

BHAKTHI IN HINDUISM

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Abstract

Bhakti literally means “devotion” and “eternal love” on a personal god by a devotee. *Bhakti* movement spread across the various continents and various regions and groups. It has created strong bonding between the god and the devotees through variety of devotional songs and religious texts, bajans and poems. It has a critical outlook on the Upanishads and Vaishnavism in religious thoughts which formed the basis of Hinduism. *Bhakti* played a vital role in bringing all the cultures, beliefs and sects together in Hinduism. Finally, *Bhakti* shows the clear vision on the Religious life and culture of people. *Bhakti* has eradicated many evil practices, castism, and dominant bharamanas. *Bhakti* inspired many poets with their poems and religious texts written by saints in India. The main aim of *bhakti* is to follow a god and attain liberation. According to the saints and poets, they preached to have a emotional bonding to a god and had no values for caste and creed.

Keywords: *Bhakti, Rig Veda, Samhita, Upanishads, Yajna, Mukthi, Bhagavata, Smritis, Cakra-puja, Bhagavad Gita, Upasana, satnam, Sanatana – dharma.*

Introduction

The beginning of religion in Indian society has been pushed back by two thousand years or even more by the discoveries of Mohenjodaro. Of their religious culture some traces are left in their icons which include the mother Goddess, the Phallus and a male God seated in Yogic posture, who has been regarded as Lord Shiva. The worship of Lord Shiva and Goddess Shakti in the primitive culture may be regarded as the oldest form of Indian theistic religion.

In the Rigveda Samhita, we first come across the idea of definite Gods, as a normal evolution from the striking phenomena of nature. On the one hand, we find the idea of propitiating the different gods by means of worship, which led to the religious sacraments known as yajna or sacrifice. On the other hand, there developed a more philosophic conception about the nature of these Godes, which culminated in the idea that all this gods are but manifestations of a higher spirit. Brahmanas developed the ritualistic side by elaborating the mechanical details of the Yajna. while the philosophical ideas were developed in the Upanisads. They are the utterances of spirituality minded people who obtained glimpses of the highest truths by earnest meditation. Their process is intuitive rather than logical and their object is to satisfy the natural yearnings of the human mind for the ultimate knowledge of reality about God, man and the world around us. Inspite of the mystic character of the upanisads, certain fundamental conceptions clearly emerge out of the mass of spiritual and metaphysical thoughts. The first and foremost is the idea of one all –

powerful, All -pervading, self-existent, External and incomprehensible absolute in whom all creatures find their origin and dissolution.

Upanishads

The Upanishads lay stress on the miseries of life which are perpetuated by transmigration or rebirth due to our karma or actions. But they pin their faith on the ultimate hope deliverance (mukti) which means cessation of miseries, and enjoyment of eternal bliss. This can be obtained by a true knowledge of the Universal spirit or soul. Such knowledge can only be derived by purity of life and intense meditation. By implication, that the ritualistic sacrifices can achieve the same result.

Lastly, the Upanishads elaborate the idea of the eternal human soul as distinct from the body and regard the individual human soul as identical with the universal soul or God. When true knowledge comes by meditation, the individual souls merge in the universal soul as rivers merge in the ocean.

But the Upanisadic ideas cannot be regarded as sufficient for the moral or religious needs of the masses. In the first place, they could make their appeal only to the intelligentsia but fell flat on the average man to whom the attainment of such a profound knowledge appeared as a utopian ideal. Secondly, their conclusions were not based on an intelligible chain of reasoning and arguments but held merely as the experience or realization of great minds. They were, therefore, to be accepted on faith. Thirdly, although by implication they denied the efficacy of ritualistic 'yajna' for the purpose of salvation, they prescribed no substitute for it which an average man could normally purpose for developing his religious life. Thus, while the Upanishads soared to a dizzy height, they failed to satisfy all the normal religious cravings of the human and the legitimate spiritual needs of human mind.

But the age that followed the early Upanishads saw new developments in religious thoughts.

The main characteristics which distinguished them may be indicated as follows: (1) belief in a personal God to be worshipped with devotion rather than an impersonal Absolute to be realised through meditation and knowledge. Here we find for the first time the introduction of Bhakti in the religious life of India. In the age of Upanishads, when conception of an impersonal God was the prevailing idea, we find first the beginning of a theistic system in the Svetasvatara Upanisad and it further developed in the Bhagavata-school. From the conception of an absolute Brahman to that of a personal God, the transition is easy and natural and almost inevitable. Thus the Upanisadic doctrine of an impersonal Absolute was fused with the devotional worship of personal God¹.

¹ Bhakti in Religions of the World, p.20

This was started on a moderate scale by the Bhagavata-religion. It substituted a personal God called Lord Hari in place of the abstract idea of a Universal soul. He could only be seen by one who worshipped Him with devotion. By an open denial of the efficacy of sacrifices and austerities, denunciation of the slaughter of animals and stressing the element of Bhakti in place of abstract knowledge, it made a fundamental breach from the accepted creeds and beliefs².

The worship of Lord Vasudeva as an object of devotion goes back to the time of Panini of the 5th century BC and is also proved by a statement of Megasthenes at the end of fourth century B.C. The religious ideas formulated by Lord Vasudeva-krishna developed into Bhagavata system. We also find a very early account of the system in the Narayaniya section of the Mahabharata. There, it is called ekantika dharma and is said to have been revealed by Lord Narayana Himself. This Ekantika Dharma was communicated to Arjuna at the beginning of the war. The allusion is, to the Srimad Bhagavad Gita, which contains the earliest philosophical exposition this system. It is generally regarded as forming the basis of popular Hinduism³.

Puranas and Smritis

The period of fourth century A.D. may be regarded as a turning point in the religious history of India. Since that date we find the gradual dominance of Brahminical religion and the steady doctrine of Buddhism and Jainism. With the decline of Buddhism and Jainism, the Brahminical religion gradually rose into importance. It included Orthodox Brahminism, that is, the remnant of the old Vedic cult and the different sectarian religions notably Saiva, Sakta and Vaishna. Although they were admitted within the orthodox fold, they still retained their essential characteristics and formed distinguished entities. In the beginning, we notice a systematization of their faiths and beliefs in a number of texts known as Puranas and Smritis. The Smritis preserve a link with the old 'grhya-sutras, describing Vedic rituals and sacrifices. The Puranas present the theology of the new sects with the old philosophical and cosmogonical beliefs in the background. One of the most important traits of the Brahminical religion of this period is the spirit of reconciliation and harmony between Orthodox and sectarian forms. Its most notable expression is to be found in the theological conception of the 'Tri-murti' the manifestation of the Supreme God in three forms of Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu and Siva. A further step towards the reconciliation of the different sects may be traced in the attempt to establish the identity of Lord Vishnu and Lord Siva such as we find in the Skanda Purana. The image of Hari Hara like that of 'Ardhanariswara' Lord

² Ibid, p.20

³ Ibid., pp.20-21

(Shiva-Parvati) is a visible symbol of this doctrine⁴. The Puranas present the two theistic and also other sectarian beliefs in a complete form which they have retained till today. The Pasupata-sect continued to flourish during this period. Huen-Tsang and Bana Bhatta, both belonging to 7th century A.D. refer to it as one of the prominent religious sects of the time. In addition to the Puranas, the saiva-theism was expounded in the Agamas and Upagamas. The members of the sect to worship Lord Shiva in this phallic form, reject the authority of the Vedas, dis-believe in the doctrine of rebirth, object to child marriage, approve of the re-marriage of widows and cherish an intense aversion to the Brahmanas⁵

The cult of Shakti consort of Lord Shiva attained a great predominance during that period. It is based upon Samkhya philosophy, according to which the sprit or purusha, here identified with the Lord Shiva, is inactive while prakrti-identified with sakthi – is productive and the universal material cause. Hence, sakthi is, in a sense superior to Lord Shiva. The system lays stress on the inherent power of the sounds and the presence, in human body, of a large number of minute channels or threads of force (nadi) and 6 great centres of that force (cakra) described as so many lotuses one above the other. The worship of the Goddess- Sakthi was accompanied by sacrifices of animals and occasionally also human beings. But the most characteristic feature of the cult was “Cakra-puja”, i.e.,circle worship in which equal number of men and women sit round a circle and uttering mystic mantras, partake of the ‘pancatativa’ consisting of five elements, namely, namely, wine, meat, fish, parched grain and sex. By worshipping Sakthi Prajna (Mahayanist Goddesses) or other Goddesses with Tantras, the worshipper seeks to attain, in a the Supernatural manner and in an incredibly short time, object of either material nature – wealth, longevity, invulnerability etc., - or spiritual character union with some divinity even in this life⁶.

The most important development of the system is the growth of Pancharatra Samhitas which give an exposition of faiths, beliefs and practices of the vaishnavas. They show considerable influence of the ‘Tantric’ element and lay stress on the ‘Shakti’ of Lord Vishnu. They show a normal development of the teaching formulated in the Narayana section of the Mahabharata. But the most distinguishing feature of the Bhagavata Purana is the exalted form of Bhakti or devotion which is displayed throughout the work. The fervent emotionalism which the characteristics mediaeval vaishnavism has its origin in this really great work. The pure devotional element of vaishnavism flourished in the Tamil country. The most remarkable specimen of this is contained in the songs of the famous Alwars .Their number is

⁴ . Bhakti in Religions of the World, p.22

⁵ . Ibid., p.23.

⁶ .Bhakti in Religions of the World.p.24

usually reckoned as twelve, and although their dates are uncertain, they may be all placed between A.D. 5th century and A.D 9th century A.D. Their devotional songs called 'Prabandham' written mostly in Tamil, are known as Vaishna -Veda, and their images are worshipped along with those of Lord Vishnu⁷.

Vaishnavism in Bhakti Literature

The next great land-mark in the history of Tamil Vaishnavism is the rise of school of Philosophers known as Aacharyas. Shri nadhamuni, the first of these, flourished about the end of the tenth or the beginning of the A.D. 11th century. He organised the Sri-Vaisnavas, and populaised the cult among the masses by collecting the songs of the Alvars, setting them to Dravidian music, and having them regularly sung in the temples. But he was also a great theologian, and his school took up the task of the giving a philosophical background to the Vaishna theories and creeds.

Sri-Nathamuni, was followed by three Acharyas of whom the last, his grandson Sri yamunacharya was great scholar. Sri Yamunacharya was succeeded by the famous Sri Ramanuja (A.D. 11th century). His great task was to put the religion on a secure philosophical basis. The great Shankaracharya's doctrine of Monoism was a direct challenge to the cult of 'Bhakti'. If there is only one absolute spirit and all else is unreal there is no scope for devotion to the supreme God by the individual, for the two are really one and the same. Sri Ramanuja set up against it a full and critical exposition of the Visistadvita – vada or qualified Monism. It was based upon the Upanisads and the Brahmasutra and construed the individual soul as an attribute of the supreme-soul, but distinct from it. The latter dwellss in the individual heart and can, therefore, be an object of devotion. Sri Ramanuja follows closely the tenets of Srimad Bhagavad Gita in describing the mode of salvation. Both in his philosophy and general practice, Sri Ramanuja follows the Orthodox Brahminism. He recognizes Sri (Lakshmi), bhu (Earth) and Lila (Sport) as the consorts Lord Vishnu⁸.

The Vaishnava Philosophy was further developed by Sri Madhva or Ananda Tirtha (A.D.1300) the founder of another sect. He conceived God as altogether distinct from the individual spirit. He established the Vaishnava creed on a define dualistic basics. He referred to the Supreme spirit as Lord Vishnu. Thus a general Vaishnavism took the place of the old Bhagavata School⁹.

⁷. ibid p.26

⁸ Bhakti in Religions of the World, p.26

⁹ . Ibid.,p.27

i) Southern Vaishnavism

The southern Vaishnavism laid little stress on the cowherd element of Sri Krishna and altogether ignored Sri Radha. Far different was the case with vaishnavism in northern India. It was first put a philosophic basis by Sri Nimbarka, who flourished after Sri Ramanuja probably in A.D. twelfth century. His philosophy is compromise between those of Sri Ramanuja and Sri Madhva, as he believes God to be both, identical with distinct from the individual spirit. But his chief difference from his predecessor, Sri Ramanuja, lies in giving prominence to the elements of Sri Krishna and Sri Radha and their 'madhura-upasana' (sweet-worship) instead of 'dasa-bhava' (loving service of the Lord servant) of Sri Ramanuja¹⁰.

The activity of Sri vallabha falls in the first half of A.D. 16th century. His Vaishnavism centres round Sri Krishna as a child of Nanda and Yashoda. He emphasized the '*balabhava-upasana*' loving service of Lord Krishna as a child by parental emotion (vatsalya-bhava). Elaborate rituals for the worship of Sri Krishna and religious feasts and festivals were fully developed. The worldly life offers no bar to this salvation¹¹.

ii) Bengal Vaishnavism

Bengal vaishnavism was promulgated by Sri Chaitanya, a contemporary of Sri Vallabha. The elements of Sri Radha and Sri Krishna had taken deep root in its soil as the songs of Sri Jayadeva and Vidyapati and Candidas. But the merit of Sri Caitanya lies in the fact that he expounded the '*Madura-upasana*' (sweet worship) of Lord Krishna on high spiritual plane and stressed the emotional at the cost of the ceremonial side of worship. His piety, devotion and fervour introduced a pure and spiritual element of Bhakti in Vaishnavism. In Maharashtra, Sri Radha was replaced by Srimati Rukmini, the wedded wife of Lord Krishna. The great preachers of the sect were Sri Namadeva (A.D. 14th century) and Tukarama (A.D. 17th century)¹².

Impacts of Bhakti in Hinduism

Another mode propounded by Sri Ramananda (A.D.14th century) was to replace Sri Krishna and Sri Radha by Sri Rama and Sri Sita. This was further developed by Sri Kabir Sri Ravidas (A.D. 15th century) Dadu and Malukadasa (A.D. 1600) and Tulasidas (A.D 1532 -A.D. 1623). The simple and beautiful songs of these Saints sung in their vernacular languages are full of piety and devotion and they have acquired wide celebrity far beyond the sectarian limits. They also rejected rites and ceremonials in favour of pure devotion, morality and purity of heart. Thus, in

¹⁰ Ibid., p.29

¹¹ Ibid., p.32

¹² Bhakti in Religions of the World, p.32

this period, the development of vernacular languages, rejection of caste- distinction and rites and ceremonials and furtherance of pure Bhakti and purity of heart are the special features of the religious life of India¹³.

In northern India especially in Punjab and upper Sind, we notice the revival of pure monotheistic doctrine of Upanisads in the Sikh-religion founded by Sri Nanaka (A.D.1469 – A.D.1539). He invoked the one true God, without any name. He discarded the Vedas and pilgrimages and put to faith in an impersonal aspect of the Lord but preached humility and Bhakti as the spiritual practice. He emphasized satnam (the divine name) sat-sanga (holy company), sad-guru (the preceptor), and Seva (service) of humanity. He compiled the songs of various saints including the nine gurus of the sect in Gurumukhi in well - known Adi - granth sahib¹⁴.

It is a fact that the monotheism and democratic spirit of Islam served as potent factor in leading these developments. Sri R.C Majumdar opines, "It is not perhaps a mere accident that from A.D. 14th century, the two characteristic features of Islam, namely, the absence of social distinctions among its followers and the total rejection of the worship of images began to influence the Vaishnava reformers and mediaeval saints. A more direct influence of Islam may be traced in the severe monotheistic doctrines of Guru Nanak. It is also to be noted that these principles are almost absent in South India, precisely the part of the country where the influence of Islam was the least"¹⁵.

Conclusion

The eighteenth century is similarly marked by impact with western thought which led to the religious reformers of the 19th century. It brought back the rationalism of the 5th century B.C. and Raja Ram Mohan Roy was its great exponent. The new spirit led to the foundation of the Brahmo - Samaj including Prarthana Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the Theosophical society, on the one hand and all-round reform in the Orthodox Hindu religion and Society on the other. Towards the close of the century flourished Sri Ramakrishna who sought to reconcile not only the rationalistic doctrine with emotionalism and ritualistic Orthodoxy of the earlier ages but also the different seemingly - conflicting religions on the basis of experience gained through spiritual culture. He asserted that all religions, if truly followed, are but different ways to salvation and there is no inherent conflict between one religion and another. Herein lies a solution to the most complicated problem of the day, - the conflict among different sects and religions. There arises a question naturally why there are so many sects and creeds in Hinduism. This is in fact; the

¹³ . Ibid., p.33

¹⁴ . Ibid., p.37

¹⁵ . Ibid., p.38

special peculiarity of Hinduism that it caters to spiritual path for every human being at whatever spiritual stage he might be and whatever different taste he might posses. Hinduism has, therefore, assimilated different cultures and creeds and has truly become a synthesis of various sects, cultures and beliefs and it, therefore claims to be the Sanatana - dharma or Manava dharma, that is eternal religion for all humanity.

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