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## THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT: CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

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### Abstract

The Hindu religion has a long growth and is separated into many pieces. It includes the Vedic Period, the Epic and Classical Period, the Medieval Period etc. But above all, the important aspect is Bhakti Movement. In this Movement, many male and female Bhakti poets like Meerabai, Guru Nanak, Namdev, Kabir etc merged to shine Indian Hindu culture and tradition. The Bhakti Movement is basically related to Bhakti which is divided into Nirgun and Sagun Bhakti. Moreover it talks about Meerabai who loves Krishna the Almighty unconditionally. It also talks basically about the ancient Indian culture and Hinduism. All the Male and female Poets put emphasis on devotional aspects of the life which is capable to enlighten the soul. And this pure soul is equivalent to God and that's why the soul speaks 'अहम् ब्रह्मा अस्मि'.

### Key-Words

Hindu religion, Bhakt Poets, Ved, Puranas, Moksha, Sufi Movement, Bhakti Movement.

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## **THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT: CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW**

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The Hindu tradition has commonly been separated into a number of important historical and religious periods through its long growth. The formative time period is highlighted by what are known as the holy texts, the Vedas, and a wandering people known as the Indo-Aryans; this period is classified as the Vedic Period. Central to the Vedas was the visionary figure of the rishi, or seer, one who was able to communicate with and about the various gods of the Vedic pantheon through a complex system of rituals that could only be performed by an progressively more powerful priesthood. Freedom was to be found through the precise performance of ritual.

The Epic and Classical Periods, from 400 BCE–600 CE are so given surnamed because of their focus on important texts, namely, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. These epics are concerned with heroes and heroic deeds, kings, queens, and ideal roles of individuals. Also of central importance to this time frame were Law Books concerned with the ideal nature of society.

Social order and stability were to be found in a hierarchical ordering of people over and above specific roles assigned to each individual's life stage (ashrama) and position in society (varna) or caste. On the upper step of this system was the Brahmin priesthood, followed by Kshatriyas (warriors) and Vaishyas (merchants), also known as two time-born classes. Only these groups were allowed to take part in a commencement ceremony known as the 'sacred thread', study the Vedas, and take part in Vedic rituals. Under these three groups were the Shudras, those were servants to the upper three Classes. Bottom this step came another subsection, the Untouchables, whose occupations were too polluting to succeed to fit within a controlled society. The way to liberation from rebirth or moksha was

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in a true understanding of religion, recognition and maintenance of the good of the social order, as exemplified and regulated by the Epics and Law Books.

In the medieval period, the Bhakti Movement was a very important aspect. This was due in part to the rise of a new line of kings, the Gupta lineage that supported the pantheon of gods through devotion of divine idols and also included the construction of temples and sustain for devotional groups. Together with these developments came a flourishing of mythical compositions about the gods, known as the Puranas, or, ancient stories. Central to this pantheon were the gods Vishnu, the cosmic king, and Shiva, the great yogi and ascetic known by many names, and his female counterpart, Shakti, or divine energy. Shakti was worshipped both as wife and wife of Shiva, but also in her own right as the Great Goddess in a variety of incarnations. Most Hindus, today, recognize themselves with the worship of one of these gods. Devotees of Vishnu in his many forms—known as avatars, Krishna and Rama being the most popular Avtaars—are called Vaishnavites. Those worshipping Shiva are known as Shaivites, whereas followers of the feminine divine are Shaktas. Devotees within each thread focus on their god or goddess as Ultimate Reality, thus having a clearly monotheistic outlook, while at the same time acknowledging that the Divine takes many forms for the advantage of humanity. The term Bhakti is defined as -devotion, or passionate love for the Divine. Moksha, or liberation from rebirth, was not in the following of rules, regulations or communal ordering; it was through by simple devotion to the Divine. Within the movement at large, useful distinctions have been made by present-day scholars between those saint-poets who composed verses extolling God with attributes or form, namely, 'saguna' bhaktas, and, those extolling God without and beyond all attributes or form, 'nirguna.' While the differences between these two branches are really important, their overarching similarities cannot be minimized; both focused on singular devotion, spiritual love for God, and had a particular focus on a personal correlation with the God. Given their faith in the centrality of personal devotion, poet-saints were highly critical of ritual observances as maintained and brought up by the Brahmins. For many, their criticism also included the caste system that supported the traditional religious chain, with Brahmins at the top of this hierarchy. Many saint-poets, particularly as the movement proceeded northward, were themselves of lower caste lineages. Another commonality was their usage of the dialect, or regional languages of the people, as different from the sacred language of the cream priesthood, Sanskrit. This practice, also, stemmed from the movement's focus on internal, mystical, and highly personal devotion to the Divine. Seminal Bhakti works in Bengali comprise the many songs of Ramprasad Sen. His pieces are identified as Shyama Sangeet. Coming from the seventeenth century, they cover an amazing range of emotional responses to Ma Kali, detailing philosophical statements based on Vedanta tradition and more intuitive pronouncements of his lovefor Devi. Using inventive metaphor, Ramprasad had 'dialogues' with the Mother Goddess throughout his poetry, at

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times chiding her, loving her, celebrating her as the Divine Mother, hasty consort of Shiva and capricious Shakti, the universal female creative energy, of the universe. Bhakti movement spawned into several different movements all across North and South India.

Bhakti movement is nevertheless not differentiable by a Sufi movement of Shia Muslims of Chisti fame, In North India. People of Muslim faith adopted it as a Sufis while Hindus as Vaisanava Bhakti. Sufi saints of Chisti order produced first punjabi sufi saint named Baba Sheikh Farid Shakarganj, who paved the way for the punjabi nationalism as well as brought peace among Hindus and Muslims. In the north the sect was basically Vaisnava-based, but in its place of being focused on Visnu, it chose to focus itself on Vishnu's human incarnations, Rama and Krishna, the respective avatars or deities central to the two epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. For bhakti now Visnu's manifestations -Rama and Krishna- were the direct substance of devotion. Adoration of the devotees was focused on them relating with their respective companions: Sita with Rama; and Rukmini, his marital wife, or Radha, his Gopika companion, with Krishna. Images of these deities and their consorts set up in temples where worshipped. Fowler opines that the pathway of bhakti was not directly reachable to the lower castes; for them the path of prapatti - unquestioned self-surrender- was given. Singing of Bhajans and dancing created an important part of this adoration. The dancers were female slaves of the deity within the temple, but nagar-badhus outside. Apart from being tremendously ritualistic, the worship likely to be deeply emotional. Followers of Bhakti movement in 12th and 13th Century included the saints such as Bhagat Namdev, and Saint Kabir Das who insisted on the devotional singing of praises of God through their own compositions.

As the Bhakti movement was started before Guru Nanak, many historians have implied that Sikhism as started by Guru Nanak was nothing more than a Bhakti movement of Punjab. This is wrong in toto and is in opposition to the basic Sikh virtues of equality of human beings and worship of single God. There is no doubt that Sikh Gurus accepted the singing of devotional songs in praise of lord from Bhakti but there is a huge difference between Bhakti, sufiism and Sikhism. Although Sufi and Bhakti saints are valued and recognized by Guru Granth Sahib but they do not form the main basis of Sikhism. Sikhism highlights on equality of male and female, good work ethic and as well as leading a good moral married life, which is Maya according to many Bhakti and sufi saints. Therefore, although Sikhs revere saints such as Bhagat Namdev, Bhagat Kabir and Sheikh Farid, but the ultimate Guru of a Sikh is the Guru Granth Sahib which includes about ten percent of the verses of these Saints. Female poet-saints also played a major role in the Bhakti Movement in general. However, many of these women had to struggle for acceptance within the largely patriarchal movement. Only through demonstrations of their absolute devotion to the Divine, their marvelous poetry, and immovable insistence of their spiritual equality with their contemporaries were these women unwillingly accepted within their

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ranks. Their struggle attests to the strength of patriarchal values within both society and within religious and social movements attempting to pave the way for more democratic entrée to the Divine. The descriptions of Bhakti poetry is grounded in the everyday, recognizable language of ordinary people. Female bhaktas wrote of the obstacles of home, family bothering, the absent husband, meaningless household chores, and limits of married life, including their status as married women. In many cases, they rejected traditional women's roles and societal norms by leaving husbands and homes in total, choosing to become nomadic bhaktas; in some instances they formed communities with other saint-poets. Their new focus was utter devotion and worship of their Divine Husbands. While it is attractive to see women's participation within the Bhakti movement as a rebellion against the patriarchal norms of the time, there is little proof to support this perspective. Injustices and the patriarchal order itself were not a chief focus of these poet-saints. Women bhaktas were simply individuals trying to lead lives of devotion. Staying largely within the man dominated ideology that upheld the pure and dutiful wife as ideal, these women transferred the object of their devotion and their duties as the 'lovers' or 'wives' to their Divine or Husband. Nevertheless, their poetry became an integral aspect of the Bhakti movement at large is highly noteworthy and inspirational for many who look to these strange women as ideal examples of lives under the influence by love for the Divine.

Further, it would appear that with the movement's northward advancement its radical edge as it pertained to women's inclusion was tempered. Greater numbers of women took part in the movement's earlier progress -sixth to thirteenth centuries; it is largely male bhaktas and saints that are today perceived as the spokespersons for the movement in its later manifestations. The poetry of women bhaktas from this final time period is generally not indicative of a refusal of societal norms in terms of leaving family and homes in chase of divine love. Instead, some of the later poetsaints stayed within the confines of the household while clarifying on their souls' journeys, their eternal love for the God, as well as their continuing search for truth.

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