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## UNIT 14 BHAKTI TRADITION\*

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### 14.0 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this Unit, you should be able to:

- understand the background of the bhakti movement,
- identify the main political and socio-economic factors for the rise of bhakti movement in north India,
- list the main popular branches and the saints of this movement,
- know the main characteristic features of the bhakti movement, and
- learn about the influence of other traditions and Islam on bhakti movement.

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## 14.1 INTRODUCTION

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Bhakti as a religious concept means devotional surrender to a personally conceived Supreme God for attaining salvation. The origin of this doctrine has been traced to both the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions of ancient India and to various scriptures such as the *Bhagvat Gita*. But it was for the first time in South India between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century that bhakti grew from a mere religious doctrine into a popular movement based on religious equality and broad-based social participation. The movement which was led by popular saint-poets reached its climax in the 10<sup>th</sup> century after which it began to decline. But it was revived as a philosophical and ideological movement by a series of wandering scholars or *acharyas*, beginning with Ramanuja in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in early 13<sup>th</sup> century witnessed great outburst of many diverse and widespread socio-religious movements in various parts of the country drawing upon the concepts of bhakti. These movements have been seen as a continuation or revival of the older South Indian bhakti movement. But each one of the later movements which grew in the Sultanate period had a historical context of its own and its own peculiarities. Moreover, one of them, namely, the non-conformist monotheistic movement which is associated with Kabir and other 'low-caste' saints bears only superficial resemblance to the variants of the movement. Its social roots, its ideology, social composition of its leadership and even its concept of bhakti and God set it fundamentally apart from the older bhakti movement of South India as well as from the rest of the later bhakti movements. In view of these wide and at times even basic differences among various bhakti movements, they must be discussed individually in order to clearly bring out the characteristics of each one of them and also to discover elements of unity and diversity among them.

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## 14.2 BACKGROUND: BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN SOUTH INDIA

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The Saiva Nayanar saints and Vaishnava Alvar saints of South India spread the doctrine of bhakti among different sections of the society irrespective of caste and gender during the period between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Some of these saints came from the 'lower' castes and some were women. The saint-poets preached bhakti in an intense emotional manner and promoted religious egalitarianism. They dispensed with rituals and traversed the region several times singing, dancing and advocating bhakti. The Alvar and Nayanar saints used the Tamil language and not Sanskrit for preaching and composing devotional songs. All these features gave the movement a popular character. For the first time bhakti acquired a popular base.

The South Indian bhakti saints were critical of Buddhists and Jains who enjoyed a privileged status at the courts of South Indian kings at that time. They won over many adherents of Buddhism and Jainism, both of which by now had become rigid and formal religions. At the same time, however, these poet-saints resisted the authority of the orthodox Brahmins by making bhakti accessible to all without any caste and sex discrimination. But the South Indian bhakti movement had its limitations as well. It never consciously opposed Brahmanism or the *varna* and caste systems at the social level. It was integrated with the caste system and the 'lower' castes continued to suffer from various social disabilities. There was no

elimination of Brahmanical rituals such as worship of idols, recitation of the Vedic *mantras* and pilgrimages to sacred places in spite of the overriding emphasis on bhakti as the superior mode of worship. The Buddhists and Jains were its main targets, not the Brahmans. This perhaps was also the reason why the Brahman dominated temples played an important role in the growth of South Indian bhakti movement.

Since the ideological and social foundations of caste system were not questioned by the South Indian saint-poets, the bhakti movement of the South in the long run strengthened it rather than weakening it. Ultimately, after the movement reached its climax in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, it was gradually assimilated into the conventional Brahmanical religion. But despite these limitations, the South Indian bhakti movement in its heyday succeeded in championing the cause of religious equality and, consequently, the Brahmans had to accept the right of the 'low-caste' to preach, to have access to bhakti as a mode of worship and to have access even to the *Vedas*.

### **Bhakti and the South Indian *Acharyas***

When the popularity of the bhakti movement in South India was on the wane, the doctrine of bhakti was defended at the philosophical level by a series of brilliant Vaishnava Brahman scholars (*acharyas*). Ramanuja (11<sup>th</sup> century) was first among them. He gave philosophical justification for bhakti. He tried to establish a careful balance between orthodox Brahmanism and popular bhakti which was open to all. Though he did not support the idea of the 'lower' castes having access to the *Vedas*, he advocated bhakti as a mode of worship accessible to all including the Sudras and even the outcastes. While propagating bhakti, he did not observe caste distinctions and even tried to eradicate untouchability. Nimbarka, a Telugu Brahman, is believed to have been a younger contemporary of Ramanuja. He spent most of his time in Vrindavan near Mathura in North India. He believed in total devotion to Krishna and Radha. Another South Indian Vaishnavite bhakti philosopher was Madhava who belonged to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Like Ramanuja, he did not dispute orthodox Brahmanical restriction on the Vedic study by the Sudras. He believed that bhakti provided alternate avenue of worship to the Sudras. His philosophical system was based on the *Bhagvat Purana*. He is also believed to have toured North India. The last two prominent Vaishnava *acharyas* were Ramananda (late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> century) and Vallabha (late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century). Since both of them lived mostly in North India during the Sultanate period and gave new orientation to the Vaishnava bhakti, they will be discussed in the Section dealing with North India.

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## **14.3 BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN NORTH INDIA**

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There arose during the Sultanate period (13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century) many popular socio-religious movements in North and East India, and Maharashtra. Emphasis on bhakti and religious equality were two common features of these movements. As has been pointed out, these two were also the features of the South Indian bhakti movements. Almost all the bhakti movements of the Sultanate period have been related to one South Indian Vaishnava *acharya* or the other. For these reasons, many scholars believe that the bhakti movements of the Sultanate period were a continuation or resurgence of the older bhakti movement. They argue that there existed philosophical and ideological links between the two, either due to contact

or diffusion. Thus, Kabir and other leaders of non-conformist monotheistic movements in North India are believed to have been the disciples of Ramananda who, in turn, is believed to have been connected with Ramanuja's philosophical order. Similar claims have been made that Chaitanya, the most significant figure of the Vaishnava movement in Bengal, belonged to the philosophical school of Madhava. This movement is also believed to have been connected with Nimbarka's school because of its emphasis on 'Krishna' bhakti.

There are undoubtedly striking similarities between the older bhakti tradition of South India and various bhakti movements that flourished in the Sultanate and Mughal periods. If we exclude the popular monotheistic movements of Kabir, Nanak and other 'low' caste saints, the two sets of movements can be shown to have possessed many more common features. For example, like the South Indian bhakti movement, the Vaishnava bhakti movements of North and Eastern India and Maharashtra, though egalitarian in the religious sphere, never denounced the caste system, the authority of Brahmanical scriptures and the Brahmanical privileges as such.

Consequently, like the South Indian bhakti, most of the Vaishnava movements of the later period were ultimately assimilated into the Brahmanical religion, though in the process of interaction, the latter itself underwent many changes. However, the similarities end here. Bhakti movement was never a single movement except in the broad doctrinal sense of a movement which laid emphasis on bhakti and religious equality. The bhakti movements of medieval India differed in many significant respects not only from the older South Indian bhakti tradition but also among themselves. Each one of them had its own regional identity and socio-historical and cultural contexts. Thus, the non-conformist movements based on popular monotheistic bhakti contained features that were essentially different from various Vaishnava bhakti movements. Kabir's notion of bhakti was not the same as that of the medieval Vaishnava saints such as Chaitanya or Mirabai.

Within the Vaishnava movement, the historical context of Maharashtra bhakti was different from that of the Bengal Vaishnavism or North Indian bhakti movement of Ramanand, Vallabha, Surdas and Tulsidas. During the later period, when the Vaishnava bhakti movement crystallized into sects, there arose frequent disputes between them which sometimes even turned violent. Among all the bhakti movements of the period between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, the popular monotheistic movements of Kabir, Nanak, Raidas and other 'lower' caste saints stand out fundamentally different.

### **Popular Monotheistic Movement and Vaishnava Bhakti Movement**

Both these movements arose in Northern India at the same time, that is, in the centuries following the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate and advent of Islam in that part of the country. For this reason, the rise of both the movements is quite often attributed to certain common causes such as the influence of Islam on Hinduism. However, the causes and sources of the two movements and the factors exerting influence on them were quite diverse. It will become clear from the following discussion that a cause which explains one movement may not do so in the case of the other. This is so because the popular monotheistic movements arose and reached their peak in the Sultanate period, while the Vaishnava movements began in the Sultanate period but reached their climax during the Mughal period.

1) Give the salient features of the bhakti movement.

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2) Write two lines on each of the following:

Ramanuja .....

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Nimbarka .....

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Vallabha .....

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Chaitanya .....

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Madhava .....

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## 14.4 EMERGENCE OF BHAKTI MOVEMENT

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The bhakti movement which influenced large number of people during 14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries in North India emerged due to a number of political, socio-economic and religious factors. We will discuss all these in this Section.

### 14.4.1 Political Factors for the Rise of Bhakti Movement

It has been pointed out that as the popular bhakti movement could not take root in Northern India before the Turkish conquest because the socio-religious milieu was dominated by the Rajput-Brahman alliance. The Turkish conquests brought the supremacy of this alliance to an end. The advent of Islam with the Turkish conquest also caused a setback to the power and prestige commanded by the Brahmans: Thus, the way was paved for the growth of non-conformist movements, with anti-caste and anti-Brahmanical ideology. The Brahmans had always made the people believe that the images and idols in the temples were not just the symbols of God but were gods themselves who possessed divine power and who could be influenced by them (i.e. the Brahmans). The Turks deprived the Brahmans of their temple wealth and state patronage. Thus, the Brahmans suffered both materially and ideologically. The non-conformist sect of the Nathpanthis was perhaps the first to gain from the declining power of the Rajput-Brahman alliance. This sect seems to have reached its peak in the beginning of the Sultanate period. The loss of power and influence by the Brahmans and the new political situation ultimately created conditions for the rise of the popular monotheistic movements and other bhakti movements in Northern India.

### 14.4.2 Socio-Economic Factors

It has been argued that the bhakti movements of medieval India represented sentiments of the common people against feudal oppression. According to this

viewpoint, elements of revolutionary opposition to feudalism can be found in the poetry of the bhakti saints ranging from Kabir and Nanak to Chaitanya and Tulsidas. It is in this sense that sometimes the medieval bhakti movements are seen as Indian counterpart of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. However, there is nothing in the poetry of the bhakti saints to suggest that they represented the class interests of the peasantry against the surplus-extracting feudal state. The Vaishnava bhakti saints broke away from orthodox Brahmanical order only to the extent that they believed in bhakti and religious equality. Normally, they continued to subscribe to many basic principles of orthodox Brahmanism. The more radical monotheistic saints rejected orthodox Brahmanical religion altogether but even they did not call for the overthrow of the state and the ruling class. For this reason, the bhakti movements cannot be regarded as Indian variant of European Protestant Reformation which was a far greater social upheaval linked to the decline of feudalism and the rise of capitalism.

This, however, does not mean that the bhakti saints were indifferent to the living conditions of the people. They used images of daily life and always tried to identify themselves in one way or another with the sufferings of the common people.

### **Economic and Social Changes**

The widespread popularity of the monotheistic movement of Kabir, Nanak, Dhanna, Pipa, etc. can be explained fully only in the context of certain significant socio-economic changes in the period following the Turkish conquest of Northern India. The Turkish ruling class, unlike the Rajputs, lived in towns. The extraction of large agricultural surplus led to enormous concentration of resources in the hands of the ruling class. The demands of this resource-wielding class for manufactured goods, luxuries and other necessities led to the introduction of many new techniques and crafts on a large scale. This, in turn, led to the expansion of the class of urban artisans in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The growing classes of urban artisans were attracted towards the monotheistic movement because of its egalitarian ideas as they were now not satisfied with the low status accorded to them in traditional Brahmanical hierarchy. It has been pointed out that some groups of traders like the Khatri in the Punjab, who benefited directly from the growth of towns, urban crafts production and expansion of markets, were also drawn into the movement for the same reason. The popularity of the monotheistic movement was the result of the support it obtained from one or more of these different classes of the society. It is one or more of these sections which constituted the social base of the movement in different parts of Northern India. In Punjab, the popularity of the movement did not remain confined to urban classes: it acquired a broader base by the incorporation of the Jat peasants in its ranks. The support extended by the Jats of the Punjab to Guru Nanak's movement ultimately contributed to the development of Sikhism as a mass religion.

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## **14.5 MAIN POPULAR MOVEMENTS AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS**

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In this Section, we will discuss some of the main monotheistic and Vaishnava movements in North India, including Maharashtra and Bengal during the period under review.

### 14.5.1 Monotheistic Movements of North India

Kabir (c. 1440-1518) was the earliest and undoubtedly the most powerful figure of the monotheistic movements that began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. He belonged to a family of weavers (Julaha – who were indigenous converts to Islam). He spent greater part of his life in Banaras (Kashi). The monotheistic saints who succeeded him either claimed to be his disciples or respectfully mention him. His verses were included in the Sikh scripture, the *Adi Granth* in large numbers than those of other monotheists. All this indicates his pre-eminent position among the monotheists. Raidas (or Ravidas) most probably belonged to the generation next to Kabir's. He was a tanner by caste. He also lived in Banaras and was influenced by Kabir's ideas. Dhanna was a 15<sup>th</sup> century Jat peasant from Rajasthan. Other prominent saints of the same period were Sen (a barber) and Pipa.

Guru Nanak (1469-1539) preached his ideas much in the same way as Kabir and other monotheists, but due to various developments later his teachings led to the emergence of a mass religion, Sikhism. The basic similarity of his teachings with those of Kabir and other saints and the basic ideological agreement between them makes him an integral part of the monotheistic movement. He belonged to a caste of traders called Khatri and was born in a village in Punjab now known as Nankana Sahib. In his later life he travelled widely to preach his ideas. Eventually he settled in a place in Punjab now known as Dera Baba Nanak. There he attracted large number of disciples. The hymns composed by him were incorporated in the *Adi Granth* by the fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan, in 1604.

### 14.5.2 Common Characteristic Features

The teachings of all the saints who are associated with the monotheistic movement have certain common features which give the movement its basic unity:

- i) Most of the monotheists belonged to the 'low' castes and were aware that there existed a unity of ideas among themselves. Most of them were aware of each other's teachings and influences. In their verses they mention each other and their predecessors in such a way as to suggest a harmonious ideological affinity among them. Thus, Kabir speaks of Raidas as 'saint among saints'. Raidas, in his turn, respectfully mentions the names of Kabir, Namdev, Trilochan, Dhanna, Sen and Pipa. Dhanna takes pride in speaking of the fame and popularity of Namdev, Kabir, Raidas and Sen and admits that he devoted himself to bhakti after hearing their fame. Kabir's influence on Nanak is also beyond dispute. It is, therefore, not surprising that the later traditions link Kabir, Raidas, Dhanna, Pipa, Sen, etc. together as disciples of Ramananda. The ideological affinity among the monotheists is also clear from the inclusion of the hymns of Kabir, Raidas, etc. along with those of Nanak by the fifth Sikh Guru Arjan in the *Adi Granth*.
- ii) All the monotheists were influenced in one way or another and in varying degrees by the Vaishnava concept of bhakti, the Nathpanthi movement and sufism. The monotheistic movement represents the synthesis of elements from these three traditions. But more often than not they did not accept the element of these traditions in their original form and made many innovations and adaptations which gave new meanings to old concepts.
- iii) For the monotheists, there was only one way of establishing communion

with God: it was the way of personally experienced bhakti. This was also the way of the Vaishnava bhakti saints, but there was one fundamental difference of perceptions: they all have been called monotheists because they uncompromisingly believed in only one God. Then, God of Nanak was non-incarnate and formless (*nirankar*), eternal (*akal*) and ineffable (*alakh*). The monotheistic bhakti, therefore, was *nirguna* bhakti and not *saguna* – which was the case with the Vaishnavites who believed in various human incarnations of God. The monotheists adopted the notion of bhakti from the Vaishnava bhakti tradition but gave it a *nirguna* orientation. Quite often Kabir called God by the name, Ram. For this reason, he has been called Ram-bhakta. But Kabir himself made it clear in his utterances that the Ram he was devoted to was not the one who was born as an incarnation in the house of king Dashratha of Ayodhya or who had killed Ravana, but a formless, non-incarnate God. In addition to the oneness of God and *nirguna* bhakti, the monotheists also emphasized the crucial importance of repetition of divine name, spiritual guru, community singing of devotional songs (*kirtan*) and companionship of saints (*satsang*).

- iv) The monotheists followed a path which was independent of both dominant religions of the time – Hinduism and Islam. They denied their allegiance to either of them and criticized the superstitions and orthodox elements of both the religions. They launched a vigorous ideological assault on the caste system and idolatry. They rejected the authority of the Brahmans and their religious scriptures. Kabir, in his harsh and abrasive style, uses ridicule as a powerful method for denouncing orthodox Brahmanism.
- v) The monotheists composed their poems in popular languages. Some of them used a language which was a mixture of different dialects spoken in various parts of North India. The monotheistic saints preferred this common language to their own native dialects because they considered it fit for the propagation of their non-conformist ideas among the masses in various regions. The use of common language is a striking feature of the movement considering that the saints belonged to different parts of North India and spoke different dialects. The monotheists also made use of popular symbols and images to propagate their teachings. Their utterances are expressed in short verses which could be easily remembered. Thus, for instance, Kabir's poetry is unpolished and has a rustic, colloquial quality but it is essentially a poetry of the people.
- vi) Most of the monotheistic saints were not ascetics. They led worldly life and were married. They lived and preached among the people. They had aversion to and disdain for professional ascetics. They frequently refer to professional caste groups in their verses which would suggest that they continued to pursue their family professions. They were also not like the medieval European Christian saints who were recognized as 'holy' by the Church. The expression which has been used for them and by which they themselves referred to each other is *sant* or *bhagat*. In the *Adi Granth*, Kabir, Raidas, Dhanna, Pipa, Namdev, etc. have been listed as *bhagat*.
- vii) The monotheistic saints travelled widely to propagate their beliefs. Namdev, a 14<sup>th</sup> century saint from Maharashtra travelled as far as Punjab where his teachings became so popular that they were later absorbed in the *Adi Granth*. Kabir, Raidas and other saints are also believed to have travelled widely.

- viii) The ideas of Kabir and other monotheists spread to various regions and became popular among the ‘lower’ classes. The popularity of the monotheists broke territorial barriers. This is clear from the high position accorded to Kabir in the Sikh tradition and in the Dadupanthi tradition of Rajasthan. Their continuing popularity even almost two hundred years after their time and in a distant region is clear from the way a mid-17<sup>th</sup> century Maharashtrian saint Tukaram looked upon himself as an admirer and follower of Kabir, Raidas, Sen, Gora, etc. A 17<sup>th</sup> century Persian work on comparative religion *Dabistan-i Mazahib* testifies to the continuing popularity of Kabir among the people of North India.
- ix) Despite the widespread popularity that the teachings of monotheists enjoyed among the masses, the followers of each one of the major figures in the monotheistic movement like Kabir, Raidas and Nanak gradually organized themselves into exclusive sectarian orders called *panths* such as Kabir *panth*, Raidasi *panth*, Nanak *panth*, etc. Of all these *panths*, the Nanak *panth* alone eventually crystallized into a mass religion while most of the others continue to survive till today but with a vastly reduced following and a narrow sectarian base.

**Check Your Progress-2**

- 1) Write two lines on each of the following:
  - a) Kabir .....
  - .....
  - b) Guru Nanak .....
  - .....
- 2) Discuss the factors that led to the rise of the bhakti movement.
 

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- 3) What are the characteristic features of monotheistic bhakti movement? Give the names of three saints belonging to this movement.
 

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**14.5.3 Vaishnava Bhakti Movement in North India**

Ramananda was the most prominent scholar saint of the Vaishnava bhakti in Northern India during this period. Some of his ideas have already been mentioned in **Section 14.3**. He belonged to the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> century. He lived in South India in the early part of his life but later settled in Banaras. He is considered to be the link between the South Indian bhakti tradition and North Indian Vaishnava bhakti. However, he deviated from the ideology and practice of the earlier South Indian *acharyas* in three important respects:

- i) He looked upon Ram and not Vishnu as object of bhakti. To him, Ram was

the supreme God who is to be adored with Sita. In this sense he came to be regarded as the founder of the Ram cult in North India within the framework of Vaishnava bhakti tradition.

- ii) He preached in the language of the common people, and not in Sanskrit, to propagate the Ram cult.
- iii) The most significant contribution to Vaishnava bhakti, was that he made bhakti accessible to all irrespective of caste. He greatly relaxed the caste rules in respect of religious and social matters. Though himself a Brahman, he took food with his 'low' caste Vaishnava followers.

It is perhaps for the last mentioned point that some later Vaishnava traditions link Kabir and some other monotheists to him as his disciples. The innovations were probably due to the influence of Islamic ideas. It has also been suggested that he made these innovations in order to counter the growing popularity of the heterodox Nathpanthis, the 'lower' classes of the society. His followers are called Ramanandis. A hymn attributed to him was incorporated in the *Adi Granth*.

Another prominent Vaishnava preacher in the Sultanate period was Vallabhacharya, a Telugu brahman of the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century. He, too, was born in Banaras. He was the founder of Pushtimarga (way of grace). It also came to be known as Vallabha sampradava (Vallabha Sect). He advocated Krishna bhakti. Famous Krishna bhakti saint-poet, Surdas (1483-1563) and seven other Krishna bhakti poets belonging to the *ashtachhap* were believed to have been the disciples of Vallabha. The sect later became popular in Gujarat.

In North India, however, the Vaishnava bhakti cult acquired a more popular base. Only in the Mughal period, Tulsidas (1532-1623) championed the cause of Rama bhakti while Surdas (1483-1563), Mira Bai (1503-73) and many others popularized Krishna bhakti.

#### 14.5.4 Vaishnava Bhakti Movement in Bengal

In many significant ways the Vaishnava bhakti in Bengal was different from its North Indian and the older South Indian bhakti. The sources which influenced it can be traced to two different traditions – the Vaishnava bhakti tradition of the *Bhagavata Purana*, with its glorification of Krishna *lila* on the one hand, and Sahajiya Buddhist and Nathpanthi traditions on the other. The Vaishnava influence was transmitted by various bhakti poets, beginning with Jayadeva in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* was composed in Sanskrit. He also wrote songs in Maithili dialect which were later absorbed in the Bengali Vaishnava bhakti tradition. Various non-vaishnava cults such as those of Sahajiya Buddhists and Nathpanthis that survived in Bengal and Bihar influenced the growth of bhakti movement in Bengal.

These cults preached an easy and natural religion focussing on esoteric and emotional elements. Vaishnava bhakti poets such as Chandidas (14<sup>th</sup> century) and Vidyapati (14<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries) came under the influence of these non-Vaishnava Cults, though the *Bhagavata* tradition was always the major source of influence. The songs of Chandidas who was the first Bengali bhakti poet and those of Vidyapati who wrote in Maithili, highlighted the Krishna-Radha relationship. These songs became part of the growing Vaishnava movement in Bengal. Chaitanya himself did not come under the direct influence of Sahajiya doctrine. It is, however, possible

that elements of esoteric cults entered into his movement through the influence of Chandidas and Vidyapati. But the most important source of inspiration was the *Bhagavata Purana*.

Chaitanya (1486-1533) was the most prominent Vaishnava saint of Bengal. He popularized Krishna-bhakti in many parts of Eastern India. His popularity as a religious personality was so great that he was looked upon as an *avatara* (incarnation) of Krishna. The advent of Chaitanya marks the shifting of the focus of the Bengal Vaishnava bhakti from devotional literary compositions to a full-fledged reform movement with a broad social base.

Chaitanya disregarded all distinctions of caste, creed and sex to give a popular base to Krishna-bhakti. His followers belonged to all castes and communities. One of his most favourite disciples was Haridas who was a Muslim. He popularized the practice of *sankirtan* or group devotional singing accompanied by ecstatic dancing.

However, Chaitanya did not give up traditional Brahmanical values altogether. He did not question the authority of the Brahmans and scriptures. He upheld the caste prejudices of his Brahman disciples against the 'lower' caste disciples. Six Sanskrit-knowing Brahman Goswamins who were sent by him to Vrindavan near Mathura established a religious order which recognized caste restrictions in its devotional practices and rituals. These Goswamins gradually distanced themselves from Chaitanya's teachings and from the popular movement that had grown around him in Bengal.

But Chaitanya's movement had a great impact on Bengali society. His disregard for caste distinctions in the sphere of devotional singing promoted a sense of equality in the Bengali life. In Bengal and in Puri, in Odisha, his movement remained popular. In these places, his followers were not always scholarly Brahmans but included common people. They wrote in Bengali, propagated his bhakti and looked upon Chaitanya as the living Krishna or as Radha and Krishna in one body.

#### 14.5.5 Bhakti Movement in Maharashtra

Like other Vaishnava bhakti movements, the Maharashtra bhakti tradition drew its basic inspiration from that of the *Bhagavata Purana*. In addition, however, it was also influenced by the Saiva Nathpanthis who were quite popular in the 'lower' classes of the Maharashtrian society during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries and who composed their verses in Marathi. Jnaneswar (1275-1296) was the pioneer bhakti saint of Maharashtra. He wrote an extensive commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, popularly called *Jnanesvari*. This was one of the earliest works of Marathi literature and served as foundation of the bhakti ideology in Maharashtra. He was the author of many hymns called *abhangs*. He taught that the only way to attain God was bhakti and in bhakti there was no place for caste distinctions.

Namdev (1270-1350) belonged to the tailor caste. He is considered to be the link between the Maharashtrian bhakti movement and North Indian monotheistic movement. He lived in Pandharpur but travelled to North India, including Punjab. His bhakti songs have also been included in the *Adi Granth*. In Maharashtra, Namdev is considered to be a part of the Varkari tradition (Vaishnava devotional tradition), but in the North Indian monotheistic tradition he is remembered as a nirguna saint. Other prominent bhakti saints of Maharashtra were Eknath (1533-99) and Tukaram (1598-1650).

### 14.5.6 Bhakti Movement in Other Regions

Saiva bhakti flourished in Kashmir in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Most prominent of the Saiva bhakti saints was a woman, Lal Ded. In Gujarat, bhakti was preached by the Vallabha sect of Vallabhacharya and another important saint, Narsimha Mehta (1414-1481, or 1500-1580). He knew of Jayadeva and Kabir and was followed by a number of poet-saints. The Vallabha sect became popular among merchants and landowners of Gujarat. In Karnataka, the Saiva bhakti cult of the Kannad speaking Virasaivas developed during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. They preached a strongly radical and heterodox concept of bhakti by incorporating social criticism in their religious outlook.

In Assam, Sankaradeva (1449-1568) introduced bhakti both in the Brahmaputra valley as well as in Cooch-Bihar. He was born in the family of non-Brahman Bhuyan chiefs. He became an ascetic during the later part of his life and is believed to have visited many places of pilgrimage in North and South India. He preached absolute devotion to Vishnu or his incarnation, Krishna. He had to face persecution at the hands of orthodox Brahmanical priesthood of the Ahom kingdom and took shelter in the territories of the neighbouring Cooch-Bihar, where its king gave him the freedom to preach bhakti. Monotheistic ideas influenced his concept of bhakti which came to be known as the *eka-sarana-dharma* ('religion of seeking refuge in one'). He denounced the caste system and preached his ideas to the people in their language (an Assamese form of Brajapoli). He made some significant innovations in the devotional practice such as inclusion of dance-drama-music form in the preaching of bhakti. He also founded the institution of Satra, which means a sitting during which people of all classes assembled for religious as well as social purposes. Later the Satras grew into full-fledged monasteries. His sect is called Mahapurashya Dharma.

#### Check Your Progress-3

- 1) Write a note on the Vaishnavite bhakti movement.

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- 2) Write three lines on each of the following:

- a) Bhakti movement in Bengal

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- b) Bhakti movement in Maharashtra

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## 14.6 INFLUENCE OF OTHER TRADITIONS AND MOVEMENTS

It is clear that the bhakti movement of the Sultanate period cannot be linked in any-way with the older South Indian bhakti. But they were influenced in one way or another by certain existing traditions and movements whose history goes back to the pre-Sultanate period. These included the bhakti tradition of the *Bhagavat Purana*, religious ideas and activities of scholar-saints such as Ramananda, and such heterodox movements as that of the Nathpanthis.

The doctrine of bhakti is fully developed in the most famous of the Puranas – the *Bhagavat Purana*, a Vaishnavite work composed around the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Its most important feature is its emphasis on the bhakti of Vishnu in his various incarnations, especially in the form of Krishna. The *Bhagavata* accepts the orthodox Brahmanical theory of the origin of the *varna* system but does not accept the superiority of the Brahmins simply on the basis of their status or birth. For it, bhakti is the main criteria. It has been pointed out that *Bhagavata Purana* is the link between various Vaishnava bhakti movements of the medieval period. However, the influence of the *Bhagavata* tradition on monotheistic saints such as Kabir and Nanak was not exerted in a direct manner. Most of these saints were illiterate and did not have any direct access to the *Bhagavata* and other scriptures. Kabir's concept of bhakti is characteristically different from that of the *Bhagavata*. Kabir and other non-conformist saints did not believe in incarnations either and rejected the Brahmanical and scriptural authority altogether.

### 14.6.1 Popular Monotheistic Saints and Ramananda

Ramananda's teachings are considered to be the source of popular monotheistic movement of Kabir, Raidas and others. As we shall discuss later, Ramananda was strongly opposed to caste restrictions and opened the path of bhakti to all. He also preached his ideas in popular dialect. But, on the whole, his ideas and his concept of bhakti were essentially a part of the Vaishnava bhakti. On the other hand, Kabir and other monotheists went many steps further than even the most liberal Vaishnava *bhaktas* like Ramanand and denounced the Brahmanical religion in its entirety. In fact, none of the monotheists, who are claimed to have been Ramanand's disciples, make any mention of him or any other human *guru* in their utterances.

### 14.6.2 Influence of the Nathpanthi Movement on Monotheistic Saints

Some of the ideas of Kabir and other monotheists can be traced to the influence of heterodox movements like that of the Nathpanthis. A large number of Nathpanthi preachers called *siddhas* belonged to the 'lower' castes – doma, tanners, washerman, oilman, tailor, fisherman, wood-cutter, cobbler, etc. With the establishment of Turkish rule in northern India the popularity of the Nathpanthi movement reached its peak during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Anybody could be initiated into the sect of the Nathpanthi *yogis* irrespective of caste.

Nathpanthi influence on Kabir is clearly seen in his non-conformist attitudes, in his independent thinking, in the harsh style of his utterances in his 'upside-down' language (called *ulatbasi* containing paradoxes and enigmas) and partly in his mystical symbolism. However, Kabir and other monotheists, in their character-

istically critical and innovative manner adopted the Nathpanthi ideas on a selective basis only and even when they did so, they adapted these ideas to their own purpose. Kabir rejected their asceticism and esoteric practices and also their physical methods such as breath control. Thus, the influence of the Nathpanthis on the monotheistic saints of medieval period can be seen more in their heterodox' attitudes towards the established Brahmanical religion than in their practices.

### 14.6.3 Influence of Islamic Ideas and the Role of Sufism

Many scholars have argued that all the variants of the bhakti movement and the doctrine of bhakti itself came into being as a result of Islamic influence both before and after the 12<sup>th</sup> century. This claim has been made on the basis of many similarities between Islam and the bhakti cults. On the other hand, it is pointed out that bhakti and bhakti movements had indigenous origins. It has been noted above that bhakti as a religious concept had developed in the religious traditions of ancient India. The older South Indian bhakti movement also cannot be explained in terms of Islamic influence as its history goes back to the period before the advent of Islam in South India. Conceptually, a movement based on the idea of devotion or grace is not peculiar to any particular religion but could grow independently in different religions at different times depending on the concrete historical conditions. It would be more appropriate to understand the bhakti movements of medieval India in their immediate historical context rather than searching for far-fetched sources of inspiration in any particular religion. However, Islam did influence the bhakti cults and, in particular, the popular monotheistic movements in other ways. Non-conformist saints such as Kabir and Nanak picked up some of their ideas from Islam. These included their non-compromising faith in one God, their rejection of incarnation, their conception of *nirguna* bhakti and their attack on idolatry and the caste system. But they did not uncritically borrow from Islam and rejected many elements of orthodox Islam. The Vaishnava bhakti movements, on the other hand, cannot be interpreted in terms of such an influence of Islam as they neither denounced idolatry (and the caste system nor the theory of incarnation). They believed in *saguna* bhakti. The relationship between monotheistic bhakti movement and Islam seems to have been one of mutual influence and sufism provided the common meeting ground. Sufi concepts of *pir* and mystic union with the 'beloved' (God) coincided in many respects with the non-conformist saints' concepts of *guru* and devotional surrender to God. Kabir is even believed to have had affiliations with Chishti sufi saints, though concrete historical evidence is lacking. Guru Nanak's encounters with sufis are described in the *janam-sakhis*. Though the sufism and the monotheistic movement were historically independent of each other, there was remarkable similarity in many of their basic ideas, including their common rejection of Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies. The interaction between them, however indirect, must have given impetus to both of them.

### 14.6.4 Theory of Islamic Challenge to Hinduism

One modern viewpoint, tends to attribute the rise of the medieval bhakti movements to alleged persecution of the Hindus under 'Muslim' rule and to the challenge that Islam is supposed to have posed to Hinduism through its doctrines of 'Unity of God', equality and brotherhood. According to this theory, the bhakti movements were a two-pronged defensive mechanism to save the Hindu religion by purging it of such evils as caste system and idolatry and at the same time defending its basic

tenets by popularising it. The former task is believed to have been undertaken by Kabir, Nanak, etc., and the latter project was accomplished by Tulsidas in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Such a notion of the medieval bhakti movement is not borne out by evidence.

- i) This theory of imagined Islamic threat to Hinduism is in essence a projection of the Islamic doctrine of ‘brotherhood’ had lost much of its appeal and social, economic and racial inequalities had crept into the Muslim society. The Turkish ruling class possessed a strong sense of racial superiority and looked upon ‘low caste’ Indian converts to Islam as low-born and not fit for high offices.
- ii) The Hindu population continued to observe their religious practices and to celebrate their religious festivals. In fact, the overwhelming majority of population remained Hindu, even in the vicinity of Delhi, the capital of the Sultanate.
- iii) The monotheistic saints denounced the aspects of both orthodox Brahmanism and orthodox Islam and their ritualistic practices.
- iv) To assume that all monotheistic and Vaishnava bhakti saints were reacting on behalf of the Hindus to Islamic threat is not convincing because Kabir and other ‘low caste’ saints hardly saw any unity of purpose with the saints belonging to the Vaishnava bhakti cults.
- v) Lastly, the poetry and the teachings of the Vaishnava bhakti saints or all the regions are either not concerned with Islamic influence or at best show indifference in this regard. In fact, it has been pointed out that Hindus and Muslims both stood side by side among Chaitanya’s disciples, as they had done under Ramanand, Kabir, Nanak or Dadu Dayal.

**Check Your Progress-4**

- 1) In what way the bhakti saints were influenced by the Nathpanthi doctrine?  
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- 2) Do you agree that the bhakti movement was the result of Islamic influence?  
 Comment.  
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**14.7 SUMMARY**

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The bhakti movement of the Sultanate period represented the most widespread constellation – both interwoven and variegated – of socio-religious movements in Indian history after the rise of heterodox movements of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. They influenced the whole country at different times by propounding new socio-religious ideas and practices. Many of the current practices of popular Hinduism such as repetition of divine names, emphasis on the company of saints, and community

devotional singing can be traced to the medieval bhakti movements. They also contributed to the growth of modern vernacular languages, emergence of organized religious communities like the Sikhs, and evolution of various sects or *panths*.

In this Unit, we have studied the:

- background of bhakti movement in South India which emerged in a different form in North India,
- main political and socio-economic factors for the rise of bhakti movement,
- two main streams of bhakti movement – the monotheistic and the Vaishnava,
- main popular movements and saints of two streams of North India including Maharashtra and Bengal,
- influences of various sects and beliefs on North Indian bhakti movement, and
- influence of Islam on bhakti movement.

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## 14.8 KEYWORDS

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<b><i>Acharya</i></b>	Scholar-saint who propounded new religious and philosophical ideas
<b><i>Adi Granth</i></b>	The most important sacred scripture of the Sikhs compiled by the fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan in 1604. This later came to be called <i>Guru Granth Sahib</i>
<b><i>Bhagat</i></b>	The colloquial expression for <i>bhakta</i> , a devotee
<b><i>Julaha</i></b>	Member of a Muslim weaving caste
<b><i>Kirtan</i></b>	Community singing of hymns
<b><i>Marga</i></b>	Path
<b><i>Mukti</i></b>	Salvation
<b><i>Nam</i></b>	The divine name
<b><i>Nirankar</i></b>	Without form
<b><i>Nirguna</i></b>	Without attributes, unqualified
<b><i>Panth</i></b>	Path, sect; the community of the followers of a particular monotheist saint e.g., Kabirpanth, Nanakpanth, Dadupanth, etc
<b><i>Parampara</i></b>	Lineage, tradition
<b><i>Sabad</i></b>	The divine word; the divine self-communication
<b><i>Saguna</i></b>	Having qualities or attributes
<b><i>Sampradaya</i></b>	Tradition; school of religious thought and practice
<b><i>Vaishnava</i></b>	Worshipper of Vishnu
<b><i>Varkari</i></b>	A Vaishnava devotional tradition

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## 14.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Sections 14.1, 14.2, 14.3
- 2) See Section 14.2

### Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See Section 14.4
- 2) See Sub-Section 14.5.1
- 3) See Sub-Sections 14.5.1, 14.5.2

### Check Your Progress-3

- 1) See Sub-Section 14.5.3
- 2) See Sub-Sections 14.5.4, 14.5.5

### Check Your Progress-4

- 1) See Sub-Section 14.6.2
- 2) See Sub-Section 14.6.3

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## 14.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Chand, Tara (2006) (Reprint), *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture* (Nabu Book).

Iraqi, Shihabuddin, (2009) *Bhakti Movement in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Manohar).

Lorenzon, David N., (1995) *Bhakti Religion in India: Community Identity and Political Action* (New York: State University of New York Press).

Schomer, Karine, and W.H. McLeod, (1987) *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas).

Shima, Iwao, (2011) *The Historical Development of Bhakti Movement in India* (New Delhi: Manohar).

Zelliot, Eleanov, (1976) 'The Medieval Bhakti Movement in History – An Essay on the Literature in English', in Bardwell L. Smith, ed., *Hinduism – New Essays in the History of Religions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill) (Numen Series), pp 143-168.

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## 14.11 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECCOMENDATIONS

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**Role of Bhakti Movement in Indian History | Rajya Sabha TV**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFCIKGI1Ybs>

**In Depth - Sant Kabir**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpAhA\\_CbgBQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpAhA_CbgBQ)

**Religious Ideas and  
Visual Culture**

**Role of Bhakti Movement in Indian History**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFCIKG11Ybs>

**Bhakti Movement**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTJnn-HBoVQ>

