

# **The Bhakti Cult's Vision of Religious Reformation: A Secular Strategy for The Modern World**

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to explain the origin and significance of the Bhakti cult in medieval India. Though it has significant social and religious overtones, the Bhakti movement is fundamentally spiritual. The Bhakti movement may also be viewed as an effort to lessen animosity among various religious groups. Even though the movement originated in South India, its secular worldview quickly expanded throughout the nation. During the era of the Bhakti movement, there was a noticeable and profound shift in society. It encourages the idea of religious cooperation and fights against bigotry and social injustice. This paper has attempted to define the role played by Bhakti saints in fostering social cohesion. Secularism seeks to foster a few tolerant, cooperative ideals in our contemporary culture to create an unbiased, conflict-free environment. In this paper, I intend to demonstrate the principles of religious unity, emphasised by a few well-known Bhakti saints, that offer a secular perspective and strive for social welfare.

**Keywords:** *Bhakti, Religion, Secularism, Reformation, Conflict, Harmony, Equality.*

## **Introduction:**

Human beings can be considered as seekers of peace within their lives. All people search for a path to achieve salvation. More or less, every person has faith in an ultimate truth. We human beings are unaware of the ultimate truth. As a result, different people have different opinions, which can create social conflicts. To remove all the conflicts, we need a medium to teach us moral values and create social harmony. The 'Bhakti' movement can be considered a valuable guideline that ties the knot of different believers by the thread of 'love'. The main aim of the Bhakti cult is to experience the essence of divinity by complete self-surrender. 'Bhakti' originates in the Sanskrit word '*Bhaj*', which means 'to serve'. So, the primary intention of the Bhakti movement was human service. To serve humanity, the Bhakti movement ignores all social and religious hierarchies. The notion of love and devotion, which the Bhakti cult spreads, converts social conflict into social harmony.

India has multiple religions, and the nation aims to achieve unity in diversity. However, sometimes, having several religious faiths becomes the reason for social conflict. Religious domination is very harmful to a nation, and it always takes its position in public discourse. Having diverse religious beliefs, our Indian society is further divided into some sects or castes. Being a caste-bounded society, the people belonging to this society are somehow identified by their caste. In a multi-religious country, every religious belief considers itself superior or higher than others. However, religious superiority or dominance should not be acceptable in all ideal societies. Instead, an ideal state must have welcoming behaviour towards every religious belief. Every existing religion must have tolerant behaviour and a secular notion towards their fellow religions. The emergence of the Bhakti movement aims to promote the idea of equality to build social unity. In our contemporary world, the impact of the Bhakti movement, which reflects the notion of secularism, is highly appreciable. We need a historical analysis of this movement to know its social implications.

#### **Bhakti saint's contribution to reconciling religions in south India:**

From some historical analysis, we come to know that the Bhakti movement first emerged in south India during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. The emergence of the Bhakti movement can be considered a revolution that threatened the stereotyped caste system. In south India, the Bhakti movement emerged by holding the hands of two groups, the Alvars and the Nayanars. Both these groups are believers of complete self-surrender to God to achieve salvation. The Alvars were the devotees who adored Lord Vishnu. On the other hand, the Nayanars were the adorers of Lord Shiva. It has been argued that both the Alvars and Nayanars were Tamil saints and poets who were highly critical of the Buddhist and Jaina schools. They were also highly critical of the social caste system. In our ancient past, the untouchables, lower-caste people, and even women were barred from entering temples, and they didn't have the right to consider themselves as devotees. The Alvars and Nayanars broke this tradition. Some saints belonging to these two groups were from the lower caste, and some were female devotees, too. Their aim to achieve religious egalitarianism attracts everyone and catches everyone's emotions. It has been argued that both Alvars and Nayanars were against some rituals. Though they were

considered critiques of the Buddhist and Jaina schools, we did not find any protest against the Brahminical superstitions and rituals. Both the Alvars and Nayanars spread the notion of love and Bhakti by composing songs and poems. Here, it is essential to note that all the songs and poems were written in Tamil language. So, it can be understood by the people of South India. Composing songs in one's language to spread the notion of love and peace for all, irrespective of caste, sex, creed, etc., was an attempt to build a congenial society with no religious conflict.

Focusing on the impact of the Bhakti cult in South India, it is important to note that some Bhakti saints came forward as social reformers and pure devotees who taught the way of worship. These devotees point out the way to ultimate liberty or salvation. In South India, some saints deeply excavated the philosophical perspective of devotion and conveyed it sonorously. One important saint was Adi Shankaracharya. His monotheistic theory about the supreme power made people conscious of one and only one ultimate truth. After Shankaracharya appeared, another outstanding acharya, Ramanuja, left a seminal impact. He is considered to be the founder of the new strand of devotion, known as '*Bhakti-marg*'. Ramanuja was very conscious about uplifting people, including the lower caste. In his time, *sudras* or the lower caste people did not get access to the holy Vedas. But, according to Ramanuja, the *sudras* and the lower caste people have the fundamental right to follow the devotional path to create a relationship with the deity. This type of allowance indicates a spirit of equality in the door of deity, which later became spiritual communism. In order to propagate Bhakti, Ramanuja feels the necessity of eradicating the caste distinction from society. Though these acharyas did not establish themselves as social reformers, their philosophical thought towards absolute gives a new definition to Bhakti, which is adopted and practised by many followers till today's world.

Having engulfed South India, the Bhakti cult trickled into North India, including Bengal, Punjab, Maharashtra, etc. The impact of the Bhakti movement in North India was visible from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century. In North India, the movement flourished as a socio-religious amendment. Many consider this movement as the

continuation of the South Indian movement.<sup>1</sup> While talking about the North Indian Bhakti cult, it is important to note that people's perspectives about devotion have been divided into two schools, i.e., '*Saguna Bhakti*' and '*Nirguna Bhakti*'. The follower of the *Saguna* school admires their deity with attributes. They also believe in idol worship. They also believe in incarnations of God, like Rama and Krishna - both are considered incarnations of Lord Vishnu. On the other hand, the followers of the *Nirguna* school consider their deity without any attribute. They are said to have been followers of monotheistic theory. It would be better to consider them as the followers of one ultimate truth. Though both these ways are quite different, they somehow express the same moral values. To understand those values and their impact on our society, we must discuss some outstanding notions admired by different saints in north India.

#### **Spiritual resistance against social hierarchy by North Indian Bhakti saints:**

One of the important saints of the 15th-century North Indian Bhakti cult was Ramananda. He essentially ushered in the new era of medieval mysticism. It has been claimed that we are unable to find any authentic writing on Ramananda's life. He was acknowledged as a follower of Ramanuja.<sup>2</sup> Ramananda is regarded as the progenitor of the '*Ramanandi*' sect. North India saw a return to religious reform under Ramananda. Being a devotee of Ramanuja, Ramananda served as a link between the North and South Indian Bhakti movement. It has been asserted that Ramananda picked his students from all walks of life, in opposition to the caste system, just like other monotheistic Bhakti saints. During his era, the Vaishnava community only accepted Brahmins as instructors and members of upper castes as laypeople. However, Ramananda did not appreciate the social hierarchy and tried to discard the caste system from our society. Reportedly, he thought of himself as an adorer of Ram and believed in the concept of incarnation. According to his theory, those who uphold the principles of human equality and fraternity can find their way to God. According to him, complete dedication and unadulterated love can be considered as the means to realise the essence of God. All devotees,

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<sup>1</sup> University of Calcutta. (n.d.). Retrieved July 15, 2024, from <https://www.caluniv.ac.in/academic/History/Study/Bhakti-Saint.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Pillai, P. G. (2022). *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism?* (p. 107). Routledge.

regardless of caste or religion, can be considered brothers. While Ramanuja didn't allow the Sudras to study the Vedas, Ramananda lifted this restriction and made the path of Bhakti open to all people, regardless of caste, creed, or religion. This saint held that there is only one God, the source of all things, and all divisions based on caste and creed disappeared for him. He disagreed with the teachings of holy literature exclusive to the Sanskrit language. Ramananda attempts to overcome language boundaries to reach individuals on a mental level. To make his concept of Bhakti comprehensible, he preached in regional tongues. One can infer social harmony from his teachings. While discussing Ramananda, we can assert that he wants to create a secular society based on devotion and harmony, striving to eliminate social biases by elevating humanity.

#### **Kabir's fight against social discrimination as a reform prophet:**

Unquestionably, the Bhakti movement profoundly affected politics, society, culture, and, most significantly, our religious life. During the Bhakti movement, our society split along religious, caste, regional, and class lines. The Bhakti movement aimed to unite society by promoting a syncretic God of love. Kabir is arguably the most well-known and adored among India's saint poets during the Bhakti movement. He was regarded as a reform prophet as well. Kabir wants to eradicate all forms of oppression, social inequalities, and hierarchies. According to him, people's love and dedication to God is the only way to accomplish this. He supposedly belonged to a lower-class Muslim family and experienced continuous hierarchical persecution and separation because of his caste identification. The bloodshed that occurred in the name of the religion, which led to people killing one another, convulsed Kabir's mind. He respects all living creatures equally and considers them as part or creation of the same creator. Kabir was thought to have been a contemporary of Ramananda. Ramananda, as it is well known, was a devotee who belonged to the 'sauna' school, while Kabir adhered to the '*nirguna*' school. Kabir was a follower of the ultimate deity devoid of traits or forms. He rejected the veneration of idols and all religious rituals. For him, though there are many ways to remember God, it does not imply that there are many Gods. He believes in the spiritual unity between living creatures and the absolute. By examining his opinions, we can see Kabir's compassion and concern for animals. Though the

ultimate creator also creates animals, Kabir was against animal persecution in all its manifestations, including sacrificial ceremonies. Since everyone is blessed with the same spirit of God, Kabir acknowledges that all people are equal and spiritually related to one another regardless of caste. Also, he was a logical thinker who did not believe that any one class was better. All the beings have the same blood and flesh. So, discrimination arises from human minds, not from the supreme. That is why Kabir rejects all forms of social inequality and discrimination. Kabir aims to build an ideal society where there will be no exploitation of the poor by the rich or untouchables by the higher caste people. He wanted to remove religious animosity from society through the path of Bhakti. From the views of Kabir, we can consider him as a monotheist who pays equal respect to all the creation of the one supreme power. During the Bhakti movement, Kabir's works and poetry were referred to as '*Kabirvanis*', which people mostly accepted. It is said that Kabir broke the language barriers and enabled his works to become close to all people's lives. Kabir's couplets, known as '*Dohas*', have been appropriated by individuals from many ethnicities, faiths and geographical areas over the ages. Some well-known poets, like Rabindranath Tagore, are said to have translated Kabir's '*Dohas*' into his native tongue and found it inspiring.<sup>3</sup> It is evident from the fact that individuals of diverse religious backgrounds equally claim Kabir's legacy that his influence is both transcendental and universal. Because it was so relevant to everyday life, Kabir's opinions grew increasingly more like those of all other religions. Hindu people consider him a Vaishnava saint; on the other hand, Muslims consider him a Sufi saint. Most importantly, the Sikh holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, contains his writings. One cannot simply categorise Kabir's thoughts into a single religion or group. Although Kabir's significant ideas about fostering social cohesion demonstrate his secular outlook, which is remarkably relevant in the modern world.

#### **Guru Nanak's humanistic vision towards world peace:**

India can be considered a country that has become the shelter of multiple cultures. Culture is what we value, preserve, and pass down from generation to generation. Our culture influences our manner of life, diet, attire, and

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<sup>3</sup> Pillai, P. G. (2022). *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism?* (p. 109). Routledge.

communication. The most important part of our culture is having religious faith, which makes communication between a person and the supreme spirit. Nonetheless, a variety of disputes emerge due to differing religious beliefs. The Bhakti movement was born out of the desire to eradicate those conflicts in society. In North India, Guru Nanak was a significant pioneer of the Bhakti movement. Guru Nanak is regarded as the first Sikh Guru. It is noteworthy that, after his death, the followers of Guru Nanak were known as the 'Sikhs', although he did not start a new and distinct religious organisation. He was regarded as a proponent of religious cooperation with other religions. Guru Nanak was adorer of humanism. Religious strife, poverty, the mistreatment of women, and social superstitions had troubled him since he was a young child. Guru Nanak thus started looking for the real purpose of life and a means of bridging the divide between adherents of various religions from an early age. Nanak dedicated his life to eradicating religious strife to bring about world peace. An individual's main intention is to achieve salvation. Salvation can be possible when our self is unified with the divine. According to Guru Nanak, it can only be possible through complete self-surrender through the medium of Bhakti. The teachings of Guru Nanak included the oneness of God, fraternity among all living beings, and service to all living beings. He sought to bring the Hindu and Muslim religious communities together. Nanak challenged religious prohibitions, conventional practices, and superstitions. He holds the same monotheistic beliefs as Kabir and asserts that a single creator inhabits every creation. In his view, God is the cosmos' creator, preserver, and destroyer. Regardless of our religious beliefs, a single, all-encompassing spirit created us all. Nanak views God as transcendent, omniscient, almighty, and immanent in all spirits. For him, there is no Hindu or Muslim; instead, all share the spirit of the same almighty. It signifies that, for him, all people are equal, regardless of the religious sect to which they belong. According to him, God is sympathetic toward everyone, including the wrong-doers. To be freed from reincarnation, Nanak emphasised the significance of meditating on the divine name. Since God created everything, we are unable to discover God's existence in any idols created by humans. Nanak was vehemently against the idol-worshipping system. Nanak considers and admires God without any forms. He talked about *nirakar Brahma*,

and stressed devotion and knowledge. Despite this, Guru Nanak was a believer in karma. According to his beliefs, doing good deeds is the only way for the individual soul to connect with the eternal soul. Nanak highlighted that to achieve salvation, one must have a Guru as a spiritual mentor. He asserts that the primary barrier to achieving salvation is the human ego. The ego, which gives rise to all the negative emotions that cause strife in society, including greed, jealousy, and rage, is regarded as the greatest evil in human existence. According to Guru Nanak, one can overcome this ego by praising the name of God. Complete devotion is the only way to erase all social evils. Although Guru Nanak pays equal respect to all religious sects. This admiration towards one supreme entity, his aim to bring religious harmony, indicates religious tolerance and acceptance. Moreover, Guru Nanak can be considered a prominent secular thinker of the Bhakti cult.

#### **Sri Chaitanya's call for social unity:**

In this regard, we honour Sri Chaitanya, another illustrious social revolutionist who popularised the Bhakti movement during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Here it is important to note that, Sri Chaitanya was a follower of the '*saguna*' school. He was a believer in incarnation theory and dedicated his life and devotion to adoring Lord Krishna. Due to Sri Chaitanya's profound influence on people's social and cultural lives, his influence extended beyond religious considerations and encompassed socio-cultural movements. Caste was a rigid social structure in his days. Not only were lower caste members prohibited from chanting Vedic hymns, but they were also forbidden from praying in temples. Sri Chaitanya condemned the caste system. He advanced a philosophy transcending trivial issues like caste, creeds, and other smaller considerations. In his teachings, Sri Chaitanya placed great emphasis on the eradication of the distinction between members of various sects. He was regarded as a cherished companion by the impoverished, the oppressed, the low-born untouchables, and the troubled. As a Krishna devotee, Sri Chaitanya created a new devotional system for the whole community. He introduced 'Kirtan' as a way to cultivate devotion and love for Sri Krishna. One way to conceptualise '*Kirtan*' is as a form of collective or mass chanting that downplays caste division. One of Chaitanya's most significant contributions was introducing '*Nagarkirtana*' to a group of individuals from all castes and creeds. He

maintained that no race or caste was outside the pole of salvation. According to him, all religious groups, including Muslims and Christians, and even women, were allowed to participate in the communal chanting, i.e. in 'Kirtana'. By promoting the dignity of every individual, Chaitanya's movement aspired to overthrow the traditional social dominance over those from lower castes. Sri Chaitanya's way of devotion can be considered unique, as it welcomes people from every sect to participate in devotional chanting, which signifies another way of a secular approach.

After discussing the theological philosophies espoused by a few significant Bhakti saints, we might view the Bhakti movement as a religious reformation movement. This movement may be viewed as a humanitarian strategy for fostering cross-cultural harmony. Through the adoption of the concept of devotion, religion plays a crucial role in contemporary culture in uniting people of different faiths. Conflict between different cultures and religions has become more common in the modern world due to cultural variety. We can reduce the socio-cultural disputes if we adhere to the Bhakti saints' concept of serving mankind. Realising the ultimate truth is the goal of every religious sect. Because we consider ourselves to be the descendants of the absolute who created everything, we must respect the other species created by the all-powerful creator. The Bhakti saints try to introduce some specific moral values to create a harmonious society. They preserve basic human rights by incorporating equal respect for every religious belief. Their attitude towards different religious sects highlights the notion of secularism as such. Though in the period of the Bhakti movement, the term 'secularism' was not introduced, but we can observe the implication of secular norms within the human-centric approach of the Bhakti movement. In this regard, we can remember the famous Western philosopher Protagoras, who considered human beings as the measure of everything. Human beings are creators and preservers of social customs. So, every individual must adopt a welcoming behaviour towards others to build a peaceful society. Everyone gives importance to human deeds, from our ancient literature to the Bhakti saints. Removing caste hierarchy, providing equal respect, and incorporating or spreading the notion of love were the main aims of the Bhakti saints. To achieve the aim, they dedicated their life to the divinity as well

as to the service of mankind. In this regard, we can remember Swami Vivekananda, who refers to the service to humanity as equal to the service to God. Swami Vivekananda was the exponent of universal brotherhood. He never judges any individual by his/her caste or religious sentiment. Swami Vivekananda believed in one infinite truth as a follower of the Vedantic tradition of monotheism. In his own words -

There never was my religion or yours, my national religion or your national religion; there never existed many religions, there is only the one. One infinite religion existed all through eternity and will ever exist, and this religion is expressing itself in various ways.<sup>4</sup>

Religion has become an inseparable part of human life. The Bhakti saints, by respecting every person in the society and their religious beliefs, wanted to convert everyone's focus towards spirituality. A spiritual mind can be considered a conflict-free, peaceful mind. Spiritual thought is the essential criterion for creating a harmonious society. In this regard, the opinion of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan comes to mind, who reminds us that spiritual certainty provides comfort and strength. Spiritual thinking influences a person to behave welcomingly towards every religious sect. The impact of the Bhakti movement encourages people to pay attention to 'karma' and consider service to others to be their primary duty. In the same way, the notion of secularism gives importance to humanity in achieving the welfare of society. The propounder of the term 'secularism', George Jacob Holyoake, asserts that -

Secularism is the study of promoting human welfare by material means, measuring human welfare by the utilitarian rule, and making the service of others a duty of life.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Vivekananda, S. (2018). *THE COMPLETE WORK OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA* (p. 180). New Delhi, India: Discovery Publisher.

<sup>5</sup> Holyoake, G. J. (1871). *THE PRINCIPLES OF SECULARISM* (p. 13). London, England: Legare Street Press.

## **Bhakti cult's ideology and its relevance to contemporary culture:**

The Bhakti cults, which emerged in medieval India as social and spiritual reform movements, continue to have significant effects on contemporary culture. Their fundamental beliefs—devotion, equality, compassion, and direct communion with the divine have had and will significantly impact modern philosophical, social, and cultural discussions.

### **1. As a Crusader for Fairness and Social Justice:**

The Bhakti movement's revolutionary demand for social justice and human equality is one of its most significant legacies to contemporary India and the globe. The Bhakti saints stood firmly against the repressive social hierarchies, caste systems, and untouchability that pervaded their religious and cultural practices. Some historical figures, like the caste-bound leatherworker Ravidas and the traditionally deprived weaver Kabir, vehemently opposed Brahmanical supremacy and maintained that one's dedication to one's religion and good deeds, rather than one's birth, caste, or ritual purity, determines one's access to heavenly grace. In their poems, they advocated a spiritual democracy based on the idea that God is equal to every person. In the face of caste-based oppression, this egalitarian spiritual perspective became a potent weapon of resistance.

Women, who had hitherto been marginalised in religious life, were also given a voice in the Bhakti movement. In defiance of patriarchal conventions, saints such as Mirabai and Sri Chaitanya demonstrated their spiritual power via sung poetry and personal devotion. In addition to challenging gender discrimination, their voices paved the way for women to take the lead in spiritual traditions and express themselves. Social justice, equality under the law, and human dignity are essential tenets of the Bhakti cult's teachings. These assertions resonate particularly in contemporary society due to the enduring prevalence of discrimination based on gender, religion, socioeconomic status, and caste. The cult's lasting impact provides spiritual solace and cultural affirmation to underrepresented groups fighting for equality. Modern democratic principles are reflected in the movement's prioritisation of individual merit over familial privilege, which lends credence to the fights for social justice, affirmative action, and inclusive growth that are

ongoing today. As a result, Bhakti ideology remains a wellspring of strength and moral direction for those seeking a more equitable and just society.

## **2. Amplification of Underrepresented Perspectives:**

Saints of the Bhakti movement have traditionally come from all walks of life, including lower castes and women, and have fought against the spiritual domination of the elite. This heritage provides a cultural example of inclusive empowerment and lends assurance to current initiatives to elevate the voices of the oppressed, especially in feminist and Dalit discourses.

## **3. Promoting Religious Inclusion and Pluralism:**

According to Bhakti traditions, an individual's connection with the divine should not be limited by institutionalised religion. Messages conveyed by saints such as Kabir and Nanak transcended Hindu-Muslim divides. Bhakti cults offer a potent antidote to sectarianism in an age characterised by religious polarisation through their teachings of tolerance, unity, and harmony.

## **4. Supporting Regional and Vernacular Traditions:**

The Bhakti movement preserved and enriched regional cultures by conveying spiritual ideas in local languages. This heritage provides a blueprint for fighting cultural homogenisation in this era of modern globalisation by encouraging cultural rebirth and linguistic pride.

## **5. Spiritual peace:**

Anyone can find a spiritual home in the Bhakti cults, which provide a framework for compassionate living, personal faith, and ethical living apart from institutional orthodoxy. This aligns with the current societal tendency of people seeking spirituality without being overly religious.

## **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, it can be said that, in Medieval India, the Bhakti movement was upending the established social order, questioning the rights and power of religious leaders, and attempting to create a direct line of communication between God and humanity. The Bhakti ideology was driven from the start by an intense

emotional desire, a humanising cosmopolitanism, and a yearning for the divine essence and personal experience. A concerted social protest against the caste system, untouchability, and feudal changes was led by saints of the Bhakti movement, who sought to secure equal rights for everyone to live with dignity beside one another. The evaluation and practical analysis of the notion of secularism can show the relevance of the Bhakti movement in today's world. Modern civilisation needs an ideal, balanced society, which is what the Bhakti movement seeks to achieve through its revolutionary religious reformation and the idea of secularism through its call for equality.

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