



THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT AND THE STATUS OF “WOMEN” IN THE FOURTEENTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURY

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The fourteenth and the fifteenth century witnessed significant socioeconomic changes giving rise to new social group which could not fit in the traditional hierarchy. The newly emerging social in an attempt to redefine their position and the status within the given traditional hierarchy spearheaded a social movement articulating their demands for restructuring the existing order.

An analysis of the bhakti movement raise important question in relation to our major proposition. What are the aims and ideologies of this movement. What was the politico-socioeconomic background which shaped the ideology of these saint poets? How did they perceive women? Were they successful in bringing out women from the oppressive social structure? Did they provide an alternative life style for women? It will become evident through our paper that despite the radical tone of this movement, it almost completely ignored women. On the contrary it tended to reinforce and reiterate already existing notions of women, family and their roles.

The word Bhakti was first used by H.H. Wilson to denote the Krishna Bhakti of the Vaishnavas of Bengal. It was George Grierson who developed the idea that Bhakti is a religion, cult and doctrine. Most of these theories which Indian historians also accepted, tried to explain God in abstract and impersonal terms. However, Bhakti indicates a bhava or feeling and can be used in both religious and secular context. The medieval period saw both sargun and Nirgun Bhakti.

Earlier the Bhakti movement was treated chiefly as a literary movement or at best an ideological phenomena which had religion at the basis of its inspiration. This has mainly happened due to lack of emphasis on social history and hence the socioeconomic factors which aimed at bringing in a change have been generally ignored.

The Bhakti movement was a product of a transitional society when a number of changes were taking place in the society on the political, economic and social front. Since there is a close relationship between sociopolitical and economic trends and the religious activity, the bhakti movement cannot be seen in isolation. Therefore, it becomes necessary to see the historical transition witnessed in fourteenth and fifteenth century India.

On the economic front the Delhi sultanate witnessed a number of changes. It definitely created an economic organization considerably superior to the previous one. In its earlier phase it had released social forces which had led to the expansion of towns and alternations in agrarian relations. By the beginning of the fourteenth century there was a considerable growth in these towns and expansions in craft production and commerce. All this had occurred due to a numbers of changes in the various crafts as a result of improvement in technology. This can be seen in sericulture, carpet weaving on the vertical loon, introduction of spinning wheel (charkha) in the cotton textile sector, the Persian wheel in irrigation, the introduction of paper, the appearance of the magnetic compass as an aid to navigations and the invention of accurate time-keeping devices for the regulation of economic activity. The increase in commerce can be seen in the increase of coinage as a result of the transfer of stored silver and gold into minted money. There is also seen an increase in the slave market , to provide artisans conversant with the new techniques and cheap labour for the various crafts. Therefore on the economic front the increase in craft production and commerce had created unstable conditions for the artisan and merchant classes.

The Bhakti movement was a product of this society and its ideology served a purpose. Its saints were not idle philosophers or arm-chair reformers. They mostly come from lower sections of society and worked for their living. Thought Meera ,Tulsidas, Gnandev and Chaitanya come

from the upper class , Kabir , Nanak, Ravidas, Dadu, Namdev and Tukaram were basically from the trading and artisan communities. They narrated their philosophy in local dialects in lyrical forms. They were aware that books on religion were written in Sanskrit and women as well as shudras were not permitted to read them and thus they were debarred from access to religious knowledge. The readings of the various hymns and songs composed by the Bhaktas give us a clear glimpse into their social aims and objectives. The saints were trying to make a readjustment among the Hindus and Muslims for the creation of a harmonious society.

By enrolling a large number of traders and craftsmen into its rank and file, the Bhakti movement was making them conscious of their position and the need for democratizing the religious and social structure of the society. There was to be no privileged class at the top dominating over the vast majority of the silent, submissive believers. The Preaching's of many of these saints and devotional songs gave a real shape to the concept of an egalitarian society. They played an important role in awakening the Hindu consciousness on the necessity of reforming the existing religion. Religion is but a part of the social milieu and has to be assessed on the basis of needs of the society at a particular point in time. The creation of a casteless, creedless, classless society was the need of the time and hence a clamour for a change.

It has become evident from our above discussion that the fourteenth and fifteenth century was a period of transition. Transformations in the socioeconomic spheres had spearheaded a social movement which articulated demands for restructuring the existing order. However , an analysis of the perception of women by the Bhakti poets clearly highlights the fact that ideological and cultural changes did not include 'women' under its purview. In fact there was every attempt at maintaining the status quo.

Though these saints were clamoring for various reforms and changes _ women were not to be a party to this change. This was in complete Contrast to a number if women Bhaktas who were getting the liberty of self- expression for the first time, through their poetry and hence were daring enough to lead a non - traditional,nonconformist lives. Some of the prominent ones were Dayabai and Sahaiobai the disciple of Charandas in Northern India, Laleswhari in Kashmir

,Sahajobai and Bihanabai in Maharashtra, Ganga bhi, Gouribai, and Rambai in Gujarat , Meera Bai in Rajasthan, AKK Mahadevi in Karnataka and Godamma in Tamil Nadu.

Nanak is all praise for woman. In fact he stands out as the lone crusader , in the total denunciation of woman by the male Bhaktas .

It is by woman that we are conceived and it is from her that we are betrothed and married.

It is a woman we befriend and it is she who keeps the race going

when one woman dies another is sought for

and it is with her that we got established in society

why call her evil from whom are born kings and great men.

Except for him the dominant discourse of the bhakti movement, especially the nirgumsant, look down upon women. They could not rise up above the age old prejudice of regarding women as a barrier to the path of salvation. Though Surdas is all praise for Yasodha and Devaki and their love for Krishna, to him, a woman is worse than a poisonous snake and one has to beware of their poison. Once she entraps a man it is difficult to be free .

Dadu Dayal says a woman is but the enemy of man and man is the enemy of woman and in the end nothing will be left. Even while Tulsidas is all praise for Parvati and Sita he does not forget to remind us that a drum, an imbecile, a sudra, animals and a woman are all of one category, fit only to be beaten. Kabir also remarks that woman is the dustbin of hell and the leftovers of the world. To him, it is the desire of a woman's heart that she should finish all men and then remain alone . The Bhaktas considered woman to be a temptress who would surely lure man from the righteous path.

The only duty of a woman was to serve her husband through the institution of marriage. Surdas eulogized the devoted wife saying 'just as a woman finds fulfillment at the feet of her husband, I get fulfillment at God's feet. Keshavdas says clearly that a woman should not leave her husband even if he is disabled, dumb, mad, lame, blind and deaf. the only duty of a woman is to serve her husband for all else has no purpose. To Dadu Dayal, a woman is to be kept at

home only when she serves her husband. forTulsidas also, the only religion which a woman has is to serve and obey her husband with mind, body and soul.

That the dominant discourse of the Bhakti movement, should refer to the woman in derogatory terms should not comes as a surprise. They were but depicting a reality of their times. These saints were living in a patriarchal society and were themselves holding patriarchal values which considers a man superior and a women subordinate to him, her status defined in terms of her role in the family vis-a-vis the husband. A woman has no worth outside the institution of marriage through which she must serve her husband.

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It would not be out of context to point out here that the Bhakti saints of the sarguna branch were primarily associated with agriculture where women still played a pivotal role but the nirguna saints were related to the upcoming trading, tailoring, etc., where women were slowly being marginalized and the old prejudice against women, being a barrier to salvation, continued.

It cannot be denied that biological differences between the sexes are not in themselves, sufficient to limit an individual's outlook to that extent that social roles dictate. There are large variations in gender role from one time period to another in the same society. The variation in gender is therefore a creation of society and its reproduction takes place in the ideological and cultural realm. This becomes an important mechanism for the control of women and creation of inequality within a patriarchal society.

Patriarchal institutions have been with us since times immemorial and it continues to persist irrespective of any changes. In fact, it is in periods of historical transitions that ideological reinforcements of notions of gender get strengthened manifold. Transformation in socioeconomic spheres does not keep pace with ideological changes. In fact new mechanisms are fashioned to control change – more so in the case of women. The explanation for this can probably be sought in the male apprehension of female sexuality or as women seen as representatives and upholders of the morality of society and hence an attempt at control.

The Bhakti movement saint's attitude is a case in point. Though clamouring for changes and protesting vocally against the prevalent injustices in society, they conveniently left out the women, relegating her to the background and the home. She had no place in the change that was being sought. It was a change that was being defined by male parameters. Since the changing was being sought within a given structure it did not attempt at changing the power structure of society vis-à-vis man and woman. The perception of change and the need to come to terms with it were not seen as synonymous with a radical ideology in favour of a 'total change.' There were no attempts at reorganization of the social relationships within the family. Women, by and large were excluded from this, in fact there is every attempt at marginalizing women, pushing her into the domestic sphere. It is in times of transition like the bhakti movement, that patriarchal ideology seems to reinforce itself.

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