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Bhakti as social protest

By Siddhartha

If one were to examine religious thought in India to discover signs of liberative social protest, the devotional current known as Bhakti stands out conspicuously. For hundreds of years Bhakti has helped many castes to either bear with courageously or seek release from their low social status. Among the Bhakti saints one finds so called 'untouchables', other low caste persons and women. Although the Bhakti teachings did not unequivocally condemn the caste system, this religious current is nevertheless profoundly imbued with the protest of the down-trodden social groups.

By Bhakti means loving devotion, surrender and prayer to a divine person. 'Participation' is the original meaning of the word Bhakti; participation in the plenitude of the Lord. Bhakti-marga, or the path of devotion, represents one of the three paths within Hinduism which lead to eternal bliss and salvation. The other two paths are Karma-marga the path of ritual observance, and Jnanamarga, the path of knowledge. Although the Vedas show little trace of Bhakti, it is nevertheless likely that one of the four Vedas, the Yajurveda (and it's Upanisads) did serve as a source of inspiration. The Bhagavad Gita also reveals many elements of Bhakti, although they are more speculative and intellectual. However, the most important sacred literature of Bhakti is the Bhagavata Purana which was written sometime between A.D. 500 and A.D. 950. It is believed that the tenth century is the most likely period when the Bhagavata Purana was composed. As regards its place of origin, it is in the Tamil speaking part of South India.

The early Bhakt saints of South India were known as the Alvars. Caste status did not appear to have any significant role among them. Among the ten best known Alvar saints several were outcastes and one was a woman. The language used was Tamil and not Sanskrit. The trend of using the vernacular in place of Sanskrit had, by the fourteenth century, spread into the Hindi, Marathi and Bengali speaking regions. The language of the priests was given up and vernacular hymns replaced them. The priests were not required to mediate anymore; a direct personal relationship was advocated between the worshipper and his god.

The Bhagavata Purana was probably produced as a result of the earlier activity of the Alvars. It promotes devotion to Visnu in his incarnation as Krishna, also referred to as Vasudeva, Hari, Mukunda, Acyuta and Bhagwan. The following verses reveal the emotional nature of this devotion to Vishnu.

Hearing about, praising, remembering, and attendance on the feet of Visnu, honouring Him, saluting Him respectfully, service to Him, friendship with Him, and offering one-self to Him...Without the bristling of the hair of the body, without the mind dissolving, without being inarticulate because of tears of joy, without Bhakti, how can the heart be purified ?

He whose voice is stammering (from emotion), whose thought dissolves, who repeatedly weeps and sometimes laughs, who, shameless, sings and dances, such a person, attached by Bhakti to me, purifies the world.

The emotional nature of the Bhagavata Purana was commented upon by Farquhar who said, "Bhakti in this work is a surging emotion which chokes the speech, makes the tears flow and the hair thrill with pleasurable excitement, and often leads to hysterical laughing and weeping by turns, to sudden fainting fits and to long trances of unconsciousness....It has been noted that this mystic ecstasy has similarities with the phenomenon of possession which occurs in village festivals, the main difference being the unlike the possessed person, the Bhakta (devotee) does not make prophecies.

There are other verses which are critical about the hypocrisy of people who attempt to hide behind their knowledge of sacred texts. Appreciative references are also made to poor people:

Hari, fond of those persons destitute of wealth is Himself and knowing their affection, does not accept the worship of evil-minded persons who, by their conceit about their Vedic learning, wealth, family, and deeds, bestow harm on good people who are poor.

The path to salvation expressed in the Bhagavata Purana places great importance on the individuals total surrender before Visnu. The high status of one's caste is of little value if one is not capable of true devotion. Even a low caste person or Untouchable may be purified through Bhakti. The following verses express the theme of equality before Visnu. To a limited extent they may be said to also express some sentiments against the inequality of the caste system:

"He is truly the favourite of Hari for whom there is no pride attached to the body because of either birth and actions or because of varna. He is truly the best Bhagavata who is tranquil, to whom all beings are equal.....

There are indications that the Bhagavata does not represent the viewpoint of the higher caste groups.

Wealthy and learned people were often opponents of the devotional religion as it appears in the Bhagavata Purana. Apart from Krishna himself, the most important figure in the Bhagavata Purana is the ascetic Narada. He is a Sudra and is born of a servant girl. Compassion for those who are distressed and praise for a life of poverty are important aspects of the social teaching of the Bhagavata Narada states:

- As one whose body is pierced by a thorn does not desire that pain for (other) creatures, having attained impartiality toward living beings by means of their Characteristics (ie by sharing their suffering), so one in whom a thorn has not been stuck does not have this attitude.
- A poor person, freed from the arrogance of his ego and released from all conceit in this world, by chance obtains hardship; indeed that is for him the highest religious authority.

Bhakti has contributed to helping several low castes in developing social movements. The militant movement of the untouchable Mahars of Maharashtra is a good example. Their 14th century saint Chokhamela occasionally protested against the low status of the Untouchables.

He wrote:

"In the beginning
and the end
there is nothing but pollution.
No one knows anyone who is born
"Pure"

The songs of Chokhamela were well known to many Mahars and there was even an attempt to change the name of the caste to Chokhamela. Temples were built in his honour and groups and institutions carried his name. The Chokhamela reform society which met near Nagpur, in 1923, resolved to build a temple, where untouchables would have equal rights in weddings and other religious ceremonies along with Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas.

Another person in the Bhakti tradition to have influenced the Mahars was the sixteenth century saint Kabir. Many Mahars sing the beautiful devotional hymns composed by Kabir, who tried to reconcile both Hinduism and Islam and taught that all men were brothers. Kabir rejected the caste system and preached that salvation was to be reached through faith and devotion. Kabir appeared to propagate a religion where neither dogma nor scripture nor caste found a place.

Robert Miller, writing on the Mahars, states that they evolved a counter-great tradition which represented a radical cultural disjunction to the Brahmanic great tradition. Miller finds among the Mahars a separate tradition where "equality is opposed to inequality; individual ability is opposed to merger of the individual in the group; emotionalism is opposed to ritualism; escape from the system is opposed to movement within the system". The disjunctive model proposed by Miller suggests that the Mahars were

part of a tradition which grew up in a separate and opposed manner to the tradition of the upper castes. It also suggests that Bhakti was some kind of counter-great tradition.

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