge' (Phule, 1980:256). He attacked the traditional policy of prohibition of education to the *strishudra-atishudra*. According to him denial of access to education made the subaltern castes ignorant. And due to this state of enforced ignorance, these castes could not realize the injustice and slavery inflicted on them; nor could they recognize their human rights. He identified that the caste-based inequality of power/knowledge is upholding caste and avowedly suggested universal education as the important panacea. He believed that as universal education brought revolution in Europe, it will bring revolution in India too (Phule 1991:229-244).

Phule criticized colonial apathy towards mass education and complained that the state policy of allocating larger share of funds to higher education resulted in the neglect of primary education (Phule, 1991: 243). He accused the government of ignoring the education of lower classes by toeing the trickle-down theory. The government was under the illusion that the higher classes would spread education among the lower classes. The government squandered the taxes it collected from poor farmers on educating the upper classes. But children of the rich, who availed free education and achieved material success on its basis, did nothing to assist the uplift of the underprivileged. The British policy ensured 'monopoly of education by the Brahmins' and, as a result, 'all the senior government posts are monopolized by them'.

Due to poverty and ignorance, the subaltern castes were not ready to understand the importance of education. The Shudra-atishudras, under the spell of religion, perceived education as sin. They were so much under the sway of religious gullibility that they dreaded to send their children to school. Phule urged the British government to initiate the

spread of primary education. Phule submitted several constructive suggestions to the Hunter Commission:

- Each boy or girl up to age 12 should be given compulsory and free primary education.
- The government should spend half the amount of the local funds on primary education.
- The number of primary schools should be increased.
- Provincial governments should allocate enough funds for primary education.
- Municipalities should take responsibility of the expenses on primary education.
- The education department should control primary schools (Phule, 1980:167-182).

He wanted the British government to spend people's money collected through taxes on developing an infrastructure for universal education. He repeatedly asked, advised and warned the government in this regard (Mani, 2005:273). Criticising colonial education for not serving the immediate interests of caste subalterns, he pointed out that neither did it offer them technical and professional capabilities to better their lives nor did it prove to be instrumental in freeing themselves from the shackles of Brahmanism. He suggested radical revamping in the approach, content and pedagogy of colonial education setting alternative path of education.

Phule offered devastating critique of Brahmanical pedagogy and stated how it made the subaltern lose the track of reality. Both, Brahmanical and colonial pedagogies, never intended at cultivating a critical bend of mind in the students. Their descriptive and memory-based pedagogy neither could give the students capability to pose questions nor could impart skills or creativity to solve them. Their pedagogic stance was so alien and textual that it detested any connection with everyday lives of the downtrodden students. It remained abhorrent towards imparting occupational or technical skills. It was so commanding that it never respected students' ability of thinking and treated them merely as passive objects.

Phule initiated a new kind of pedagogy which aimed at nurturing rational thinking among students. He rejected teacher-student relationship prescribing command to teacher and obedience to students. He encouraged inquisitiveness and spirit of inquiry among students. He introduced problem-posing dialogic pedagogy which brought teacher and students on the same level of active engagement. This pedagogic technique of placing questions and finding solutions made students critical thinkers. It not only enabled students to approach the reality in a critical and creative way, but also encouraged them to take up struggles to transform the reality.

Phule's pedagogy is evident in his writings. Some of his texts such as *Gulamagiri* and *Sarvajanik Sataydharma* use dialogic mode in which the narrative runs as dialogue between students and teacher Jyotiba. Unlike colonial education where teacher is adult and student is child (Krishna Kumar, 1989), Phule places both teacher and students on an equal footing; both pose questions to each other, procure facts, offer analysis, verify statements and derive their own truths. His pedagogy helped caste-subaltern students in building critique of existing knowledge and making fresh inroads in the field of knowledge.

The structure of education under the British government was entirely text-oriented and did

not provide practical or skill-oriented technical education. It also was not imparting the knowledge of Western physical sciences. And the preponderance of Brahmin teachers added an instrument of pedagogy which was memory-based, uncritical and bookish. Colonial education was not that useful to meet the needs of the labouring subaltern-castes. Therefore, Phule vehemently criticised these limitations of colonial education (Phule, 1991: 723-25) and asserted in favour of professional and technical education. He advised that the knowledge of subjects like physics, astronomy and chemistry should be given at primary level. According to him, education should address the life-world of the toiling Shudra-atishudra masses and should enrich their skills and capabilities to make advances in the industrial and agriculture field (Phule, 1991: 714-26).

Both the traditional Brahmanical and the colonial education had shown apathy towards physical labour. Phule criticised this policy of delinking physical labour from intellect. For him intellect and physical labour were inseparable. He attacked the tendency of stigmatizing labour and urged that schools should be associated with industries so as to impart professional and technical education. Thereby, students can learn to tackle the predicament of practical life and turn themselves into independent and thinking individuals (Narke, 1998: 20).

He observed that the anti-labour vanity of the Brahmanical intellectuals was a major hurdle in the development of education. He was in favour of an education of 'doing'. He placed the subjugated knowledge of the caste-subaltern central to his scheme of education. Colonial education laid emphasis on liberal literary knowledge which was most suited to the perpetuation of Brahmin hegemony. On the one hand, it stripped caste subaltern from their advantage of knowing and doing of indigenous science and technology and on the other hand it bolstered the already dominant position of Brahmins through text and memory-centred education. Phule wanted to set a balance between education of doing and education of concepts or abstractions. Illiteracy had denied the opportunity of conceptual training to the caste-subaltern and led them to stagnation. Therefore, he actively argued in favour of an education that would impart conceptual training and develop critical and analytical capabilities. He wanted the education of 'doing' as enshrined in the everyday knowledge of the caste-subaltern to be blended with abstract training of European physical sciences and technology (Phule, 1991: 714-26).

7.5 BUILDER OF ALTERNATIVE CULTURE

Religion had remained a dominant ideology in India. It operated as the key institutional force upholding customs, traditions and law codes. It, as an ideological and cultural apparatus, had provided basis to the institution of caste, untouchability and patriarchy. Phule realised that without the critique of religion and without an alternative scheme of religion and culture, social reforms neither could be inaugurated nor could be cherished. Therefore, Phule started an alternative religion called Sarvjanik Satydharm.

He set out on a quest for religious alternative in the trajectory of anti-caste traditions of India. Phule invoked the following traditions, which according to him had combated with the regime of religious slavery, caste oppression and Brahmanical hegemony:

- the rationalist tradition of Buddha
- the materialist tradition of Brahaspati
- the medieval bhakti tradition of saint Tukaram.

He grounded his alternative on Deist rationalism which by espousing universal religion has propounded universal ethics based on liberty, equality and fraternity. He built his alternative by dwelling on counter-cultural lineage of Shudra-atishudra masses of Maharashtra. By invoking indigenous deities like Khandoba Bhairoba as historical heroes and ethical role models, he put them in the alternative scheme of rituals.

A major concern of his alternative religion was to build universal ethics which, he argued, could be realized through undertaking the criterion of self-examination i.e. *atmparikshan* (Phule, 1980:458). The individual in the processes of self-reflection undertakes a critical inquiry of her or his own experiences of social relations, where her or his personal experience of social treatment of inequality, slavery, exploitation and humiliation becomes unacceptable and, therefore, ethically unwarranted. The rigorous process of self-reflection creates, justifies and legitimizes moral basis of society, cherishing values such as liberty, equality, fraternity, industriousness, and philanthropy. (Bagade, 2006:334).

He presented Indian history as a series of conflicts between Aryans and non-Aryans. He declared that till now the history of India was history of Brahmin domination. He traced the process of subjugation of non-Aryans. He constructed the utopia of Bali's kingdom. Liberty, equality and fraternity prevailed in his kingdom; patriotism, democracy, republicanism were integral to his polity; his efficient and pro-people officers like Khandoba *Kalbhairi* were zealously serving people. During Bali's regime, art and knowledge prospered; people lived a happy life. He argued that the history of India since fall of Bali has been a history of caste struggle (Phule, 1991: 150-153). Thus, by cherishing the utopia of non-Brahmin past, he recovered the insurgent caste subaltern subject position rooted in anti-caste tradition.

He confronted the colonial and the nationalist portrayal of a monolithic Hindu past by retrieving anti-caste struggles of the Samkhy philosophy, Lokayats and Buddhist religion in ancient India. By narrating a continuous trajectory of ongoing anti-caste struggle, he rejected the colonial periodization of Indian history. By exemplifying Tukaram and Chhatrapati Shivaji's struggle against caste, he smashed the colonial myth of the period of Islamic interruption. Phule's exercise of unfolding anti-caste struggle was aimed at retrieving the lower caste selfhood (Bagade, 1998:111-18).

However, though Phule's history was based on mythology, it defied mythological or theocratic notion. His attempt was to write modern scientific history which included inquiry and causal analysis as integral to its method. He was not mythologizing history but historicizing mythology for deriving insurgent subject position of the subaltern castes. He gave a radical turn to history writing which empowered subaltern castes to challenge the hegemonic construct of caste and untouchability.

Phule initiated a movement of alternative literature. He criticized contemporary mainstream literature as hegemonic and useless. When M. G. Ranade extended invitation to participate in a literary conference (*Marathi Granthkar Sabha*), he scathingly rejected it. He stated that the conference would not present the woes of Shudratishdra masses (Phule 1991: 344). He rejected the self-proclaimed authenticity of the Brahmanical literature because it did not possess concrete experience of women and the caste subaltern. By prioritizing the experience of the caste and gender subaltern, he initiated a movement for alternative literature.

He held popular language, culture and literature as the main source of alternative literature (Patil, 1988:154). He drew inspiration from popular literature like bhakti and used popular

literary forms like *abhang*, *powadas* and *ovi*. By rejecting verbose, artificial complicated elitist language, he used simple, lucid, communicative language of the labouring Shudratishudra masses (Phule 1991: 41). He also rejected elitist aesthetics and carved a space for alternative literature. Insurgent consciousness and the anger against unjust, exploitative system remained the motive force of his scheme of alternative literature.

Phule rejected the existing notions of nationalism. The prevailing version of cultural nationalism espoused unity which forced caste and patriarchal inequality and sustained caste hegemony of the elites; therefore he condemned it as hegemonic. He also criticised economic nationalism for not representing the interests of the Shudratishudra masses. He defined nation as 'one integrated people' and claimed that India is a nation in making. According to him annihilation of the caste is the precondition of becoming a nation (Phule, 1980:409). Thus, he prioritised the agenda of social transformation in the politics of nationalism.

The then nationalists considered religion as the driving force of nationalism; they also allowed caste and religious pride to be at centre stage in the politics of nationalism. Phule rejected this variety of nationalism. He rebuked Sarvjanik Sabha and Indian National Congress as organisations of caste elites which, in the name of nation, were serving their own interests (Phule 1991: 407). He identified the contradiction between colonialism and people of India; he exposed colonial exploitation and vehemently criticised colonial officers for indulging in luxury and being apathetic towards the interests of the Shudra-atishudra masses (Phule 1991: 136).

Against this background, Phule propounded an alternative nationalism whose objectives were emancipation from exploitation, social equality and republicanism. When elite nationalists were busy in claiming the unity of Indian nation around Vedic-Aryan tradition, Phule made a non-Aryan-non-Brahmin past as the cultural grounding and uniting force for the Indian nation. Non-Brahmin past and anti-caste traditions espousing values of patriotism, republicanism and humanism remained a major source of alternative nationalism. Liberty, equality, fraternity, and democratic governance were the enshrining principles of his variety of nationalism. Therefore, instead of the term *Hindustan*, which was in vogue, he used the term *Balistan* to address India (Bagade, 2006:352-354).

7.6 JYOTIBA PHULE'S INFLUENCE ON AMBEDKAR

Ambedkar was greatly influenced by the ideas of Indian social reformers. Indian society was rigid and conservative during his time and social reformers played a significant role in society. Ambedkar was influenced by Lord Buddha, Mahatama Jyotiba Phule, Kabir and Dalit saints like Nandnar, Ravidas and Chokkhabela. Here we discuss how Ambedkar was influenced by Jyotiba Phule's work.

Phule, who did remarkable work for the removal of social ills of Hindu society, had influenced Ambedkar. Phule's field of social work related to the problems of untouchability, abolition of *sati*, upliftment of women in society, abolition of child marriage, etc. Phule's reforms impacted Ambedkar strongly, who cultivated the philosophy that all men were equal by birth but social evils made one man superior over another man. He wanted to provide opportunities to the suppressed to raise themselves socially, economically and politically. Phule believed that *Manusmiriti* had bound the *Shudras*'s hand and foot: unless they revolted against it, they would never be able to shake off the shackles of bondage. Ambedkar also had a similar view point, which he derived from Phule.

According to Ambedkar, laws of *Manusmiriti* governed the lives of the Hindus in every village. Their low social, economic and political status and degradation were due to the injunctions of *Manusmiriti*. Ambedkar burnt *Manusmiriti* on 25 December 1927, which was a very important landmark in his career as a social reformer. Many of Ambedkar's arguments regarding the origin of untouchability can be traced to Phule, whose influence inspired Ambedkar to become a great social-political thinker of modern India.

7.7 LET US SUM UP

Like his contemporaries, Phule espoused the philosophy of western liberalism; however, his organic ties with caste and gender subaltern gave a radical edge to his ideology and activism. His caste critique demonstrated revolutionary ramifications. He fiercely refuted every logic offered in defence of caste; demolished every theoretical grounding supporting caste system; unravelled the social slavery and economic exploitation instituted under caste and untouchability. His profound critique of men-women inequality unfolded ideological structures of patriarchy which enslaved women. By exposing the exploitative and oppressive role of Brahmanical religion in perpetuating caste and gender inequality, he initiated a fight against religious tyranny.

Under his leadership, Satyashodhak Samaj steered anti-caste movement in Maharashtra which not only confronted caste in its material and social sphere but led the struggle in the field of knowledge and culture. By deploying education for transformatory purposes, he started a campaign for mass education. Not only did he start schools for girls and untouchables (he was the first one to do so in India), he also introduced critical pedagogies for educating them.

According to G. P. Deshpande, Phule was a system builder. He built a new domain of alternative culture in every important field that he encountered. He created alternative religion espousing values such as liberty, equality, fraternity and democracy. He also offered alternative conception of history which provided a theory of revolutionary praxis leading to annihilation of caste.

His enterprise of alternative literature brought the subaltern experience at centre stage; it opened a new critical stand, which by challenging prevailing regime of aesthetics and language, channelized insurgent literary zeal of *Shudratishudra* masses. By rejecting prevailing hegemonic nationalism, he propounded alternative nationalism which sought freedom from all kinds of slavery, not just from the British. Ambedkar acknowledged the philosophical legacy of Jyotiba Phule and called him 'the greatest Shudra philosopher' of modern India.

7.8 QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Bring out Jyotiba Phule's criticism of caste system.
- 2) Why Satyashodhak Samaj was founded?
- 3) What were Phule's views on education?
- 4) Explain Phule's use of alternative pedagogy.
- 5) Explain Phule's attempt to create alternative culture?
- 6) Explain Phule's influence on Ambedkar.

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UNIT 8 SAINT POETIC TRADITION OF MAHARASHTRA

Structure

- 8.1 Objectives
- 8.2 Introduction
- 8.3 Historical Background
- 8.4 Views on Religion
- 8.5 The Guru-Shishya Tradition in the *Bhakti* Movement
- 8.6 The Bhakti Movement and Synchronic Tradition
- 8.7 Bhakti Tradition and Language
- 8.8 Women-Saint Poets
- 8.9 Ambedkar on Bhakti Movement
- 8.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 8.11 Questions to Check Your Progress

Suggested Readings

8.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit would enable you to understand:

- Historical context of the Bhakti tradition and its importance;
- Significance of the Bhakti tradition and its influence;
- The Guru-shishya tradition in the Bhakti movement;
- The Bhakti tradition and the role of language;
- The role of women and Muslim saint-poets; and
- Ambedkar on the Bhakti movement.

8.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will discuss emergence of Bhakti movement, its importance and influence in Maharashtra and other parts of the country. For in India, Bhakti or what may be called the path of devotion or hero-worship, plays a part in its politics unequalled in magnitude by the part it plays in the politics of any other country in the world. Bhakti in religion may be a road to the salvation of the soul. But in politics, Bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship. (Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Speech to the Constituent Assembly on 25 November 1949.)

The term *bhakti* comes from the Sanskrit root *bhaj*, one of whose meanings is to

worship, to honour, to serve, to revere, and to be attached to. The Marathi word *sant* used for these poets is derived from the Sanskrit *sat* which denotes being and awareness, purity and divine spirit, wisdom and sagacity, being emancipated, and being true.

The Bhakti movement originated in south India in the 6th century and then gradually spread to Karnataka, Maharashtra and further to the northern parts of India. Though the movement reached its peak in the 15th and 16th centuries, it continued to flourish till the late 18th century in different forms. Spread over almost the whole of India, the movement advanced with the emergence of several notable saints, many of them from low-castes, such as the following:

- Kabir (1440-1518),
- Ravidas (15th century),
- Dadu (1554-1603),
- Eknath (1533-1599)
- Nanak (1469-1539),
- Tukaram (1608-1649),
- Janabai,
- Namdev (1270-1350),
- Akka Mahadevi (1130-1160),
- Chokhamela (14th century),
- Savata Mali.

Maharashtra underwent cultural metamorphosis during the 12th and the 13th centuries. During this period, various religious sects such as the following emerged:

- Nathsampradaya founded by Gorakshanath (1050-1150),
- Lingayat sampradaya founded by Shri Chakradhar (1213-1272)
- Varakari sampradaya associated with Sant Namdev (1270-1350) and Dnyandeo (1271-1309).

8.3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Let us understand the historical context of the Bhakti movement. The Bhakti tradition was spearheaded by a few poets, who later came to be known as *sants*. The Bhakti tradition in medieval India was a cultural-religious movement led by poets who were called saints. A remarkable feature of this movement is that these saint-poets emerged from the lower layers of the caste hierarchy. Being low-caste artisans and labourers, they knew well the social agonies of this section of society and being poets, they could express well these agonies in the form of complaints, rage, devotion and so on. These medieval saint-poets have remained torch-bearers for the masses across India today.

Many of these devotional cults were, as Vijaya Ramaswamy argues, heterodox and reflective of an inner social ferment. The Bhakti movement, by and large, rejected the existing ritual hierarchy and Brahmanical superiority. However, the response to the Bhakti

movement is ambivalent because some see it as devotionism whereas others see it as the rise of the low-caste devotees and poets against the authoritative Brahmanical religion.

In Maharashtra, the Bhakti tradition was immediately preceded by the rule of the Yadav dynasty. When the Bhakti movement was in the offing, Ramdevrao Yadav was ruling Maharashtra and the Yadav dynasty had been in deep crisis and was bound to fall. Ramdevrao and his prime minister Hemadri were completely engrossed in Brahmanical rituals. When Allahauddin Khilji attacked his kingdom, he gave it up easily.

During this period, two spiritual movements emerged in Maharashtra:

- Mahanubhav
- Varkari

The Mahanubhav sect, founded by Chakradhar Swami (1132-1169), who is said to have come from Gujarat, was partly influenced by the Vedic as well as Jain / Buddhist ideologies.

Both the Mahanubhav and the Varkari sects used people's languages for communicating their ideas.

Recently, some scholars have begun to analyse the Bhakti tradition in the context of Buddhist history and argue that though the Bhakti tradition was partly entrenched in Vedic devotionism, it was also influenced by Buddhism. Quite often, Buddhism and Bhakti movements are seen as protest movements against Brahmanism.

There are many problems in studying the saint-poets' writings in general and low-caste saint poets' writings in particular. Some of them are:

- 1) Authentic and critically edited versions of the writings of these poets are not available. For example, the writings of poets such as Chokhamela, Kabir, Tukaram have been either partly destroyed or interpolated.
- 2) The existing records of the Bhakti tradition, which came from the 13th to the 18th centuries, by and large came through the Brahmins and reflect their view points.
- 3) No authentic and contemporary biographical information of the poets is available. For example, the biography of Nandnar, a Tamil saint-poet who lived during 660-842 CE period, was written 400 years after his death (i.e., in the 12th century).
- 4) Ideologically, there are many versions of the same saint-poets.

The movement needs to be studied in the context of the material available and the reality of the times. The movement arose when the Indian society had forgotten the rich heritage of Buddhism. By the time the early proponents of Bhakti began to emerge, the society had already turned feudal. Feudal ruling groups had begun to appropriate the surplus produced by the peasantry and the artisan castes. The general picture of the society was that of chaos. The economic conditions and poverty were further worsened by the tightening grip of Brahmanical ritualism. The scenario was made more complex by the following:

- Large number of gods
- Large number of castes

- Growing influence of patriarchy and the notion of purity
- Increasing feudalization of land relationships.

Significance of the Bhakti Tradition

The Bhakti tradition has had a profound impact on Marathi people and shaped their 'world-image'. M G Ranade, one of the social reformers from Maharashtra, believed that the Varkari sect and its socio-cultural practices created conditions conducive to the formation of the political state of Shivaji:

It was not the work of one man, or of a succession of a gifted men. The foundation was laid broad and deep in the hearts of the whole people and unlike the subhedarships of Bengal, Karnatik, Oudh and Hyderabad, the rise of the 'Maratha Power' was due to the first beginnings of what one may well call the process of nation-making....It was the upheaval of the whole population, strongly bound together by the common affinity of language, race, religion and literature and seeking further solidarity by a common independent political existence.

The Bhakti tradition influenced virtually every socio-cultural movement in the 19th and 20th centuries. Many socio-cultural organisations such as Prarthana Samaj of the 19th century and many social reformers such as Gadge Baba of the 20th century were influenced by the Varkari sect. The Satyashodhak movement, the most radical movement of the 19th century Maharashtra, was also deeply influenced by the underlying anti-caste radical potential inherent in the Varkari sect. While being critical of the brahmanical nature of the Bhakti tradition, Jotirao Phule (1827-90) could not escape his affinity for saint-poets like Tukaram. Many of his allies in the movement like Gyanoba Sasane and Mukundrao Patil were also influenced by the *Varkari* sect.

8.4 VIEWS ON RELIGION

Many subaltern scholars have been engaged in discovering similarities between the bygone Buddhist tradition and the medieval Bhakti tradition. They argue that Bhakti was profoundly influenced by the Buddhist philosophy. However, there are few differences between the two in terms of form and degree. These scholars have pointed out that both were relatively anti-establishment. The proponents of the Bhakti movement opposed religion that was imbued with ritualism, orthodoxy and exploitative cultural ethos. Instead, they looked at religion as a power that could be used for raising a voice against oppression. This was an attempt to respond to the upper castes that had used religion as a tool to establish their own dominance.

Though the Bhakti movement was focused on the spiritual idea of worship, it was also imbued with humanism and universal brotherhood. The proponents of the Bhakti movement were trying to displace the old religion, which was lost in external pomp and caste dogmatism, and replace it with a broad-minded and compassionate religion. Many medieval saint-poets did not denounce material life and seek an escape into spirituality. They thought religion was necessary for establishing social justice. Since there was no possibility of providing an alternative to the exploitative material order of society, the saint-poets were left with no option but to look for equality in the dominion of culture and society.

The poets came from the lower rungs of society and their notion of God was different

from the orthodox understanding of God as omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. In fact, these poets paid greater attention to the devotees than to God. They refused to accept God as representing the supreme authority. For these poets, God was just one of them. Many of these poets talked to God in their poetry and, at times, rebuked God for not helping them in crises. For example, Janabai and Tukaram quarrel with Vitthal for not sharing life with them as real friends do.

8.5 THE GURU-SHISHYA TRADITION IN THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

Now we will discuss the role of Guru-Shishya tradition. In the hegemonic scriptural religion, unlimited authority was wielded in the institutionalized position of guru, the mentor. Ancient scriptures such as *Manusmriti* and medieval texts such as *Gurucharitra* and *Dasbodh* deemed only the Brahmans as eligible for the elevated position of the *guru*. These texts mention that a non-Brahman, irrespective of her or his scholarship or spiritual attainments, was not eligible to be a guru. This is the reason why in the Hindu sects the 'gurus' are treated with great honour and reverence.

However, in the Bhakti cult, lowly born poets were also venerated as gurus by the high born disciples. This attempt of reversing the logic of guru-shishya tradition in the Bhakti movement was heavily criticized by priestly classes. Those who revered the lowly born poets as their gurus were at times criticized and punished. The Brahmanical classes came down upon this phenomenon very heavily. For example, Bahinabai (1628-1700), a saint-poet born in a Brahman family, accepted Tukaram as her guru and Mirabai, a saint-poet born in a Rajput family, accepted Ravidas as her guru. In Maharashtra, Samartha Ramadasa dismissed the idea of lower-caste guru:

In becoming low-caste guru is lost morality

Who will ask the Brahmin mastered the Vedas

The *Bhakti* movement contested the traditional Brahmanical notion of guru. As discussed earlier, the Brahmanical notion of guru conformed Brahman as a sole guru for all. However, in the Bhakti movement, the saint-poets refused to follow the archetypal dichotomy in the relationship between Brahman guru and non-Brahman disciple. There are many instances of such defiance.

8.6 THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT AND SYNCHRONIC TRADITION

Many scholars have argued that the Bhakti movement in India played a significant role in lessening religious orthodoxy and synchronising the Hindu and the Muslim faith systems. They tried to harmonise the orthogenetic and heterogenetic elements of the great and little traditions of Hinduism and Islam. These saints professed the values and principles not from the hegemonic scriptures; however, they preached a philosophy of life that was closer to the lives of the common people among both Hindus and Muslims.

Maharashtra had around 42 Muslim saint-poet. There was a healthy dialogue between the Hindu saint-poets and Muslim saint-poets. For example, Janardan pant, the guru of Enkath, was a disciple of Chand Bodhale. There was a Muslim saint-poet named Shaikh Mohammad in Shrigonda in Ahmednagar district. The Muslim poets showed tremendous

interest in the Bhakti cults such as Chaitanya, Nath, Varkari and Datta. A peculiar confluence between the Hindu and the Muslim traditions is seen in Sufism.

8.7 BHAKTI TRADITION AND LANGUAGE

The issue of languages is complex in India. The complexity involved in the linguistic scenario in India is a corollary to the varna-caste order. Multilingualism in India is an outcome of the complex and fragmented system of varna-caste order in India. One of the essential pre-conditions for the maintenance of varna-caste order was the lack of uniform mode of communication and scriptural injunctions against learning certain languages such as Sanskrit.

Rise of Sanskrit as a language of the priestly class was a peculiar phenomenon appropriate for the development of the varna order. Access to Sanskrit was limited to the priestly class and this facilitated their hegemony in knowledge. The lower castes were forced to use the language that was stigmatised as unsuitable for any philosophical discourse.

People's languages developed during the Buddhist period and were used as the languages of knowledge and philosophical discourse. The Buddha insisted on using people's languages while delivering discourses. As a result, a lot of literature in the form of writings, stories, songs and fables emerged in these languages.

Keeping in tune with the linguistic practice of Buddhists, the saint-poets preferred to use the languages of the populace for delivering their messages. They had to fight with the priestly castes to establish their claim on these languages for religious and philosophical discourses. For example, Saint Eknath had this to say in favour of Prakrit:

If Sanskrit had come from God

Did Prakrit come from the thieves?

Moreover, these poets also had to develop these languages to the extent that they could be used for poetry and philosophy. The saint-poets' decision to select the Prakrit languages was to ensure large scale participation of peasantry, artisans and other ritually inferior but economically powerful groups in these devotional movements.

Dilip P. Chitre argues that medieval Marathi poetry developed in two divergent directions. One continued from the Sanskrit classics – both religious and secular. These classicists neglected or excluded the use of the native colloquial Marathi. However, only a minority of writers have produced such 'classicist' literature.

The other tradition continued from the Prakrit languages. Early saint poets such as Dnyaneshwar and Namdeo had to win over linguistic orthodoxy in order to claim that Marathi was equally eligible for the use of poetry.

8.8 WOMEN SAINT-POETS

The emergence of women-saint poets was an important phenomenon in the medieval period. Vijaya Ramaswamy argues that the morphology of feminine spirituality in India lies in the long record of male oppression and sexual exploitation which characterised the condition of women in traditional India. Indian society being essentially patriarchal, the position of women was markedly inferior.

Vijaya Ramaswamy further argues that the life and works of the women saints are shrouded in mystery unlike those of the men saints. This was partly because none of them established a guru paramparā or monastic tradition with disciples who might have preserved the sayings or compositions of the saints. The one exception seems to have been Venabai, the disciple of Samartha Ramadasa (17th century) who became the head of the math at Miraj.

In Maharashtra, there were a few women-saint poets. Some of the prominent women-saints were:

- Muktabai (Dnyaneshwar's sister),
- Bahinabai (wife of Kulkarni),
- Rajai (daughter of Namdeo),
- Soyarabai (Chokhabai's wife).

The struggle of Bahinabai epitomises the struggle of a woman poet to establish her right to expression. In her poetry, she challenges caste, patriarchy and religion. She registers a complaint against her husband for beating her. Bahinabai translated the anti-*varna* text *Vajrasuchi*, which was written by a Buddhist scholar Ashvaghosh.

Janabai was another saint-poet. Born in a poor low-caste family, Janabai expressed rebellious thoughts in her poems. She had bitter experiences of being a Shudra and also a woman. She refused to succumb to the Brahmanical and patriarchal dominance and continued to express her contempt for the dominant order.

8.9 AMBEDKAR ON *BHAKTI* MOVEMENT

B. R. Ambedkar did not have any ambivalence on the medieval Bhakti movement. The clarity of his position on this movement emerged from his scientific and unprejudiced outlook on history. Neither did he dismiss the Bhakti movement as an empty and fruitless effort nor did he eulogise the Bhakti movement as liberatory.

He used this as a litmus test to assess the Bhakti movement. Using this criterion, he found that the saint-poets in Maharashtra revolted against the *Chaturavrya* or *varna* order in the society. They tried to establish the superiority of the devotee over the Brahman; however, they did not try to establish superiority of human beings over the Brahman. He further argues that the value of human beings cannot be established in terms of Bhakti as the value of human beings is self-evident. Though he argues that the Bhakti movement was a revolt against Brahmanism, it did not succeed in challenging the innate superiority of the Brahmins.

However, Ambedkar pointed out the progressive nature of the Mahanubhav sect in the medieval period. He argues that the Mahanubhav sect was against caste and was free from the notion of touch-untouch and orthodoxy. He also admired Tukaram and used his poetry frequently in his periodicals and writings. He compared Tukaram with the Buddha and argued that Tukaram's views on non-violence were close to those of the Buddha. He also expressed his desire to use Pali literature to prove that Pandharpur was originally a Buddhist site.

8.10 LET US SUM UP

The Saint poetic tradition was a landmark in the cultural history of Maharashtra and other regions in India. The movement was marked by ideological diversity and contradiction. The Bhakti movement was rooted in *Vedic* and *Puranic* traditions; however, it also strove upon the tension between the radical liberatory *shramanic* tradition and the conservative-hegemonic Brahmanical tradition.

Ambedkar pointed out the limitations of this movement by arguing that the movement did not aim at establishing equality in all walks of life. Since he was interested more in the liberation of the lower castes and women from the clutches of the caste system, the possibility of annihilation of caste was a major criterion for Ambedkar for assessing any movement.

8.11 QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Discuss the historical context of the Bhakti tradition and its importance.
- 2) Discuss the significance of the Bhakti tradition and its influence.
- 3) Explain the Bhakti tradition and the role of language.
- 4) Critically analyse Ambedkar's position on the Bhakti movement.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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