

HISTORY CHAPTER-8

CLASS-7

DEVOTIONAL PATHS TO THE DIVINE

The Idea of a Supreme God

- The idea that all living things pass through countless cycles of birth and rebirth performing good deeds and bad came to be widely accepted.
- Many people were uneasy with such ideas and turned to the teachings of the Buddha or the Jainas according to which it was possible to overcome social differences and break the cycle of rebirth through personal effort.
- Others felt attracted to the idea of a Supreme God who could deliver humans from such bondage if approached with devotion (or bhakti). This idea, advocated in the Bhagavadgita, grew in popularity in the early centuries of the Common Era.

The Idea of a Supreme God

- Shiva, Vishnu and Durga as supreme deities came to be worshipped through elaborate rituals.
- In the process, local myths and legends became a part of the Puranic stories, and methods of worship recommended in the Puranas were introduced into the local cults.
- Eventually the Puranas also laid down that it was possible for devotees to receive the grace of God regardless of their caste status.
- The idea of bhakti became so popular that even Buddhists and Jainas adopted these beliefs.

A New Kind of Bhakti in South India

– Nayanars and Alvars

- The seventh to ninth centuries saw the emergence of new religious movements, led by the Nayanars (saints devoted to Shiva) and Alvars (saints devoted to Vishnu) who came from all castes including those considered “untouchable” like the Pulaiyar and the Panars.
- The Nayanars and Alvars went from place to place composing exquisite poems in praise of the deities enshrined in the villages they visited, and set them to music.
- Between the tenth and twelfth centuries the Chola and Pandya kings built elaborate temples around many of the shrines visited by the saint-poets, strengthening the links between the bhakti tradition and temple worship.

Philosophy and Bhakti

- Shankara, one of the most influential philosophers of India, was born in Kerala in the eighth century. He was an advocate of Advaita or the doctrine of the oneness of the individual soul and the Supreme God which is the Ultimate Reality.
- Ramanuja, born in Tamil Nadu in the eleventh century, was deeply influenced by the Alvars. According to him the best means of attaining salvation was through intense devotion to Vishnu.
- He propounded the doctrine of Vishishtadvaita or qualified oneness in that the soul even when united with the Supreme God remained distinct.

Basavanna's Virashaivism

- Virashaiva movement initiated by Basavanna and his companions like Allama Prabhu and Akkamahadevi.
- This movement began in Karnataka in the mid-twelfth century.
- The Virashaivas argued strongly for the equality of all human beings and against Brahmanical ideas about caste and the treatment of women.
- They were also against all forms of ritual and idol worship.

The Saints of Maharashtra

- The most important among them were Janeshwar, Namdev, Eknath and Tukaram as well as women like Sakkubai and the family of Chokhamela, who belonged to the “untouchable” Mahar caste.
- This regional tradition of bhakti focused on the Vitthala (a form of Vishnu) temple in Pandharpur, as well as on the notion of a personal god residing in the hearts of all people.

The Saints of Maharashtra

- These saint-poets rejected all forms of ritualism, outward display of piety and social differences based on birth.
- In fact they even rejected the idea of renunciation and preferred to live with their families, earning their livelihood like any other person, while humbly serving fellow human beings in need.
- A new humanist idea emerged as they insisted that bhakti lay in sharing others' pain. As the famous Gujarati saint Narsi Mehta said, "They are Vaishnavas who understand the pain of others."

Nathpanthis, Siddhas and Yogis

- They advocated renunciation of the world. To them the path to salvation lay in meditation on the formless Ultimate Reality and the realisation of oneness with it.
- To achieve this they advocated intense training of the mind and body through practices like yogasanas, breathing exercises and meditation.
- These groups became particularly popular among “low” castes. Their criticism of conventional religion.

Islam and Sufism

- The saints had much in common with the Sufis, so much so that it is believed that they adopted many ideas of each other. Sufis were Muslim mystics.
- They rejected outward religiosity and emphasised love and devotion to God and compassion towards all fellow human beings.
- Islam propagated strict monotheism or submission to one God. It also rejected idol worship and considerably simplified rituals of worship into collective prayers.
- At the same time Muslim scholars developed a holy law called Shariat. The Sufis often rejected the elaborate rituals and codes of behaviour demanded by Muslim religious scholars.

Islam and Sufism

- The Chishti silsila was among the most influential orders. It had along line of teachers like Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti of Ajmer, Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki of Delhi, Baba Farid of Punjab, Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya.
- Devotees of alldescriptions including members of the royalty and nobility, and ordinary people flocked to the khanqahs.
- Often people attributed Sufi masters with miraculous powers that could relieve others of their illnesses and troubles. The tomb or dargah of a Sufi saint became a place of pilgrimage to which thousands of people of all faiths thronged.

New Religious Developments in North India

- We saw that new towns (Chapter 6) and kingdoms (Chapters 2, 3 and 4) were emerging, and people were taking up new professions and finding new roles for themselves. Such people, especially craftspersons, peasants, traders and labourers, thronged to listen to these new saints and spread their ideas.
- Some of them like Kabir and Baba Guru Nanak rejected all orthodox religions. Others like Tulsidas and Surdas accepted existing beliefs and practices but wanted to make these accessible to all. Tulsidas conceived of God in the form of Rama.

New Religious Developments in North India

- Tulsidas's composition, compiled in the Sursagara, Surasaravali and Sahitya Lahari, express his devotion.
- This tradition also included saints like Dadu Dayal, Ravidas and Mirabai. Mirabai was a Rajput princess married into the royal family of Mewar in the sixteenth century. Mirabai became a disciple of Ravidas, a saint from a caste considered "untouchable".
- A unique feature of most of the saints is that their works were composed in regional languages and could be sung. They became immensely popular and were handed down orally from generation to generation.

A Closer Look: Kabir

- Kabir, who probably lived in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, was one of the most influential saints. He was brought up in a family of Muslim julahas or weavers settled in or near the city of Benares (Varanasi).
- We have little reliable information about his life. We get to know of his ideas from a vast collection of verses called sakhis and pads said to have been composed by him and sung by wandering bhajan singers.
- Some of these were later collected and preserved in the Guru Granth Sahib, Panch Vani and Bijak.

A Closer Look: Baba Guru Nanak

- Irrespective of their former creed, caste or gender, his followers ate together in the common kitchen(langar).
- The sacred space thus created by Guru Nanak was known as dharmsal. It is now known as Gurdwara.
- Before his death in 1539, Guru Nanak appointed one of his followers as his successor. His name was Lehna but he came to be known as Guru Angad.
- The number of Guru Nanak's followers increased through the sixteenth century under his successors.

A Closer Look: Baba Guru Nanak

- He emphasized the importance of the worship of one God. He insisted that caste, creed or gender was irrelevant for attaining liberation.
- He himself used the terms nam, dan and isnan for the essence of his teaching, which actually meant right worship, welfare of others and purity of conduct.
- His teachings are now remembered as nam-japna, kirt-karna and vand-chhakna, which also underline the importance of right belief and worship, honest living, and helping others. Thus, Guru Nanak's idea of equality had social and political implications.

Thank you