

Bhakti: The Mystica

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Abstract: *The devotional worship of God with the ultimate object of attaining moksha or salvation is called Bhakti. The cult of Bhakti is as old as the Indian religious traditions going back to the prehistoric times of the Indus valley civilization and culture. We find mention of Bhakti in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Epics and the Puranas. The most significant saints related to Bhakti Cult were Sankaracharya, Ramanuja, Ramananda, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Vallabhacharya, Mirabhai and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. The basic significance of the Bhakti saints was their partial success in creating a climate of understanding between Hindus and Muslims and providing a framework within which they could meet without synthesis. Thus, the Bhakti movement had profound significance in the religious, social, economic and cultural spheres of its contemporary times.*

Key Words: *devotional worship, Bhakti movement, Bhakti cult, lord Krishna.*

1. INTRODUCTION - BHAKTI: THE MYSTICA:

The devotional worship of God with the ultimate object of attaining moksha or salvation is called Bhakti. The word “Bhakti” comes from the root word “bhaj” which means “faith, devotion, attachment, worship or adoration to God” and also from the root word “bhaj sevayam”, which means “to serve”. Therefore, the word “bhakti” stands for affection, love or service. We find mention of Bhakti in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Epics and the Puranas.

The *Narada Bhakti Sutra*, a well-known sutra venerated within the traditions of Hinduism, starts off by defining “Bhakti” to be the form of supreme love. It states, “One who attains bhakti becomes accomplished, unafraid of death, and fulfilled. Having attained it, one doesn’t crave for anything nor grieve nor harbour hatred; one doesn’t indulge nor has the urge. Having realised this, one becomes lost in it, attains stillness within, and delights in the Self” (*Narada Bhakti Sutra*, Verse 4-6). In the Third Sutra of the *Narada Bhakti Sutra*, it is stated that, “When a person attains to the perfectional stage of love of Godhead, he becomes liberated even in his present body and realizes his constitutional position of immortality”. This view aligns closely with what earlier Hindu scriptures speak about bhakti. It is a means to attain the highest bliss - a state which is beyond material attributes and bindings.

Bhakti is so sublime that only through bhakti one can understand the constitutional position of the Lord. That is clearly stated in Chapter 18, Shloka 55 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, “One can understand the Supreme Lord through devotional service and by no other process”. There are different processes of understanding the Absolute Truth, but if a person wants to understand the Supreme Lord as He is, he has to take to the process of bhakti-yoga. There are other mystic processes, such as karma-yoga, jnana-yoga, and dhyana-yoga, but it is not possible to understand the Supreme Lord except through His devotional service. In the Sixth Chapter, Shloka 47 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Lord confirms this: “And of all yogis, the one with great faith who always abides in Me, thinks of Me within himself, and renders transcendental loving service to Me—he is the most intimately united with Me in yoga and is the highest of all. That is My opinion.” This is the highest perfectional stage, known as prema, or love of God. We find mention of Bhakti in other Hindu scriptures too.

One of the chief characteristics of Bhakti movement is the monistic belief in God. Atharva Veda (13.4, 16-21) also puts the monistic belief very clearly: “Neither second, nor third, nor yet fourth is he called; He is called neither fifth, nor sixth, nor yet seventh He is called neither eighth, nor ninth, nor yet tenth. He watcheth over creatures, all that breatheth and that breatheth not. This conquering might hath entered him. He is the sole, the simple One, the One alone. In him these Deities become simple and One.” (Griffith 124).

The cult of Bhakti is as old as the Indian religious traditions going back to the prehistoric times of the Indus valley civilization and culture. The Bhakti movement may be said to have originated in the South in the teachings of the Tamilian mystic-saints of the 7th and 9th centuries A.D. as a reaction against the growing tide of Buddhism and Jainism. It flourished in South India for about two centuries through its well-defined wings, Saivism and Vaisnavism. The exponents of Shiva worship were collectively called as Nayanars (vis the leaders) while those of Vishnu became known as Alvars. It was systematized by Ramanuja in the 12th century A.D and propagated throughout India. It was spread in the North by Ramananda who was greatly influenced by the teachings of Ramanuja.

The origin of the movement has been a subject of much academic controversy. European scholars like Weber opine that Bhakti as a means of Salvation was borrowed from Christianity. But research of its genesis discards the above possibility and rightly allows us to assess the relative effects of Hinduism, Islam and Sufism on the Bhakti Cult.

However, the impact of Islam on the rise of Bhakti cult cannot be denied. This impact, primarily to be seen in the Nirguns sect of Bhakti, was not so much metaphysical and spiritual, but at its social and organisational level. All the higher thinkers, the religious reformers, the sincere devotees among the Hindus from the earlier times, have proclaimed one and only one supreme God behind the countless deities of popular worship and have declared the equality of all true admirers and placed a simple sincere faith above religious ceremonies. So what really happened after the Muslim conquest was a re-emphasis on the essential monotheistic character of the Idea of God and the superiority of the path of devotion over ritualistic sacrifices and mere books of knowledge and wisdom.

The glory of Bhakti movement is most resplendent in the history of religion in India. The most significant saints related to Bhakti Cult were Sankaracharya (788-820), Ramanuja (1060-1137), Ramananda, Kabir (1440-1510), Guru Nanak (1469-1538), Vallabhacharya (1479-1531), Mirabai (1498-1546) and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533).

2. MIRABAI:

Mirabai was the most notable of all the Bhakti reformers from among the women. Mirabai is widely known as an incarnation of Radha, the consort of Lord Krishna. Most historians believe that Mira was born in (Vikram Samvat 1555) 1498 A.D. in village Kudaki, near Medata, a small state in Marwad, Rajasthan. Mira was the daughter of Ratan Singh Rathod and the grand-daughter of Dudaji of Medata. Mira Bai grew up amidst Vaishnava (devoted to Lord Vishnu) influence which moulded her life towards devotion for Lord Krishna. 'Mira' is a root word which stands for 'light' in Hindi, 'sea or ocean' in Sanskrit; and the Slavic element 'mir' means 'peace'.

Mira's parents died in her childhood and she was raised and nurtured by her grandfather. As customary with royal families, her education included knowledge of scriptures, music, archery, fencing, horseback riding and driving chariots. She was also trained to wield weapons in case of a war. However, Mira also grew up amidst an atmosphere of total Krishna consciousness, which was responsible in moulding her life in the path of total devotion towards Lord Krishna. When she was just four years of age, she manifested her deep devotion to Krishna. Once Mira, who was only a child, saw a ceremonially dressed bridegroom and innocently asked her mother, "Mother, who is my bridegroom?" Mira's mother pointed towards the idol of Lord Krishna and said, "My dear child, Lord Krishna is your bridegroom". Since then Mira instigated to love and worship the idol of Lord Krishna. She also changed the clothes of the idol, talked and slept with the idol, sang and danced about the image of Krishna in ecstasy.

Mira's father arranged for her marriage with Rana Kumbha of Chitore, in Mewar. She was a devoted wife, and she went to the temple of Sri Krishna to worship, sing and dance before the image of Krishna regularly but unfortunately her husband died after a couple of years. After her husband's demise, her in-laws forced her to perform Sati (self-immolation that was practiced by all Hindu widows). Mirabai used to coalesce with people of all social classes and castes. Then, she used to sing and dance in the public temples. Because of this reason, she had to face very grave consequences. Her in-laws were furious. Rana's relatives began persecuting Mira in various ways, even though Mira had no desire for the throne. Mira was sent a basket with a cobra inside and a message that the basket contained a garland of flowers. Mira opened the basket after remembering Krishna and found inside a divine idol of Krishna. After this incident, the ruthless Rana (Mira's brother-in-law) sent a cup of poison for her with the message that it was nectar. Mira presented it to her Krishna and took it as His prasada. It was real nectar to her. The bed of nails that Rana sent for Mira was transformed into a bed of roses when Mira laid on it.

Mira was badly tortured by her in-laws; she then sent a letter to Tulsidas ji and asked for the saint's advice. She wrote thus: "All my relatives trouble me, because I move amongst Sadhus. I cannot carry on my devotional practices in the house. I have made Giridhar Gopal my friend from my very childhood. I am strongly attached to Him. I cannot break that attachment now".

Tulsidasji sent a reply: "Abandon those who do not worship Rama and Sita as if they are your enemies, even though they are your dearest relatives. Prahlad abandoned his father; Vibhishana left his brother Ravana; Bharata deserted his mother; Bali forsook even his Guru; the Gopis, the women of Vraja, disowned their husbands in order to attain the Lord. Their lives were all the happier for having done so. The opinion of holy saints is that the relation with God and love of God alone is true and eternal; all other relationships are unreal and temporary" (*Mira Bai* by Sri Swami Sivananda).

Once Akbar and his court musician Tansen came in disguise to Chittor to hear Mira's devotional songs and it brought the turning point in Mira's life. Before departing, they both touched the holy feet of Mira and placed a necklace of precious gems in front of the idol as a present. Someway, Rana got the news that that Akbar had visited the sacred temple in disguise, touched the holy feet of Mira and even presented her a necklace. On hearing this, Rana became furious. He told Mira to drown herself in the river and not to show her face to anyone as she has brought great dishonour to the family.

Mirabai followed the words of Rana and headed towards the river to drown herself, chanting Govind, Hari, Giridhari, Gopal and singing and dancing in ecstasy on her way to the river. When she raised up her feet from the ground to jump, a hand from behind grasped her and embraced her. She turned behind and saw her beloved Giridhari. Lord Krishna smiled and Mira fainted on him.

Mira walked barefoot on the hot sandy beds of Rajasthan. On her way, many ladies, children and devotees received her with great hospitality. She reached Brindavan (or Vrindaban). It was at Brindavan that she again met and was inspired by Sant Ravidas. She stayed in Brindavan, worshipped in the Govinda temple which has since become famous and is now a great place of pilgrimage for devotees from all over the world.

Mira's worldly life was full very difficult and troublesome. She was ill-treated, tortured, tormented and yet she had an undaunted spirit and unshakeable faith all through, by the power of her faith, devotion and the grace of her beloved Sri Krishna. Though she was a princess, she begged alms and lived sometimes on water alone. She led a life of perfect renunciation and self-surrender.

She taught the world the way to love God. She rowed her boat dexterously in a stormy sea of family troubles and difficulties and reached the shore of supreme peace—the kingdom of love. Her lyrics infuse faith, courage, devotion and love of God. Her bhajans still act as a soothing balm to the wounded hearts and tired nerves.

Mira left Mewar and went on pilgrimages. In the last years of her life, Mira resided in Dwarka, Vrindavan, and it is believed that she miraculously disappeared by merging into an idol of Lord Krishna in 1547. While miracles are questioned by scholars for the dearth of historical evidence, it is widely accepted that Mira dedicated her life to Hindu god Krishna, composing songs of devotion. She was one of the most significant poet-saint of the Bhakti movement.

Mira's poems display her spiritual intensity springing from poetic inspiration, sublimity of thought and sublimity of expression outstandingly linked with each other. For example, "jaha baithave tithi baitu, baiche toh bik jau. Mira ke prabhu giridhar nagar, baar baar bali jaun". Most of her poems available are in Western Rajasthani - the dialect spoken in the area where she originally lived but there are some traces of Braj Bhasha, Gujarati, Rajasthani and Punjabi in some of her poems as she had spent some time in Vrindaban and Gujarat also. She accompanied sadhus of various places; so she may have borrowed some words and sentences from their languages. The main themes in Mira's poems are love, mysticism, a voice of social equality, perpetual bliss, freedom and revolution. Mira's songs instil unshakeable faith, courage, strong devotion and love of God in the hearts of the readers.

"Koi roke nahi, koi toke nahi

Meera govinda gopal-e ganne lagi

Baithi santan ke sang, rangi mohan ke rang

Meera premi pritam ko manane lagi"

Her songs inspire the aspirants to take to the path of devotion and they produce in them a marvellous thrill and a melting of the heart.

"Paayoji maine ram ratan dhan paayo

Janam janam ki punji paayi,

Jag me sabhi khovaayo,

Paayoji maine ram ratan dhan paayo"

3. CONCLUSION:

The brief assessment of this paper divulges the religious apprehensions and life sketch of Mira Bai had been depicted and her impact in the socio-religion actions of the time. Bhakti Movement had shaken the social structure and challenged the privileges and authority of the custodians of religion and therefore was trying to establish direct relation between God and beings. Mirabhai followed vaishnavite Bhakti cult and was great devotee of Krishna ignored gender, class, caste and religious boundaries. Her contribution to the Bhakti movement was primarily in her music as she composed hundreds of songs and commenced a mode of singing the songs, a raga. She rejected the classical language Sanskrit and wrote in local languages like in "Rajasthani" and "Brajbhasha" and thus promoted the native dialects. Merabai songs express her affection and devoutness to Krishna as her songs speak of both the joy and pain of love. Metaphorically, she points to the longings of the personal self, *atman*, to be one with the universal self of *paramatma*, which is the poet's representation of Krishna. Mirabai's imperative character in the Bhakti movement stressed ecstatic devotion and excluded traditional division with resisted feminine stereotype is noteworthy. The religious methodology of Mirabhai an enduring symbol of a liberated woman with complete surrender to the Lord Krishna exerting religious actions, approaches and common framework of worship had been portrayed with strong belief for religious advocacy.

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