
UNIT 10 : *SUFI* SILSILAS: CHISHTIS AND SUHRAWARDIS, DOCTRINES AND PRACTICES, SOCIAL ROLES

Structure

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10.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we will discuss *sufi* movement and ideas in medieval India. After going through this unit, you would be able to learn about;

- the salient features of *Sufism*,
- its development in India during the period of Delhi Sultanate,
- the main *silsilahs* that flourished in India during the period, and
- the social role of *Sufism*.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

Sufism or *tasawwuf* is the name for various mystical tendencies and movements in Islam. It aims at establishing direct communion between God and man through personal experience of mystery which lies within Islam. Every religion gives rise to mystical tendencies in its fold at a particular stage of its evolution. In this sense, *sufism* was a natural development within Islam based on the spirit of *Quranic* piety. The *sufis* while accepting the *Shariat* did not confine their religious practice to

formal adherence and stressed cultivation of religious experience aimed at direct perception of God.

10.2 SALIENT FEATURES OF *SUFISM*

There developed a number of *sufi* orders or *silsilah* in and outside India. All these orders had their specific characteristics. However, there were a number of features which are common to all *sufi* orders Here we will discuss such features.

- i) *Sufism* as it developed in the Islamic world came to stress the importance of traversing the *sufi* path (*tariqa*) as a method of establishing direct communion with divine reality (*haqiqat*).
- ii) According to the *sufi* beliefs, the novice has to pass through a succession of "stations" or "stages"(*maqamat*) and changing psychological conditions or "states" (*hal*) to experience God.
- iii) The *sufi* path could be traversed only under the strict supervision of a spiritual director (*shaikh, pir* or *murshid*) who had himself successfully traversed it and consequently established direct communion with God.
- iv) The disciple (*murid*) progressed through the "stages" and "states" by practising such spiritual exercises as self mortification, recollection of God's name to attain concentration (*zikr*) and contemplation.
- v) The *sufi* organised impassioned musical recital (*sama*). The practice of *sama* was intended to induce a mystical state of ecstasy. However, some *sufi* orders did not approve of certain forms of *sama* and the *ulema* were particularly hostile to this practice.
- vi) Yet another feature of *sufism* is the organisation of the *sufi* into various orders (*silsilah*). Each of these *silsilah* e.g. *suhrawardi, Qadiri, Chishti*, etc., were founded by a leading figure who lent his name to it. A *silsilah* consisted of persons who had become disciples of a particular *sufi*.
- vii) The hospice (*khanqah*) was the centre of the activities of a *sufi* order. It was the place where the *pir* imparted spiritual training to his disciples. The popularity of the *khanqah* and its capacity to attract disciples depended on the reputation of the *pir*. The *khanqahs* were supported by endowment and charity.

Check Your Progress 1

1) What do you understand by *sufi siisilah*?

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2) What is the concept of *pir* and *murid* in *sufi* terminology?

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3) Write two lines on Khanqah.

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10.3 GROWTH OF *SUFISM* IN INDIA

Al Hujwiri (d. 1088 CE) was the earliest *sufi* of eminence to have settled in India. His tomb is in Lahore. He was the author of *Kashf-ul Mahjub*, a famous Qersian treatise on *Sufism*. However, various *sufi* orders were introduced in India only after the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the beginning of the 13th century. India not only provided a dew pasture ground for the propagation of *sufi* ideas but also became the new home of the *sufis* who along with many other refugees fled from those parts of the Islamic world which had been conquered by the Mongols in the thirteenth century. During the 13th and 14th centuries, *khaaqahs* sprang up in various parts of India. The *sufis* introduced various orders in India from the Islamic world, built up their own organizations and established themselves in their respective areas of influence. By the middle of the 14th century, the entire country from Multan to Bengal and from Punjab to Deogiri had come under the sphere of their activity. According to the observation of an early 14th century traveller, there were two thousand *sufi* hospices and *khanqahs* in Delhi and its neighbourhood.

Sufism in India originally stemmed from the *sufi* thought and practice as it developed in various parts of the Islamic world, especially in Iran and Central Asia. However, its subsequent development was influenced more by Indian environment than by non-Indian variants of *sufism*. Once the *sufi* orders took root in different parts of India, they followed their own phases of growth, stagnation and revival. These were determined largely by indigenous circumstances, though the influence of developments in *sufism* outside India cannot altogether be discounted.

10.4 *SUFI* ORDERS IN INDIA DURING THE SULTANATE PERIOD

A number of *sufi silsiiah* became popular in India during the Sultanate period. Here we will discuss the important ones.

10.4.1 The Suhrawardi *Silsilah*

The Suhrawardi *silsilah* was a major order of the Sultanate period. Its founder in India was Shaikh Bahauddin Zakariya (1182-1262 CE). He was a Khurasami and

was a disciple of Shaikh Shahabuddin Suhrawardi who had initiated the *silsilah* in Baghdad and was directed by the latter to proceed to India. He made Multan and Sind the centres of his activity. Thus, one of the oldest *khanqahs* in India was established by him at Multan. Iltutmish was the Sultan of Delhi at that time, but Sultan was under the control of his rival, Qubacha. Shaikh Bahauddin Zakariya was critical of Qubacha's administration and openly sided with Iltutmish in his conflict against the Multan ruler's overthrow. Bahauddin Zakariya received from Iltutmish the title of *Shaikh-ul Islam* (Leader of Islam) and endowment. Contrary to the Chishti saints of time, he followed a worldly policy and built up a large fortune. He accepted state patronage and maintained links with the ruling classes. However, during the later period many independent *sufi* lines stemmed from him and some of them came to be known as '*beshara*' (illegitimate orders).

In addition to Shaikh Bahuddin Zakariya, many other *Khalifas* were designated by Shaikh Shahabuddin Suhrawardi to spread the Suhrawardi silsilah in India. One of them was Shaikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi. After his initial stay in Delhi, where he failed to establish his supremacy, he went to Bengal. He established his *khanqah* there and made many disciples. He attached a *langar* (centre for the distribution of free meals) to his *khanqah*. He is said to have played an important role in the process of Islamization in Bengal.

During the Sultanate period, Punjab, Sind and Bengal became three important centres of the Suhrawardi activity. Scholars are generally of the opinion that the Suhrawardi *sufis* converted Hindus to Islam and in this task they were helped by their affluence and connections with the ruling class. In this connection, a sharp contrast is drawn between their attitude and that of the Chishti *sufis* whose teachings did not aim at conversion.

10.4.2 The Chishti Silsilah

The growth of the Chishti order in India during the Sultanate period took place in two phases. The first phase ended with the death of Shaikh Nasiruddin (*Chiragh-i-Delhi*) in 1356 CE. The second phase is marked by its initial decline during the later part of the 14th century followed by revival and expansion in various parts of the country during the 15th and 16th centuries.

First Phase

The Chishti order which later became the most influential and popular *sufi* order in India, originated in Herat and was introduced in India by Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti (1141-1236 CE) who was born in Sijistan. He came to India at the time of the Ghori conquest. He finally settled in Ajmer about 1206 and won the respect of both Muslims and non-Muslims. No authentic record of his activities is available. During the later period, many legends projected him as an ardent evangelist. However, he was not actively involved in conversions and his attitude towards non-Muslims was

one of tolerance. His tomb in Ajmer became a famous centre of pilgrimage in later centuries.

The successor of Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti in Delhi was Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki (d. 1235). Shaikh Hamiduddin Nagauri (d. 1274), another Khalifa of Shaikh Muinuddin (Chishti, made Nagaur in Rajasthan centre of his activity. Shaikh Hamiduddin Nagauri established the *Silsilah* in Nagaur where he lived like an ordinary Rajasthani peasant and dissociated himself from those in authority. He was a strict vegetarian. He and his successors translated many Persian *sufi* verses in the local language called *Hindavi* : these are earliest examples of translations of this kind.

Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki was succeeded in Delhi by his Khalifa, Khwaja Fariduddin Masud (1175-1265 CE) known as Ganjshakar and more popularly as Baba Farid. Baba Farid left Delhi for Ajodhan in Punjab and lived in his *khanqah* there. He despised association with the ruling class and rich persons. Nathpanthi yogis also visited his *khanqah* and discussed with him the nature of mysticism. His popularity in Punjab is clear from the fact that more than three hundred years after his death, verses ascribed to him were included in the Adi-Granth compiled by the fifth Sikh Guru, Arjun, in 1604 CE. His tomb at Pakpattan soon developed into a centre of pilgrimage.

The most celebrated disciple of Baba Farid and the greatest *sufi* saint of the 14th century was Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya (1236-1325 CE). He made Delhi the most famous centre of the Chishti order. Two historians Ziauddin Barani and Amir Khusrau, who were his contemporaries, testify to his eminent position in the social and religious life of Northern India during the late 13th and early 14th centuries. Later his successors spread the Chishti order in various parts of the country. His teachings and conversations (*mal'fuzat*) are recorded in *Fawa'id-ul Fuwad* written by Amir Hasan Sijzi. This work serves more as a guide to practical aspects of Sufism than as a treatise on its metaphysical and theosophical aspects.

Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya saw the reigns of seven successive Sultans of Delhi. But he always avoided the company of the kings and nobles and never visited the court. The *langar* (an alms-house for the distribution of free food) of his *khanqah* was open to Hindus and Muslims alike. In his *khanqah*, he had many conversations with the Nathpanthi yogi visitors. He adopted many yoga breathing exercises and was called a *sidh* (perfect) by the yogis. Amir Khusrau (1253-1325 CE) was a devoted disciple of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya.

Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya had many spiritual successors or *Khalifas*. One of them was Shaikh Burhanuddin Gharib (d. 1340) who was one of those *sufis* who were forced by Sultan Muhammed Tughluq to migrate to the Deccan. He made Daulatabad centre of his activities and introduced the Chishti order there.

The most famous of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya's *Khalifas* and his successor in Delhi was Shaikh Nasiruddin Mahmud (d. 1356) who came to be known as *Chiragh-i Delhi* (Lamp of Delhi). He and some of his disciples discontinued some of those practices of early Chishtis which could clash with Islamic orthodoxy and, in turn; persuaded the *ulema* to soften their attitude towards the Chishti practice of *sama*.

Some scholars hold the view that the decline of Delhi as a centre of the Chishti order was due to the attitudes and policies of Sultan Muhammad Tughluq. However, it must be pointed out that the Sultan was not opposed to the *sufis*. Some *sufis*, including Shaikh Nasiruddin Chirag-i Delhi, remained in Delhi though they were compelled by the Sultan to accept state service. Moreover, *sufi* activities in many *khanqahs* were restored after the death of Muhammad Tughluq when his successor Feroz Shah Tughluq showered gifts on them. However, Delhi was left with no commanding Chishti figure after the death of Shaikh Nasiruddin in 1356 CE. He died without appointing a spiritual successor. One of his chief disciples, Gesudaraz left Delhi for a safer place in the Deccan at the time of Timur's invasion (1398 CE). As the Delhi Sultanate began to decline and disintegrates, the *sufis* dispersed to the more stable provincial kingdoms and established their *khanqahs* there. This dispersal of the Chishti order in different parts of the country during the later 14th and 15th centuries was accompanied by significant changes in the attitudes and practices of the Chishti *sufis*.

Second Phase

The second phase in the history of the Chishti *silsilah* during the Sultanate period began with its decline in Delhi following the death of Shaikh Nasiruddin and its subsequent dispersal in various regional kingdoms. Though the *sufis* had begun to arrive in the Deccan from the late 13th century, it was Shaikh Burhanuddin Gharib who introduced the Chishti order there during the reign of Muhammad Tughluq. Later, several Chishti *sufis* migrated to Gulbarga, the capital of the Bahmani kingdom (1347-1538 CE). In Gulbarga, these *sufis* developed close relations with the court and accepted state patronage, thus causing a change in the attitude of the Chishti order towards the state. The Bahmani kings, on their part, purchased the political loyalty of these *sufis* and gave land grants to them. The most prominent of these Chishtis was Muhammad Banda Nawaz, Gesudaraz (1321-1422 CE). He left for the Deccan and received land grant of four villages from Bahmani Sultan, Feroz Shah Bahmani (1397-1422 CE). He was an orthodox *sufi* and declared the supremacy of Islamic law (*Shariat*) over all *sufi* stages. Gesudaraz discontinued many practices of early Chishtis which clashed with the attitudes of orthodox *ulema*. Unlike the early Chishti masters, he was a voluminous writer on *tasawwuf*. After his death, the Bahmani Sultans continued the land grants in favour of his family descendants. His tomb or *dargah* in Gulbarga later developed into a popular place of pilgrimage in the Deccan. But the transformation of his descendants into a landed elite and their indifference towards Chishti teachings led to the decline of living Chishti tradition in Gulbarga. The change of Bahmani capital from Gulbarga to

Bidar in 1422 CE also contributed to the decline of the Chishti order in Gulbarga. It has been pointed out that the Bahamani Court at Bidar, owing to its pro-foreigner and anti-Deccani bias, encouraged the immigration of foreign *sufis* and did not patronise the Chishtis who were considered "too Indian". However, the Chishti tradition began to thrive again - in the Deccan from the end of the 15th century and it continued to grow during the 16th and 17th centuries. Its new centre was a place popularly known as Shahpur Hillock, just outside the city of Bijapur-the capital city of the Adil Shahi Sultans. The Chishti tradition of Shahpur Hillock was different from most of the later Chishti traditions such as that of Gulbarga in that it maintained distance from the court and the *ulema* and drew its inspiration from local influences. The Chishti saints of Shahpur Hillock were thus much closer in their attitudes to the early Chishti *sufis* of Delhi, though it must be pointed out that the Shahpur Hillock Chishti tradition developed independent of both the Delhi and Gulbarga traditions.

In Northern India, the resurgence of the Chishti order took place during the later 15th and early 16th century. The Chishti *sufis* belonged to three different branches of the Chishti order- Nagauriya (after the name of Shaikh Hamiduddin Nagauri), Sabiriya (after the name of Shaikh Alauddin Kaliyari) and Nizamiya (after the name of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya). Another important Chishti centre in Northern India during the later half of the 15th century and in the beginning of the 16th century was Jaunpur, the capital of the Sharqi Sultans. From the beginning of the 15th century, a Chishti centre flourished in Rudauli near Lucknow. Later, Bahraich (in modern Uttar Pradesh) emerged as another centre during the Lodi period. Gangoh in Saharanpur district of Uttar Pradesh became an important centre of the *silsilah* under Shaikh Abdul Quddus Gangohi (1456-1537 CE). He wrote many books on *sufi* thought and practice and also on metaphysical subjects. He also translated Chandayan, a romantic poem in Hindawi written by Maulana Daud in Persian. During the second phase, the Chishti centre also flourished in Malwa and Bengal. Many Chishti saints of the second phase wrote commentaries on Arabic and Persian classics and also translated Sanskrit works on mysticism into Persian. Like the early *sufis* of Delhi, the later Chishti *sufis* made followers from all classes of society but, unlike their spiritual predecessors, most of them accepted state patronage.

10.4.3 Other *Sufi* Orders

In addition to the Chishti and the Suhrawardi orders, there were others such as the Firdausi, the Qadiri, the Shattari, Qalandari etc. which were introduced in India during this period. The Firdausi order was a branch of the Suhrawardi which established itself at Rajgir in Bihar towards the end of the 14th century. The most prominent *sufi* belonging to this *silsilah* in India was Shaikh Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri (d. 1380).

The Qadiri was the important *sufi* order in the Central Islamic countries and was founded in Baghdad by Abdul Qadir Jilani (d. 1166). It was introduced in India in the late 14th century and established itself in the Punjab, Sind and the Deccan. The

Qadiri had an orthodox orientation and its doctrinal positions were similar to those of the orthodox ulema. The Qadiri *sufis* had close relations with the ruling classes of various provincial Sultanates, and accepted state charity. The order was urban-based and attempted to reform the religious life of Indian Muslims of what it considered un-Islamic influences.

The Shattari order which was introduced in India in the 15th century by Shaikh Abdullah Shattari, was also an orthodox order. The Shattari centres were established in Bengal, Jaunpur and the Deccan. Like the Qadiris, the Shattari *sufis* had close ties with the court and accepted state patronage.

The Qalandari order covered a wide range of wandering dervishes who violated normal social behaviour. They were considered reprehensible and above the law. They had no recognized spiritual master and organization. Many qalandars frequently visited the Chishti *khanqahs* and became absorbed into the Chishti order. The qalandars had contacts with the Nathpanthi yogis, and adopted many of their custom and practices such as ear-piercing.

The Rishi order of *sufism* flourished in Kashmir during the 15th and 16th centuries. Before the emergence of this order, a religious preacher from Hamadan, Mir Saiyyid Ali Hamadani (1314-1385 CE) had entered Kashmir with a group of followers to spread Islam. The missionary zeal of Hamadani, his sons and disciples made little impact on the people of Kashmir. The Rishi order, on the other hand, was an indigenous one established by Shaikh Nuruddin Wali (d. 1430). It prospered in the rural environment of Kashmir and influenced the religious life of the people during the 15th and 16th centuries. The popularity of the Rishi order was due to the fact and it drew inspiration from the popular Shaivite bhakti tradition of Kashmir and was rooted in the socio-cultural milieu of the region.

Check Your Progress 2

1) List the main characteristics of Suhrawardi *silsilah*.

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2) (a) List the names of five *sufis* of Chishti *silsilah*.

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(b) Name five *sufis* orders that flourished in India.

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3) Write five lines on Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya.

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4) Write a brief note on the Chishti saints who settled outside Delhi.

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10.5 SOCIAL ROLE OF THE *SUFIS*

10.5.1 The *Sufi* and the State

See section 3.4 (Block-1, Unit-3) of this course.

10.5.2 The *Sufi* and the *Ulema*

We have already noted that the *ulema* continued to show their disapproval of the *sufis* despite various attempts made by al-Ghazzali to effect reconciliation between the two. The attitude of mutual distrust between the two continued during the Sultanate period, though orthodox *sufi* orders such as the Suhrawardi, the Qadiri, etc. pandered to the *ulema*. The *ulema* were in particular hostile to the early Chishti *sufis* and their practices. They pronounced against the Chishti practice of *sama* and objected to the Chishti quest for religious synthesis. However, Chishti *sufis* such as Shaikh Nasiruddin (*Chiragh-i Delhi*) and Gesudaraz gave an orthodox orientation to the Chishti order to mitigate the hostility of the *ulema* towards the Chishti practices. It appears that as the Chishtis began to involve themselves in court politics and accept state endowments, they adopted doctrinal attitudes similar to those of the *ulema*.

10.5.3 The *Sufi* and Conversions

The *sufis* of the Sultanate period have been generally considered as propagators of Islam in India. Several traditions and legends of the later medieval period also represented the *sufis* as active missionaries. The later hagiographic accounts of the

life of Shaikh Muinuddin Chishti showed him as being actively involved in the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam. Similarly, the first *sufis* who entered the Deccan in the late 13th century and early 14th century have been portrayed in the later legends as militant champions of Islam who waged a jihad (war against non-Muslims). There were certain active evangelists among the Suhrawardi *sufis*. Mir Saiyyid Ali Hamadani and his followers who entered Kashmir in the 14th century were also imbued with proselytizing zeal though they did not achieve much success in their mission. However, it must be pointed out that conversion of non-Muslims to Islam was not a part of the activities of all the *sufis*. Shaikh Muinuddin Chishti was not an evangelist and was not actively involved in conversions. His attitude and that of his spiritual successors towards non-Muslims was one of tolerance. Shaikh Nizamuddin Aulia on one occasion observed that many Hindus considered Islam a true religion but did not accept it. He was also of the view that every religious community had its own path and faith and its own way of worship. Also, there is little historical evidence to show that the early *sufis* in the Deccan were warriors fighting for the expansion of Islam.

However, large numbers of non-Muslims, especially from the low castes, were attracted to the *sufis* and later to their *dargahs* where they belonged to the wider circle of devotees. There they gradually came under the influence of Islamic precepts which eventually led to their Islamization. Later, the descendants of many groups which were Islamized claimed that their ancestors were converted to Islam by one or another medieval *sufi*. Such a claim seems to have been motivated by their desire to establish their long association with the *dargah* of the *sufi* and their long standing in Islam.

10.5.4 Material Life in Sufi Khanqah

We have seen above that there are instances of prosperous *khanqahs* supported by state endowments, of *sufis* forging links with the state and finally of the transformation of some *sufis* into landed elites. Ideally, however, the *sufis* such as the early Chishtis lived in *khanqahs* which remained in physical separation from the court and social hierarchy, and where life was based on egalitarian principles. We have pointed out that the early Chishtis accepted the logic of the existing class structure at the broader social and political level and did not see any alternative to it. Nevertheless, life in their own *khanqahs* was characterized by a lack of hierarchy and structure. The *khanqah* was a place where both its inhabitants and the pilgrims experienced equality. For their necessary expenses such *khanqahs* depended not on state patronage but on *futuh* (unsolicited charity).

The Chishti *khanqahs* were open to all sections of the society and to all communities. The *qalandars* and *jogis* made frequent visits to the *khanqahs* where they were provided accommodation. The *khanqahs* also contributed to economic life in various ways. Some of them undertook the cultivation of waste lands. Others were involved in the construction of buildings both of religious character and public utility

and planted gardens. The institution of the *khanqah* played an important role in the process of urbanization. The annual *urs* (the festival commemorating the death of a spiritual master) gave impetus to trade, commerce and production of local handicrafts.

Check Your Progress 3

1) Write on material life of the *Sufi Khanqahs*.

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10.6 LET US SUM UP

Early *sufi* saints came to India even before the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. The basic features of *sufism* in India continued to be the same as they were in the Islamic World. In the Islamic world it developed into an organised movement during 10th-12th centuries. During 12th and 13th centuries there developed a number of *sufi* orders or *silsilahs*. Like in the Islamic world a number of *sufi* orders became popular in India during the Sultanate period. Of these Suhrawardi and Chishti orders were more prominent. In India, the Chishti order became most popular among the masses.

Sufis played a very important role in the social life of the period. In general they did not get involved with the affairs of the state but we come across a number of cases where *sufis* accepted state patronage and got involved with the affairs of the state. Throughout this period we witness an attitude of distrust between *sufis* and *ulema*. The latter disapproved of a number of practices popular with *sufis*.

The *khanqahs* were the centre of activity of *sufis* and their disciples. *Sufis* in India continued to be affected by the developments of mystic ideas in the contemporary Islamic world. In India there was a regular interaction between *sufi* and *bhakti* movement. This interaction had positive effect on the social and cultural life during the Sultanate period. This interaction also resulted in a cultural synthesis in the areas of art, music and literature.

10.7 KEY WORDS

Beshara : be = without, shara = *Shariat* i.e. those who do not strictly adhere to the *Shariat* (Islamic law)

Dargah : *sufi* shrine/tomb

Futuh : income received gratuitously

Khanqah	: place where <i>sufi</i> saints lived
Malfuzzat	: <i>sufi</i> literature
Qalandar	: Muslim mendicant who abandon everything and takes to a wandering life
Ribat	: frontier posts
Sama	: a <i>sufi</i> gathering where music is played and songs are recited.

10.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sub. 10.1
- 2) See Sub. 10.2
- 3) See Sub. 10.2

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sub-sec. 10.4.1
- 2) a) See Sub-sec. 10.4.2
b) See Sub-sec. 10.4.3
- 3) See Sub-sec. 10.4.2
- 4) See Sub-sec. 10.4.2

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) See Sub-sec. 10.5.3

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UNIT 11 : *BHAKTI* MOVEMENTS AND MONOTHEISTIC TRADITIONS: KABIR, NANAK, RAVIDAS AND SRI CHAITANYA

Structure

- 11.0 Objectives
- 11.1 Introduction
- 11.2 Background: *Bhakti Movement* in South India
- 11.3 *Bhakti Movement* in North India
- 11.4 Emergence of *Bhakti Movement*
 - 11.4.1 Political Factors for the Rise of the *Bhakti Movement*
 - 11.4.2 Socio-Economic Factors
- 11.5 Monotheistic Traditions
 - 11.5.1 Kabir
 - 11.5.2 Nanak
 - 11.5.3 Ravidas
 - 11.5.4 Sri Chaitanya
 - 11.5.5 Common Characteristic Features
- 11.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 11.7 Key Words
- 11.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises.

11.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- understand the background of the *bhakti* movement,
- identify the main political and socio-economic factors for the rise of *bhakti* movement in North India, and
- list the main popular saints of this movement.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

Bhakti as a religious concept means devotional surrender to a personally conceived Supreme God for attaining salvation. The origin of this doctrine has been traced to both the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions of ancient India and to various scriptures such as the *Gita*. But it was for the first time in South India between the seventh and tenth century that *bhakti* grew from a mere religious doctrine into a popular movement based on religious equality and broad-based social participation.

The movement which was led by popular saint-poets reached its climax in the tenth century after which it began to decline. But it was revived as a philosophical and ideological movement by a series of wandering scholars or *acharyas*, beginning with Ramanuja in the eleventh century. The establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in early thirteenth century witnessed great outburst of many diverse and widespread socio-religious movements in various parts of the country drawing upon the concepts of *bhakti*. These movements have been seen as continuation or revival of the older South Indian *bhakti movement*. But each one of the later movements which grew in the Sultanate period had a historical context of its own and its own peculiarities. Moreover, one of them, namely, the non-conformist monotheistic movement which is associated with Kabir and other "low-caste" saints bears only superficial resemblance to the variants of the movement. Its social roots, its ideology, social composition of its leadership and even its concept of *bhakti* and God set it fundamentally apart, from the older *bhakti* movement of South India as well as from the rest of the later *bhakti* movements. In view of these wide and at times even basic differences among various *bhakti* movements, they must be discussed individually in order to clearly bring out the characteristics of each one of them and also to discover elements of unity and diversity among them.

11.2 BACKGROUND: BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN SOUTH INDIA

The saiva Nayanar saints and vaishnava Alvar saints of South India spread the doctrine of *bhakti* among different sections of the society irrespective of caste and sex during the period between the seventh and the tenth century. Some of these saints came from the "lower" castes and some were women. The saint-poets preached *bhakti* in an intense emotional manner and promoted religious egalitarianism. They dispensed with rituals and traversed the region several times singing, dancing and advocating *bhakti*. The Alvar and Nayanar saints used the Tamil language and not Sanskrit for preaching and composing devotional songs. All these features gave the movement a popular character. For the first time *bhakti* acquired a popular base. The South Indian *bhakti saints* were critical of Buddhists and Jains who enjoyed a privileged status at the courts of South Indian kings at that time. They won over many adherents of Buddhism and Jainism both of which by now had become rigid and formal religions. At the same time, however, these poet-saints resisted the authority of the orthodox Brahmans by making *bhakti* accessible to all without any caste and sex discrimination. But the South Indian *bhakti movement* had its limitations as well. It never consciously opposed Brahmanism or the varna and caste systems at the social level. It was integrated with the caste system and the "lower" castes continued to suffer from various social disabilities. There was no elimination of Brahmanical rituals such as worship of idols, recitation of the Vedic mantras and pilgrimages to sacred places in spite of the overriding emphasis on *bhakti* as the superior mode of worship. The Buddhists and Jains were its main targets, not the Brahmans. This perhaps was also the reason why the Brahman dominated temples played an important role in the growth of South Indian

bhakti movement. Since the ideological and social foundations of caste system were not questioned by the South Indian saint-poets, the *bhakti* movement of the South in the long run strengthened it rather than weakening it. Ultimately, after the movement reached its climax in the tenth century, it was gradually assimilated into the conventional Brahmanical religion. But despite these limitations, the South Indian *bhakti* movement in its heyday succeeded in championing the cause of religious equality and, consequently, the Brahmans had to accept the right of the "low-caste" to preach, to have access to *bhakti* as a mode of worship and to have access even to the Vedas.

When the popularity of the *bhakti* movement in South India was on the wane, the doctrine of *bhakti* was defended at the philosophical level by a series of brilliant vaishnava Brahman scholars (*acharyas*). Ramanuja (11th century) was first among them. He gave philosophical justification for *bhakti*. He tried to establish a careful balance between orthodox Brahmanism and popular *bhakti* which was open to all. Though he did not support the idea of the "lower" castes having access to the Vedas, he advocated *bhakti* as a mode of worship accessible to all including the Sudras and even the outcastes. While propagating *bhakti*, he did not observe caste distinctions and even tried to eradicate untouchability. Nimbarka, a Telugu Brahman, is believed to have been a younger contemporary of Ramanuja. He spent most of his time in Vrindavan near Mathura in North India. He believed in total devotion to Krishna and Radha. Another South Indian vaishnavite *bhakti* philosopher was Madhava who belonged to the thirteenth century. Like Ramanuja, he did not dispute orthodox Brahmanical restriction of the Vedic study by the Sudras. He believed that *bhakti* provided alternate avenue of worship to the Sudras. His philosophical system has based on the Bhagvat Purana. He is also believed to have toured North India. The last two prominent vaishnava acharyas were Ramananda (late 14th and early 15th century) and Vallabha (late 15th and early 16th century). Since both of them lived mostly in North India during the Sultanate period and gave new orientation to the vaishnava *bhakti*, they will be discussed in the section dealing with North India.

11.3 BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN NORTH INDIA

There arose during the Sultanate period (13th-15th century) many popular socio-religious movements in North and East India, and Maharashtra. Emphasis on *bhakti* and religious equality were two common features of these movements. As has been pointed out, these two were also the features of the South Indian *bhakti* movements. Almost all the *bhakti* movements of the Sultanate period have been related to one South Indian vaishnava *acharya* or the other. For these reasons, many scholars believe that the *bhakti* movements of the Sultanate period were a continuation or resurgence of the older *bhakti* movement. They argue that there existed philosophical and ideological links between the two either due to contact or diffusion. Thus, Kabir and other leaders of non-conformist monotheistic movements in North India are believed to have been the disciples of Ramananda who, in turn, is believed to have

been connected with Ramanuja's philosophical order. Similar claims have been made that Chaitanya, the most significant figure of the vaishnava movement in Bengal, belonged to the philosophical school of Madhava. This movement is also believed to have been connected with Nimbarka's school because of its emphasis on 'Krishna' *bhakti* .

There are undoubtedly striking similarities between the older *bhakti* tradition of South India and various *bhakti* movements that flourished in the Sultanate and Mughal periods. If we exclude the popular monotheistic movements of Kabir, Nanak and other "low" caste saints, the two sets of movements can be shown to have possessed many more common features. For example, like the South Indian *bhakti* movement, the vaishnava *bhakti* movements of North and Eastern India and Maharashtra, though egalitarian in the religious sphere, never denounced the caste system, the authority of Brahmanical scriptures and the Brahmanical privileges as such.

Consequently, like the South Indian *bhakti*, most of the vaishnava movements of the later period were ultimately assimilated into the Brahmanical religion, though in the process of interaction, the latter itself underwent many changes. However, the similarities end here. *Bhakti* movement was never a single movement except in the broad doctrinal sense of a movement which laid emphasis on *bhakti* and religious equality. The *bhakti* movements of medieval India differed in many significant respects not only from the older South Indian *bhakti* tradition but also among themselves. Each one of them had its own regional identity and socio-historical and cultural contexts. Thus, the non-conformist movements based on popular monotheistic *bhakti* contained features that were essentially different from various vaishnava *bhakti* movements. Kabir's notion of *bhakti* was not the same as that of the medieval vaishnava saints such as Chaitanya or Mirabai. Within the vaishnava movement, the historical context of Maharashtra *bhakti* was different from that of the Bengal vaishnavism or North Indian *bhakti* movement of Ramanand, vallabha. Surdas and Tulsidas. During the later period, when the vaishnava *bhakti* movement crystallised into sects, there arose frequent disputes between them which sometimes even turned violent. Among all the *bhakti* movements of the period between the 14th and 17th century, the popular monotheistic movements of Kabir, Nanak, Ravidas and other "lower" caste saints stand out fundamentally different.

Both these movements arose in Northern India at the same time, that is, in the centuries following the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate and advent of Islam in that part of the country. For this reason, the rise of both the movements is quite often attributed to certain common causes such as the influence of Islam on Hinduism. However, the causes and sources of the two movements and the factors exerting influence on them were quite diverse. It will become clear from the following discussion that a cause which explains one movement may not do so in the case of the other. This is so because the popular monotheistic movements arose and reached

their peak in the Sultanate period, while the vaishnava movements began in the Sultanate period but reached their climax during the Mughal period.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Give the salient features of the *bhakti* movement.

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2) Write two lines on each of the following:

a) Ramanuja

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b) Nimbarka

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c) Vallabha

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d) Madhava

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11.4 EMERGENCE OF *BHAKTI* MOVEMENT

The *bhakti* movement which influenced large number of people during 14th-17th centuries in North India emerged due to a number of political, socio-economic and religious factors. We will discuss all these in this section.

11.4.1 Political Factors for the Rise of the *Bhakti* Movement

It has been pointed out that as the popular *bhakti* movement could not take root in Northern India before the Turkish conquest because the socio-religious milieu was dominated by the Rajput-Brahman alliance which was hostile to any heterodox movement. The Turkish conquests brought the supremacy of this alliance to an end. The advent of Islam with the Turkish conquest also caused a setback to the power

and prestige commanded by the Brahmans. Thus, the way was paved for the growth of non-conformist movements, with anti-caste and anti-Brahmanical ideology. The Brahmans had always made the people believe that the images and idols in the temples were not just the symbols of God but were gods themselves who possessed divine power and who could be influenced by them (*i.e.* the Brahmans). The Turks deprived the Brahmans of their temple wealth and state patronage. Thus the Brahmans suffered both materially and ideologically. The non-conformist sect of the nathpanthis was perhaps the first to gain from the declining power of the Rajput-Brahman alliance. This sect seems to have reached its peak in the beginning of the Sultanate period. The loss of power and influence by the Brahmans and the new political situation ultimately created conditions for the rise of the popular monotheistic movements and other *bhakti* movements in Northern India.

11.4.2 Socio-Economic Factors

It has been argued that the *bhakti* movements of medieval India represented sentiments of the common people against feudal oppression. According to this viewpoint, elements of revolutionary opposition to feudalism can be found in the poetry of the *bhakti* saints ranging from Kabir and Nanak to Chaitanya and Tulsidas. It is in this sense that sometimes the medieval *bhakti* movements are an Indian counterpart of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. However, there is nothing in the poetry of the *bhakti* saints to suggest that they represented the class interests of the peasantry against the surplus-extracting feudal state. The vaishnava *bhakti* saints broke away from orthodox Brahmanical order only to the extent that they believed in *bhakti* and religious equality. Normally, they continued to subscribe to many basic principles of orthodox Brahmanism. The more radical monotheistic saints rejected orthodox Brahmanical religion altogether but even they did not call for the overthrow of the state and the ruling class. For this reason, the *bhakti* movements cannot be regarded as Indian variant of European Protestant Reformation which was a far greater social upheaval linked to the decline of feudalism and the rise of capitalism.

This, however, does not mean that the *bhakti* saints were indifferent to the living conditions of the people. They used images of daily life and always tried to identify themselves in one way or another with the sufferings of the common people.

The widespread popularity of the monotheistic movement of Kabir, Nanak, Dhanna, Pipa etc. can be explained fully only in the context of certain significant socio-economic changes in the period following the Turkish conquest of Northern India. The Turkish ruling class, unlike the Rajputs, lived in towns. The extraction of large agricultural surplus led to enormous concentration of resources in the hands of the ruling class. The demands of this resource-wielding class for manufactured goods, luxuries and other necessities led to the introduction of many new techniques and crafts on a large scale. This, in turn, led to the expansion of the class of urban artisans in the 13th and 14th centuries.

The growing classes of urban artisans were attracted towards the monotheistic movement because of its egalitarian ideas as they were now not satisfied with the low status accorded to them in traditional Brahmanical hierarchy. It has been pointed out that some groups of traders like the *Khatris* in the Punjab, who benefited directly from the growth of towns, urban crafts production and expansion of markets, were also drawn into the movement for the same reason. The popularity of the monotheistic movement was the result of the support it obtained from one or more of these different classes of the society. It is one or more of these sections which constituted the social base of the movement in different parts of Northern India. In Punjab, the popularity of the movement did not remain confined to urban classes: it acquired a broader base by the incorporation of the Jat peasants in its ranks. The support extended by the Jats of the Punjab to Guru Nanak's movement ultimately contributed to the development of Sikhism as a mass religion.

11.5 MONOTHEISTIC TRADITIONS

In this section, we will discuss some of the main monotheistic in India during the period under review.

11.5.1 Kabir

Kabir (1440-1518 CE) was the earliest and undoubtedly the most powerful fibre of the monotheistic movements that began in the fifteenth century. He belonged to family of weavers (*Julaha*) who were indigenous converts to Islam. He spent greater part of his life in Banaras (Kashi). The monotheistic saints who succeeded him either claimed to be his disciples or respectfully mention him.

The name Kabir evokes in the mind the meaning of the name “the great”. It is one of the ninety nine names of Allah in Arabic theology, mentioned six times in Qur’an. Kabir lived up to his name and his influence in Hindi speaking area is all pervasive. He is quoted at every step, and has relentlessly campaigned against both Hindu and Muslim orthodoxy.

His influence over his contemporaries has been important and has been written about. It is stated that Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion came under the influence of Kabir when he was twenty seven years old. Nanak mentions Kabir in his work, *Janam Sakhi* (Evidence on the story of Birth) and states that he is a ‘Bhagat’ (devotee) equal in merit to Nanak himself, and other Bhagats are exhorted to follow his example. On many occasions, Nanak quotes the verses attributed to Kabir. *Adi Granth*, the sacred book of the Sikh Panth, gives information regarding the life of Kabir and his teachings. The interest that Guru Nanak took in Kabir is reflected in the works of Kabir being included in the *Adi Granth*, and it is stated that both had good rapport.

Other religious teachers have also been influenced by Kabir. They are Dadu of Ahmedabad, who founded the sect that bears his name, and Jag Iswar Das from Oundh (1760), who is the founder of Satnami Sect and many other then contemporary religious teachers, like Bribhan, founder of the Sadh Sect (1658), Baba Lal of Malwa and Shiva Narain of Gazipur. Even though Kabir is not a founder of any cult, many claim that they belong to his cult, which is called 'Kabir Panth' and the followers of this sect are called 'Kabir Panthis'. In the census of 1901, about eight lakh and forty three thousand people registered themselves as belonging to this sect in the four states of North India. His pithy and stark words are quoted in day to day conversation, and wandering minstrels sing his songs, taking them to millions of people.

The information about the year of his birth and other information is scanty, and historically not proven. According to Benares Gazetteer, Kabir was born in Belhara, a village in Azamgad district. According to Kabir Panthis, he was born in 1398 and died in 1518. The date of birth might be a matter of conjecture, as there was a need to make him the contemporary of Ramanand, the founder of the *Bhakti* movement in North India. A pamphlet was published by the Kabir Panthis in Mumbai in 1885. It is said to have been produced with information from books as well as tradition. Much of the legend relating to Kabir has been sourced from this pamphlet.

Kabir's foster parents are said to be Niru, a Muslim weaver, and his wife, Nima. There are two versions of his birth. A Brahmin widow was unknowingly blessed by an ascetic, for begetting a child. Realising his mistake Ramanand tried to make amends. He said that the child would be born out of the palm of the mother, and accordingly the child was born. The mother kept it in a lotus flower, in the tank, and was picked up by Nima, his foster mother. There are other interpretations but it was said that Kabir was found somewhere by Niru and Nima, and that they are his foster parents.

Kabir followed the profession of his foster parents, and became a weaver, a "julaha" in Hindi. Kabir was said to have become the disciple of Ramanand, and got initiation from him to be the devotee of Rama. Adi Granth says of Kabir: "By caste weaver and of mind, utters Kabir with natural ease the excellencies of Ram". True to his profession, Kabir compares the cycle of life and death to the shuttle that travels in the loom.

Formless Supreme Being (Nirguna)

Kabir is also a proponent of Nirguna, the Supreme Being without form and properties. This concept, which came into philosophy with the Advaita School, caught the imagination of Kabir as well as Tulasidas. Kabir's strong opposition to idolatry stems from this philosophy. He says, "If worshipping a stone idol gets Hari then I will worship a mountain. Better is the grinding stone, which grinds and feeds the world."

Kabir's works are contained in two books. One is Bijak, and another is Adi Granth. During the lifetime of Kabir, his sayings were not documented, and the process of writing them down started at least fifty years after his death.

Sayings and Poetry of Kabir: Kabir's sayings are pithy, and many a time, sound like riddles, but the meaning is conveyed clearly. To illustrate the point, a few selected couplets of Kabir are given here.

“Fire does not burn it, the wind does not carry it away, no thief comes near it; collect the wealth of name of Ram, that wealth is never lost”.

“What is muttering, what austerity, what vows and worship to him whose heart there is another love?”

“Pearls are scattered on the road; the blind draw near and depart; without the light of the Lord, the world passes them by”.

“Sandal, restrain thy fragrance; on thy account, the wood is cut down; the living slay the living and regard only the dead”.

11.5.2 Nanak

Another saint-preacher of the time was Guru Nanak (1469-1538 CE), the founder of Sikhism. He was a contemporary of Kabir. He was born in a Khatri family at Talwandi (Nankana Sahib) in the district of Seikhpura in West Punjab (now in Pakistan). He was sent to school at the age of seven to learn Hindi, Sanskrit and Persian. Different types of miraculous stories are associated with the astonishing wisdom of child Nanak. His father was an accountant and it was presumed that he would be a good government servant. But he did not show any interest in studies and tried different professions of agriculture, cattle-tending and shop-keeping, but without any success. For some time he was appointed the Keeper of Sultan Daulat Khan Lodi's storehouse of charities. Nanak got married at the age of nineteen and had two sons. Because of his indifference to worldly affairs he left royal service and thus got an opportunity to mix with saints and sages freely. At the age of thirty he left his home and led the life of an ascetic. He wandered over many lands and visited many holy places to gather spiritual experience. On his return, he set up his hermitage at Kartarpur on the bank of the river Ravi and started preaching his own philosophy. He became a preacher but at the same time led the life of a householder. He composed hymns which he sang with the accompaniment of a musical instrument called '*rabab*' preaching harmony among people of all communities. He died at the age of sixty nine in 1538 CE and had nominated his favourite disciple Anagad as his successor.

Nanak had played a very dominant role in the *Bhakti* movement of medieval India. Both Sufism and *Bhakti* had contributed to the development of Nanak's religious philosophy. So his teachings were composite by nature comprising of the noblest

principles of Hinduism and Islam. At the same time he discarded the retrograde elements of both religions. For Nanak, God is one and formless. Through love, devotion and purity of heart one can attain the grace of God. God is the creator, sustainers and destroyer of the Universe. He is Almighty and Omnipresent. He is merciful to all, even to the sinner. Nanak believed in the presence of a soul in every human being. Good actions of a man help the soul to merge with the Eternal soul that is God. Evil actions increase the burden of sin for which the soul cannot rise high and remains in darkness. So each individual must do well and be virtuous to get eternal liberation from the bondage of the world. Thus Nanak's teachings rested upon two themes—praise of virtues and condemnation of vices. In other words moral conduct and emphasis on moral values constituted the foundation of his teachings.

Like all Sufi saints Nanak was in favour of accepting a guru who would guide the individual in all his conduct. In his own words, "Without guru, nobody can attain God. Under the guru's instruction, God's word is heard and knowledge is acquired." So the presence of a guru is essential for every man for his own spiritual emancipation. Nanak was very practical in his outlook. He wanted to bring an end to the conflict among various religions. That is why he vehemently rejected the caste system, authority of the Vedas and the Quran and idolatry or image-worship. He never laid any emphasis upon renunciation of the world. Rather he stressed upon upholding moral values and rejection of religious hypocrisy, falsehood, selfishness and violence.

Nanak had both Hindu as well as Muslim disciples. His catholicity of spirit and loving approach aimed at bridging the gap between the two communities by establishing harmony between them. His mission and teachings were carried on by a line of nine successors who worked devoutly for about a century after his death. His teachings were included in the *Adi-Granth* compiled by the fifth Guru, Arjun Das. It was during the time of later Gurus that the followers of Nanak began to be known as Sikhs – a distinct religious unit. The last Guru, Gobind Singh, transformed Sikhism (corruption of the Sanskrit word '*shishya*' meaning disciple) into a military mission due to religious prosecution by the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb. Thus, Nanak's chief aim was to bring about religious harmony and peaceful co-existence and although he never aimed at starting a new separate religion he ultimately became the founder of Sikhism.

11.5.3 Ravidas

Ravidas was an Indian mystic poet-saint of the *Bhakti* movement during the 15th to 16th century CE. Venerated as a *guru* (teacher) in the region of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, the devotional songs of Ravidas have had a lasting impact upon the *bhakti* movement. He was a poet saint, social reformer and a spiritual figure. The life details of Ravidas are uncertain and contested. Scholars believe he was born in 1371 CE, in a family that worked with

dead animals' skins to produce leather products. If tradition and medieval era texts are to be believed then Ravidas was one of the disciples of the *bhakti* saint-poet Ramananda and a contemporary of the *bhakti* saint-poet Kabir. Ravidas' devotional songs were included in the Sikh scriptures, Guru Granth Sahib. The Panchvani text of the Dadupanthi tradition within Hinduism also includes numerous poems of Ravidas. Ravidas taught removal of social divisions of caste and gender, and promoted unity in the pursuit of personal spiritual freedoms.

The songs of Ravidas discuss *Nirguna-Saguna* themes, as well as ideas that are at the foundation of Nathyoga philosophy of Hinduism. He frequently mentions the term *Sahaj*, a mystical state where there is a union of the truths of the many and the one. Multiple manuscripts found in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, dated to be from the 18th and 19th centuries, contain a theosophical debate between Kabir and Ravidas on the nature of the Absolute, more specifically whether the Brahman (Ultimate Reality, Eternal Truth) is monistic Oneness or a separate anthropomorphic incarnate. Kabir argues for the former. Ravidas, in contrast, argues from the latter premise to the effect that both are one.

11.5.4 Sri Chaitanya

The greatest saint of the *bhakti* movement was Shri Chaitanya, popularly known as Gouranga Mahaprabhu. He was born in 1486 CE at Navadweep in West Bengal in a Brahmin family. His childhood name was Nimai or Biswambhar Mishra. He was a promising student and mastered all branches of Sanskrit learning. After formal education he married Lakshmi Devi. But gradually he developed a sense of detachment towards worldly affairs. At the age of twenty two he came in contact with a saint named Ishwar Puri at Gaya who initiated him with hymns of Lord Krishna. Nimai now became a devout worshipper of Krishna. In 1510 CE, at the age of twenty four, he renounced the world and became a sanyasi. His name was changed from Nimai to Shri Chaitanya and went on pilgrimage to various places like Dwarka, Vrindavan and Mathura. In 1516 CE he came to Puri and spent the last part of his life here till his death in 1533 CE.

Chaitanya's teachings centred round 'love' – from intense human love to divine love. He opened the doors of divine love to all by chanting and singing the glories of Krishna in the form of Kirtans. Kirtan is not merely a religious song, but a feeling of ecstasy emanating from love and devotion, accompanied by singing and dancing of the highest spiritual order when one can feel the presence of Almighty. In fact, Chaitanya believed that by singing Kirtan alone one can realise God, because it transports the mind from the material world to the divine world.

Chaitanya was an exponent of the RadhaKrishna cult. His biographer Krishnadas Kaviraj has summed up his teachings in the following manner: "*If a creature adores Krishna and serves his guru, he is released from this world of illusion and attains*

Krishna's feet and leaving these temptations and religious system based on caste, the true Vaishnava takes refuge with Krishna".

Thus, for him, God was Krishna or Hari who would be pleased only by intense love and devotion of the devotee. Such adoration is known as *Madliura bhava* and Chaitanya's exposition of *Rasalila* is one of his most profound contributions to Indian philosophy. Chaitanya was a champion of social liberation. He denounced caste system and stood for the universal brotherhood of man. At the same time he was very much opposed to the domination of the priestly class and superfluous rituals and ceremonies. It was due to his attitude of social liberation that people of socially oppressed classes became his disciples. Indeed, one of his most favourite disciples was a Muslim named Haridas.

True to the Vaishnava way of life Chaitanya stood for truth and non-violence. He led an ascetic life and maintained celibacy. His teachings were simple and, therefore, had a universal appeal. The Radha-Krishna cult and Chaitanya's preaching through singing *Kirtans* generated remarkable impact in Bengal and Orissa and the impact continues to be felt even today. Chaitanya died in 1533 CE in the premises of Jagannath temple at Puri while singing *kirtan*. His followers believed that Shri Chaitanya merged with Lord Jagannath whom he considered to be the embodiment of Krishna.

After his death his followers put his teachings together, collected his religious songs and organised themselves into a separate sect. The six Goswamis of Vrindavan were his prominent disciples who carried forward their master's philosophy. Chaitanya's teachings and message of love still remain a great source of spiritual inspiration to the people of eastern India in particular.

11.5.5 Common Characteristic Features

The teachings of all the saints who are associated with the monotheistic movement have certain common features which give the movement its basic unity.

- i. Most of the monotheists belonged to the low castes and were aware that there existed a unity of ideas among themselves. Most of them were aware of each other's teachings and influences. In their verses they mention each other and their predecessors in such a way as to suggest a harmonious ideological affinity among them. Thus, Kabir speaks of Ravidas as "saint among saints". Ravidas in his turn respectfully mentions the names of Kabir, Namdev, Trilochan, Dhanna, Sen and Pipa. Kabir's influence on Nanak also is beyond dispute. It is, therefore not surprising that the later traditions link Kabir, Ravidas, Dhanna, Pipa, Sen etc. together as disciples of Ramananda. The ideological affinity among the monotheists is also clear from the inclusion of the hymns of Kabir, Ravidas, etc. along with those of Nanak by the 5th Sikh Guru Arjan in the *Adi Granth*.

- ii. All the monotheists were influenced in one way or another and in varying degrees by the vaishnava concepts of *bhakti*, the nathpanthi movement and *sufism*. The monotheistic movement represents the synthesis of elements from these three traditions. But more often than not they did not accept the element of these traditions in their original form and made many innovations and adaptations which gave new meanings to old concepts.
- iii. For the monotheists, there was only one way of establishing communion with God: it was the way of personally experienced *bhakti*. This was also the way of the vaishnava *bhakti* saints, but there was one fundamental difference of perceptions: They all have been called monotheists because they uncompromisingly believed in one God. Then God of Nanak was non-incarnate and formless (*nirankar*), eternal (*akal*) and ineffable (*alakh*). The monotheistic *bhakti*, therefore, was *nirguna bhakti* and not *saguna*-which was the case with the vaishnavites who believed in various human incarnations of God. The monotheists adopted the notion of *bhakti* from the vaishnava *bhakti* tradition but gave it a *nirguna* orientation. Quite often Kabir called by the name, Ram. For this reason he has been called Ram *bhakta*. But Kabir himself made it clear in his utterances that the Ram he was devoted to was not the one who was born as an incarnation in the house of king Dasharatha or who killed Ravana, but a formless non-incarnate God. In addition to the oneness of God and *nirguna bhakti*, the monotheists also emphasised the crucial importance of repetition of divine name, spiritual guru, community singing of devotional songs (*kirtan*) and companionship of saints (*satsang*).
- iv. The monotheists followed a path which was independent of both dominant religions of the time-Hinduism and Islam. They denied their allegiance to either of them and criticised the superstitions and orthodox elements of both the religions. They launched a vigorous ideological assault on caste system and idolatry. They rejected the authority of the Brahmans and their religious scriptures. Kabir, in his harsh and abrasive style used ridicule as a powerful method for denouncing orthodox Brahmanism.
- v. Preached in vernacular languages.
- vi. Travelled widely to propagate. Namdev, a 14th century saint from Maharashtra travelled as far as Punjab where his teaching became so popular that they were later absorbed in the Adi-Granth.

Check **Your** Progress 2

1) Discuss the factors that led to the rise of the *bhakti* movement.

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2) Write three lines on each of the following :

a) Kabir

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b) Guru Nanak

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3) What are the characteristic features of monotheistic *bhakti* movement?

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11.6 LET US SUM UP

The *bhakti* movement of the Sultanate period represented the most widespread constellation - both interwoven and variegated - of socio-religious movements in Indian history after the rise of heterodox movements of the 6th century BCE. They influenced the whole country at different times by propounding new socio-religious ideas and practices. Many of the current practices of popular Hinduism such as repetition of divine names, emphasis on the company of saints and community devotional singing can be traced to medieval *bhakti* movements. They also contributed to the growth of modern vernacular languages, emergence of organized religious communities like the Sikhs and evolution of various sects or *panths*.

11.7 KEY WORDS

Acharya : scholar-saint who propounded new religious and philosophical ideas

Bhagat : colloquial expression for bhakta, a devotee

Julaha : member of a Muslim weaver caste

Kirtan	: community singing of hymns
Marga	: path; a devotional order such as Rama marg or Krishna marg
Mukti	: salvation
Nam	: the divine name
Nirankar	: without form
Nirguna	: without attributes, unqualified
Panth	: path, sect; the community of the followers of a monotheistic saint <i>e.g.</i> Kabirpanth, Nanakpanth, Dadupanth , etc.
Parampara	: lineage, tradition,
Sabada	: the divine word, the divine self-communication
Saguna	: having qualities or attribute

11.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sec. 11.1 and 11.2
- 2) See Sec.11.2

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sec. 11.4
- 2) a) See Sub-sec.11.5.1
b) See Sub-sec.11.5.2
- 3) See Sub-sec.11.5.5

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UNIT 12 : SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE BHAKTI TRADITION: RISE OF LIBERAL THOUGHT, IDEOLOGY OF EQUALITY AND GENDER RELATIONS

Structure

- 12.0 Objectives
- 12.1 Introduction
- 12.2 Rise of Liberal Thought and *Bhakti* Movement
- 12.3 Ideology of Equality in the *Bhakti* Movement
- 12.4 Women in *Bhakti* Movement
- 12.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 12.6 Key Words
- 12.7 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

12.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- understand various impacts of *bhakti* movement on Indian society,
- know about the growth of liberal thoughts and ideology of equality, and
- understand the roots of Indian feminism in the *bhakti* movement.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

With a view to understand the impact of the *bhakti* movement, we have to consider the background under which the movement gained momentum (see unit-11). The *bhakti* movement brought to the people hope, support and inner strength to save themselves from the evil practices that crept into the Hindu society. There was a lot of caste and class distinction, and several divisions had occurred. There was a good deal of bitter men between the two communities i.e. the Hindus and Muslims. Some healing touch was needed. Fortunately with the foreign invaders, some Sufi Muslim saints had also come to India and settled here. They were very liberal minded. They emphasized the virtues of love and devotion, brotherhood and equality etc. This helped to bring the two communities nearer. It also helped to harmonise the conflicting interests. The saints of the *bhakti* movement rejected the difference of caste. An important factor which led to the popularity of *bhakti* movement was that most of the promoters of this movement attempted to reconcile the differences between the Hindus and the Muslims by stressing that Ram and Rahim were one and the same. They condemned the hatred of the fanatic Pandits and Mullas alike.

12.2 RISE OF LIBERAL THOUGHT AND *BHAKTI* MOVEMENT

It has been noted that the *bhakti* cult was a wide spread movement, which embraced practically the whole of the country. It was a people's movement which aroused intense interest among them. Some of the reforms were keen to bring about a compromise between Hinduism and Islam to foster friendly relations between the two communities. Prof A L. Srivastava says that the movement succeeded in realising to a great extent the first object of bringing about the simplification of worship and liberalizing the traditional castes rules. The *bhakti* saints tried to generate an environment of good will between the Hindus and the Muslims. The most important social impact of the *bhakti* movement was that the followers of the *bhakti* movement rejected the caste distinction. A spirit of harmony among different sections of society and religion received impetus. The evil practice of 'Sati' received some set back. The movement aroused awakening among the Hindus and Muslims regarding the futility of ritualism and superstitions. The feeling of appreciation of the difference between the thought and practices of the two religions emerged. The movement encouraged religious toleration. Guru Granth Saheb the holiest book of the Sikhs which was compiled later on included the messages of saints belonging to different sects. This was on account of the spirit of toleration preached by the *bhakti* saints. Some of the rulers were also adopted liberal religious policies under the impact of the *bhakti* movement. The movement attempted to infuse a spirit of piety in the daily life of the people. It emphasized earning of wealth through hard work and honest means. It encouraged the value of social service to the poor and the needy. It developed a humanitarian attitude. It pointed out the virtues of contentment and self control. It drew attention to the evils of anger, greed and vanity.

12.3 IDEOLOGY OF EQUALITY IN THE *BHAKTI* MOVEMENT

In pre-medieval and medieval era, Indian social structure was based on rigid and discriminatory caste system which determined an individual's status and place in society based on his/her social hierarchy. The mechanism of social hierarchy started producing relationships based on superiority and inferiority complexes which later on also established the practice of untouchability. Differences and discrimination based on religion was widespread. Relationship between men and women were based on an unequal positioning of women in society. Women's freedoms were restricted and basic rights were denied. Kings and rulers were not caring and generous to subjects. A feudal structure was prevalent and powerful in society and a large gap was present between landowners and landless labourers, powerful affluent class of people and poor & suffering masses, money lenders and money borrowers, etc. Different *bhakti* saints protested and fought against these inequalities and

injustices produced by the structure and *bhakti* movement become a powerful voice to establish ideology of equality.

Kabir who was one of the most important figures of *bhakti* movement, like many other saints, also preached the doctrine of 'Monotheism' (belief in one single God). He said that God is one whom people call by different names such as Ram and Rahim. Through this conception of monotheism, he condemned the inequality of human being on the basis of religion, caste, tribe, race or family. Since everybody is created by the same supreme power, difference and inequality do not exist and one creation is the same like another in the eyes of almighty god. Inequalities based on religion, caste, race, etc., are social construct and thus divide the people and fail to see everyone with compassion and humanitarian approach. Kabir saw the greatest enemy of humanity and equality in Hindu caste system, its rituals, conservatism and superstitions. Kabir said that the original Hindu religion is captured by Brahmanical misinterpretation and dominance through rituals and superstitions. So Kabir stated that equality in Hindu society will not come until the Brahmanic rituals and practices will go away from the religion. Kabir also attacked the ill treatment and mentality of society for certain occupants and their occupations. Kabir spread his ideas that no job is lower and every individual is equal and respected irrespective of occupations that he or she is doing. Another *bhakti* saint Ravidas preached the importance of purity of mind and soul instead of ceremonial purity of body.

Saints such as Kabir, Surdas and Tulasi raised their voices against exploitations done by trading class, moneylender businessmen and state officials. In the writings of these saints grim situations of that time could be seen. Kabir was against collecting so much money and wealth by an individual, because then it would increase economic inequalities in society which further would be responsible for increasing poverty. Kabir strongly argued that only required amount of wealth and property should be possessed. His preaching of economic equality also related to god and corporeal body. He said that we are with our own mortal bodies which would not exist forever and when death would come to door, your wealth and property would not go with you. So his devotional writings became a powerful advocate of economic equality as well.

Medieval period was not just at all for women. Women's sufferings were much more acute than today. Though all the Bhakti saints did not raise the issue of women's equality and rights properly, but we can find the voices for women in the writings of Surdas and Meerabai. For them a woman and her body was not an object of sex and bodily pleasures. In Surdas and Meerabai's writings, women were seen on an equal footing with men. Both advocated the liberation of women from the ideology of male dominance. The established order of male subjugation which confines a woman in the four walls of the house and restricts her freedom would have to be forsaken. A sensitive woman who, under conditions of oppressions, looks upon god as an alternative to husband does not look upon the former as a mere alternative, but rather

as a determinate negation of that very being which a husband is not but should be. The tensions between the two potential masters: the god and husband, is not a question of choosing between options.

In the *bhakti* poetry, concerned issues of women were raised through attacking the existing social order where a woman was seen only in relation to her husband and family thereby denying an independent existence and identity to her. Thereby detaching the self of a woman from worldly and socially constructed relationship and attaching the self to the creator was felt necessary.

Untouchability which was the most painful social evil developed in the period of time and took place as an established social practice. This social evil was strongly attacked by *bhakti* saints mainly *Mahar* (untouchables) saints from Maharashtra such as Chokha Mela, Karma Mela, etc. They condemned and questioned the atrocious practices of untouchability and caste system mainly through *Abhangs* (poems/songs). In the discriminatory social system, entry in the temples, and access to wells and public places were forbidden to untouchables. There was no respect for untouchables and basic rights were denied to them. This was the background as well as landscape of the society where untouchables themselves protested through *bhakti* Tradition. Their pathetic conditions can be seen in this writing by Chokha Mela.

12.4 WOMEN IN *BHAKTI* MOVEMENT

With everyone equal in the eyes of God, the *bhakti* movement brought religion and spirituality to the marginalized classes - specially women, whose religious expression was restricted in many ways. It was a movement that not only aimed at individual salvation and a mystical union with God but also towards socio-religious egalitarianism. It liberated both God and man (inclusive of woman) from the shackles of Brahminical monopoly. The movement created a space where one could have a personal relationship with God and removed all intermediaries, rendering all Brahminical traditions, and the role of Brahmin priests futile. With such an alternative religious system in place, many women joined the movement and expressed themselves with no inhibitions. The quest for salvation no longer required Sanskrit mantras and rituals, but included dignity of labour.

The movement saw several women saints leading masses in their own regions, and singing songs and poems in their vernacular language. The *bhakti* movement was not just one movement, but an accretion of smaller regional movements towards salvation and against oppressive hierarchies. Tracing the roots of Indian Feminism led us to women in *bhakti*, who challenged Brahminical patriarchy through their songs, poems and ways of life. At a time where most spaces were restricted to women, they embraced *bhakti* to define their own truths to reform society, polity, relationships and religions.

Women saints wrote poems and songs expressing their love for the God, who is their lover, husband or consort, and about their oppression and desires for freedom. They not only challenged the god-like status of their husbands, but also gave up their motherhood and family. In this aspect, *bhakti* meant different things to women and men. While a male *bhakta* could follow his chosen path and remain a householder, this was not possible for the women. Most women had to choose between their *bhakti* and their married and domestic life. Many of these women could proceed on their chosen path only by discarding their marital ties altogether.

Mirabai, a *bhakti* poet of the 15th century and a Rajput princess, denied the legitimacy of her marriage to Raja Bhojraj and refused to consummate it. She embraced Lord Krishna and spent hours at the temple worshipping him. Roughly a decade into their unconsummated marriage, Bhojraj died. Just as Mira had refused to be his wife, she also repudiated the role as his widow. She would neither wear the mourning garb, nor follow any of the customs expected of a royal woman grieving a lost husband. Mira is a fortifying precedent of a woman who refused to be cowed. She has lived through the ages through her songs and poems, describing her utmost devotion and love towards Lord Krishna.

In addition to contending male dominance, *bhakti* women also had to bypass gender rigidities. Ramanujan lists the strategies women undertook for the same: refusing marriage to a mortal, becoming a courtesan, miraculously skipping youth, walking out of marriage, becoming a man or an old ugly woman, refusing widowhood norms, refusing motherhood, walking naked, or breaking caste barriers. Hence, the experiences of men and women bhaktas were starkly contrasted. The nakedness of the female body was also perceived as a great threat to men, and heavily condemned by the larger society, and still is. However, women *bhakti* saints like Akka Mahadevi and Lal Ded challenged these norms. Akka Mahadevi walked out of her marriage and wandered naked, with her body covered only by her hair. Lal Ded, one of the earliest Kashmiri mystic poets also refused to stay conned to domestic tyranny and its power hierarchy. She left her home, broke all material ties and wandered unclothed in search of God. On the other hand, Sant Soyarabai neither rejected marriage nor overtly deeded societal norms. She wrote about her family, daily existence and her devotion to god Vithoba, pilgrimage to Pandharpur, married life and finding freedom amidst it. Her *abhangas* to the misery of daily life and restrictions, to which they were subjected as belonging to *Mahar* caste, indicate her heightened caste and gender consciousness.

Medieval India had an atmosphere of immense discrimination, with patriarchy held in the highest regard. Hence, women sought *bhakti* to move out the restricted domestic spaces and oppose patriarchy and Brahminical hegemony. The rejection of the power of the male figure that they were tied to in subordinate relationships became the terrain for struggle, self assertion and alternative seeking.

Bhakti women laid the roots of feminism in India. With sheer bravery, tenacity and their devotion to God, they created an autonomous space for themselves and refused to be tied down by societal norms. They did the unspeakable, and displayed the true strength of a woman's spirit. They created their own path to freedom, and inspired many others to follow their own will. They transcended the social identities and material realities into a universal spiritual realm.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Give an account of the ideology of equality in the *bhakti* movement.

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2) Write a note on women participation in the *bhakti* movement.

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12.5 LET US SUM UP

The *bhakti* movement succeeded to a very small extent in realizing its two-fold objective *i.e.* bringing about reforms in Hinduism and developing harmonious relations between the Hindus and the Muslims. It was radically new, basically different from old traditions and ideas of religious authority. It sought to refashion the collective life on a new basis, envisaging a society in which there shall be justice and equality for all and in which men of all creeds shall be able to develop to their full moral and spiritual stature. It is perhaps far-fetched to say that Akbar's broad outlook was on account of the impact of the *bhakti* movement.

12.6 KEY WORDS

Mukti : salvation

Nirankar : without form

12.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES.

Check Your Progress 1

1) See Sec. 12.3

2) See Sec.12.4

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