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## BHAKTI MOVEMENT AS A PART OF THE INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL AND SOME OF ITS DIFFERENCES WITH THE CARVAKA TRADITION

ISHA SINGH\*

### *Declaration*

The Declaration of the author for publication of Research Paper in The Indian Journal of Research Anvikshiki ISSN 0973-9777 Bi-monthly International Journal of all Research: I, *Isha Singh* the author of the research paper entitled BHAKTI MOVEMENT AS A PART OF THE INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL AND SOME OF ITS DIFFERENCES WITH THE CARVAKA TRADITION declare that , I take the responsibility of the content and material of my paper as I myself have written it and also have read the manuscript of my paper carefully. Also, I hereby give my consent to publish my paper in Anvikshiki journal , This Research paper is my original work and no part of it or it's similar version is Published or has been sent for Publication anywhere else. I authorise the Editorial Board of the Journal to modify and edit the manuscript. I also give my consent to the Editor of Anvikshiki Journal to own the copyright of my Research Paper.

As a social and religious movement, Bhakti developed in medieval India, during the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was like a massive force which swept people off their feet and changed many notions about divinity and wisdom in India. Bhakti movement co-existed with many other theological strands of Hinduism and was a counter-force which was emancipatory in nature. Bhakti movement is said to have been originated in South India in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> Century C.E. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E. it had spread to many parts of India, specially to the northern region. The movement drew to a close around the 17<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The Bhakti period was preceded by the Vedic period and the classical epics period. Bhakti was born in medieval India, as an outcry against the caste system.

The Nyayavaishvika and Carvaka traditions in Indian philosophy can also be seen as counterpublic movements because they challenged the idea of metaphysical wisdom as elaborated in the Vedas. So these schools of thought served the function of religious theology but also the social function of philosophy.

Of course in this case, the counterpublics did not focus on identity as much as they did on the access to divinity. But one thing which is clear is that a counterpublic space is against dominant norms and can be seen as a response. Bhakti movement challenged accepted notions of identity in the sense that it articulated the need for a different social world of caste. Since religious practice is a collective, there is always space for conflict and appropriation. Hence, there was always space for a new theological movement in the Indian philosophical domain, which upset traditional notions of hegemony.

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As compared to the secular tenets of Bhakti, Vedic religion had focused on priesthood being the most important aspect. The priests were elite and had access to god. In Bhakti, the space opened up to householders as well. Bhakti movement was against formalism of any sort and its principles focused on spiritual awakening and equality of caste, creed and gender. Novetzke writes that the phenomenon of Bhakti changed the notion of 'publics' and concludes that;

“Unifying the myriad forms that bhakti has historically taken and continues to take is the idea of a public, which I think of as a social unit created through shared cultural phenomena and reinforced by demonstrations in public of these shared cultural phenomena.” (12)

Though Bhakti began as a social movement, gradually orthodoxy did set in and mar the same notions that it sought to uphold. It became orthodox in the sense that it gained a lot of mass momentum and did not remain a different way of religious expression anymore. Bhakti started out as a protest against the regimented Vedic religion but as its popularity increased, patrons began to be found in the royal families and amongst the elite as well. In South India, Bhakti reached the zenith of popularity and made God accessible to all. But gradually it began to be assimilated in mainstream religion. Conventional Brahmanical religion brought it into its fold. The historical process by which this assimilation happened is not in a continuous, clear frame and rather complex. Nevertheless, Bhakti movement allowed for a discursive space which changed religious theology as well as the meaning of public. Novetzke's argument can apply in the context of Bhakti here. He writes that “a public enables reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity.” (15) Thus Bhakti became a medium for larger public participation as well.

Carvaka is one such movement which changed the idea of worship. Carvaka was known for belief in the body and the physical world, and materialism, as opposed to the idea of the cosmic outlined by Vedic religion. It was a tradition of spontaneity and also known as Lokayata, which made it open to the masses. It was the tradition of commonsense which gave an access to divinity to all. Like the Bhakti movement, it was an encounter with the Vedic religion. Carvaka proved that the idea of knowledge was practical and physical. Like the bhakti movement, it was a movement of social protest but it did so more on the intellectual front, as it gave new ideas on wisdom and divinity. As Ramakrishna Bhattacharya points out;

“In short, the Cârâvâka system appeared in the Indian philosophical scene as materialismus militans, strongly objecting to and opposing all religious dogmas (not just Vedism but Buddhism and Jainism as well). Its epistemology was fashioned to match its ontology, which consisted of a series of negations. The insistence on empirical verification is the hallmark of this system. In fact one has a feeling that the Cârâvâkas first provided the epistemology to the ontology already current in India at least from the Buddha's time, when Ajita Kesakambala had come out with his proto--materialistic ideas...So, when the Cârâvâkas denied the status of inference as an independent means of knowledge, they ipso facto did not reject all kinds of inference but accepted only such inference as was found true in everyday practice (lokavyavahâra). Thus, in the Cârâvâka conception perception includes both what is sensually apprehended and inference based on such apprehension. Only such inferences as derived from the scripture, Veda and Sm[iti, are not admitted.”

Carvaka changed things in the field of metaphysical speculation, while Bhakti created new spaces for caste, creed and gender. Along with Carvaka/Lokayata, there have been many schools of thought which have opened up new spaces in terms of theology and philosophy. This merely proves that tradition is dynamic and cannot be stratified or regimentalized. Thus tradition becomes open-ended when it comes into contact with a force like Bhakti. Ideas about perception of God and divinity take up new

meanings. This proves that Indian theology is pluralistic as there is an appropriation and amalgamation always in progress. Bhakti differed from other heterogeneous movements in the sense that it did not really jostle with ideas on the intellectual and metaphysical front but brought religion to the domain of the public.

As I have also mentioned earlier, Bhakti movement had many similarities with another such movement which was radical in a sense. This movement was Sufism which focused on mysticism. Both Bhakti and Sufism focused on socio-religious reforms and changes and ushered in a new sense of identity for their followers. While Bhakti saints went against the orthodoxy of the Vedic religion, Sufi mystics did not follow the orthodox rules that Islamic clerics had laid down. The Sufi saint was known as a Pir and like the Guru in Bhakti, he too emphasized on true knowledge. True knowledge could be sought by self-awareness and by becoming one with the infinite and mysterious universe.

In this movement which metamorphosized medieval India, both the religions of Islam and Hinduism came together for a synthesis. This was a counterpublic movement in the truest sense because of this amalgamation. Sufi mysticism was born out of Islam and Hinduism gave rise to the bhakts. In a sense, deep contemplation about the mysteries of the universe could be achieved through Bhakti or devotion to God. The vedas held deep meaning too, but the orthodoxy of religion had not grasped its true meaning. Bhakti opened up new meanings and everyone could interpret religion his/ her own way. Although Bhakti movement and Sufism differed in many ways, the teachings had a lot in common. Both advocated a search for true knowledge which could be achieved by opening your heart up to God.

For the Bhakti saints, rituals were not a part of religion. Bhakti saints believed in one deity who was omnipresent. He could be seen in many forms, but the Bhakti movement did not encourage polytheism. This was an important part of the Vedic religion, where there was a pantheon of deities and they could manifest themselves into local deities as well. In this way, Hinduism tried to incorporate tribal deities into its wake. Bhakti believed in socio-cultural transformation, hence it ushered in new ideas. Religious pilgrimages were not important as the supreme Beloved or God resided in one's heart. A couplet by Kabir points to the same.

“When I was, then Hari (God) was not, Now Hari is and I am not/ All the darkness dissolved, when I saw the light within.”<sup>1</sup>

“Most of the Bhakti and Sufi saints had one ultimate goal, realisation of God for the individual. Bhakti gurus and Sufi pirs had a strong dislike of ‘blind faith’ in sacred scriptures, and did not believe in the discriminatory restrictions of caste and creed. For both, rituals and ceremonies were not important, rather the individual's relationship with the True Master (gurus and pirs) who could give them the right Knowledge to realize God through their personal devotion to Him.”<sup>2</sup>

Both movements were against materialism and illusions and became very powerful as their tenets and messages got accepted. In a sense, the meaning of enlightenment remained like the one followed by Buddhism. Oneness with the divine ensured enlightenment and this could be achieved through self-awareness. In one of her couplets, Mirabai writes as well;

“We do not get a human life, Just for the asking./ Birth in a human body, Is the reward for good deeds/ In former births./ Life waxes and wanes imperceptibly,/ It does not stay long. The leaf that has once fallen/ Does not return to the branch.”

Behold the Ocean of Transmigration, with its swift, irresistible tide.”<sup>3</sup> This couplet is filled with an acute awareness of life and that is what makes it poignant. While Mira worships Krishna, there were many other Bhakts who worshipped different Gods. Bhakti movement was myriad and had many forms – Rama Bhakti, Vaishnava Bhakti and Saiva Siddhanta, each of which worshipped Rama, Vishnu and

Shiva respectively. Bhakti and these sects have survived in the contemporary world as well because of the far-reaching impact of its teachings.

As Novetzke points out, Bhakti reached the personal realm by first interacting with the socio-religious domain. He also attributes to Bhakti a performative aspect, as it is an act of devotion and in doing so, he uses the metaphor of a river.

“The river is an apt metaphor for the public, as much as it is for bhakti and religious expression itself. Indeed, despite Sankara’s usage, we also find in Sanskrit an impressive series of texts that associate bhakti with public performance. In treatises on aesthetics, and especially in texts attributed to Abhinavagupta in the early eleventh century, the nature of bhakti as affect is debated. Bhakti in this context is beyond rasa, beyond the “flavor” of a performance, but is one of those key “experiences,” or bhavas, that a rasa might explore; all roads, as it were, may lead to bhakti, and it cannot be limited to any particular kind of affect.”

In another sense, Bhakti was a free-flowing river as it swept away institutionalization in its wake. Bhakti reached the height of its visibility and gradually got subsumed into dominant religion. Yet it managed to leave strong imprints. Bhakti differed a little from other counterpublic movements. It did stimulate change in the public sphere, but it worked more on an interior landscape. It altered a person’s perception of his or her relation to God. Since the public realm is seen as discursive anyway, Bhakti used that to its advantage. Bhakti’s aspect of personal devotion perhaps overshadowed its role as a social movement, though the balance between the two was often maintained. For a person, Bhakti in the personal realm affected his/her relation to society. For women and Sudras, Bhakti opened a new interactive atmosphere, in which they could voice their opinions. In his couplet, Kabir writes about the Bhakti path and enlightenment.

“The bhakti path winds in a delicate way./ On this path there is no asking and no not asking./ The ego simply disappears the moment you touch him./ The joy of looking for him is so immense that you just dive in, and coast around like a fish in the water./ If anyone needs a head, the lover leaps up to offer his.”<sup>4</sup>

Bhakti as a movement was massive. In its devotional wake, it gave birth to a whole new genre of Bhakti poetry, composed by many male and female bhaktas. As opposed to the Vedas, this literature was not written in Sanskrit, but in the language of the masses, so that it could have more reach. Use of vernacular language helped in the subjective experiences becoming universal. Bhakti fulfilled those socioreligious needs which had been hitherto left unfulfilled by Vedic religion. Jayant Lele terms this as the “perspective from below.”<sup>5</sup>

The Bhakti movement was pan-Indian and carried much cultural significance. Bhakti developed as a resistance against hegemonic processes. It was formed gradually in many centuries through complex historical processes. But it proved the power and visibility of counterpublics and the need for a democratic space in the socio-religious arena.

Novetzke thus sees Bhakti as a performance which is very public. This may or may not be conclusive but it does draw our attention to the various meanings of Bhakti. Bhakti can be attributed with nationalistic fervor as well; it means complete immersion in one’s object of devotion.

In many poems, the speaker addresses a wide audience, and in some of them, the addressed is the supreme beloved.

Thus, the bhakti poetry focused on experiences and was aesthetically very pleasing. It was an expression of the self, and this space was provided to the bhakt by the radical nature of this movement. Bhakti movement was thus modern in the sense that it was a criticism of the old values which had corroded religion and made it a privilege meant for a few select people. It ushered in heterogeneity in

the domain of Indian philosophy. There were various theological movements which also created a space for heterogeneity and can be seen as counterpublic like Bhakti.

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#### HINTS

<sup>1</sup>*Translation taken from* <https://aratiwpcoder.wordpress.com/2011/08/09/couplets-of-kabir-timeless-truths/> accessed 26 April 2015.

<sup>2</sup>*Quoted from* [http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10603/21133/11/11\\_chapter%205.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10603/21133/11/11_chapter%205.pdf) accessed 26 April 2015.

<sup>3</sup>*Translation from* <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/i-will-sing-the-praises-of-hari/> Accessed 26 April 2015.

<sup>4</sup>*Translation from* <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-bhakti-path/> accessed 27 April 2015.

<sup>5</sup>*Quoted from Jayant Lele's article in* *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies / Volume 46 / Issue 01 / February 1983, pp 170-170*



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