

Understanding Indian Society through Bhakti Literature: A Perspective from Below

Jayashree Ambewadikar

Assistant Professor, Central University of Gujarat, India

To Cite this Article

Jayashree Ambewadikar (2024). Understanding Indian Society through Bhakti Literature: A Perspective from Below. *Studies in Indian Sociology*, 1: 1, pp. 37-42.

Abstract: It will be very difficult to arrive at the origin of Bhakti because it is a feeling of surrendering to God which is in all religions. But during medieval period, 'Bhakti' assumed a new significance and brought many changes in the Indian society. In this period Bhakti saints from different places preached importance of 'Bhakti' in their vernacular language instead of Sanskrit with sincere and simple devotion instead of complicated and costly rituals. Their teachings had variations from place to place due to language but their messages had widespread effect on the population. During this period many saints raised their voice against unjustified caste system and caste-based discrimination. This paper depicts the voices of saints like Tiruppan Alvar, Chokhamela and Ravidas of different states and languages in India.

Keywords: Indian Saints, Bhakti literature, Social Stratification, Caste System

Introduction

It will be very difficult to arrive at the origin of Bhakti because it is a feeling of surrendering to God which is in all religions. But during medieval period, 'Bhakti' assumed a new significance and brought many changes in the Indian society. In this period Bhakti saints from different places preached importance of 'Bhakti' in their vernacular language instead of Sanskrit with sincere and simple devotion instead of complicated and costly rituals. Their teachings had variations from place to place due to language but their messages had widespread effect on the population. During this period many saints raised their voice against unjustified caste system and caste-based discrimination. This paper depicts the voices of saints like Tiruppan Alvar, Chokhamela and Ravidas of different states and languages in India.

The saints brought to the forefront the atrocities of caste system on the lower castes sections by the upper caste in the social hierarchy. Consequently the lower caste

people were denied respect in the society, and had to live in an abject poverty. Bhakti movement could not eliminate evils of caste system and establish social equality, but it had provided opportunities to the saints of lower caste to express their grievances. This was a first step towards an egalitarian society, a society of equal rights to all.

The Bhakti movement of the saints gave emphasis on equality, simple devotion, non-acceptance of rituals, and use of vernacular languages for preaching. This gave a perspective from below and created a raise in the spiritual aspirations of the lower caste or downtrodden people. They started having a sense of realization of for the divine, possible for them also. This is so because earlier God was mediated by the Brahmin priest in the Sanskrit language which gods uses and with the costly rituals. But now with spiritual awakening, meditation and creative instinct, the lower caste saints are able to reach the divine. These lower caste saints were illiterate but had composed poetry of literary merit containing high philosophical ideas.

Saint Tiruppan Alvar

Saint Tiruppan Alvar is considered to be the first 'untouchable' saint of India who lived in Tamil South during the eighth or ninth century CE. He is one among the twelve Vaisnava Alvar, who is given this title due to his devotion to Lord Ranganathan. He is attributed with one poem which is sung in the daily ritual as a tradition till today in all Srirangam temples.

It is said that, saint Tiruppan belonged to 'untouchable' *panar* caste and resided in a town near the revered temple of Srirangam, Vaisnava pilgrimage sites. Saint Tiruppan sang beautiful songs from his childhood admiring Lord Ranganatha, the form of Visnu revered in the temple of Srirangam.

Tiruppan resided across river from where he sang everyday for the lord from he could not enter temple to meet lord due to his location in the social hierarchy. But with his melodious songs and devotion, he could awake the sympathy of Lord for him. Once Lord instructed Brahmin priest of Srirangam temple in his dream to carry saint Tiruppan into the temple on his shoulders. The priest went to saint Tiruppan and requested to come to temple, but he declines to come due to his status of untouchability.

Latter, Tiruppan entered the temple riding on the shoulders of the Brahmin priest, and, starting singing for lord Ranganathan in devotion. His song of ten verses praising lord Ranganatha for his grace and power are still sung today in the Srirangam temples. It is said that saint Tiruppan got miraculously united and disappeared into lord Ranganatha. It is said that this is possible only through the power of his devotion despite the status of untouchability. But practically saint Tiruppan is not allowed walk in the temple as it will pollute the temple.

This was the first voice from India, especially from south India, from state of Tamil Nadu. This saint was able to start the reform in the very traditional place of Chidambaram which was beyond the imagination of the upper caste people that untouchable persons can be elevated to sainthood and his verses will be sang in daily liturgy of Srirangam temple as tradition.

Saint Chokhamela

Saint Chokhamela resided in Maharashtra in the 13th - 14th century. He belonged to the Mahar caste, one of the untouchable caste in India. It was seen that the practice of untouchability was done against them during those days. Being untouchable, he was not allowed to enter in the temple; or even come to the main door of the temple by the upper caste people. He therefore built a hut on the other side of the river, Chandrabhaga beyond Pandharpur to view and praise the god Vitthal.

Chokhamela complains to God Vitthal about the caste-based injustice that some people experience and other enjoying high place, respect and prosperity. He says, somebody is having a high comfortable seat to sit and comfortable bed to sleep. But some people do not have clothes to cover their body. Some people enjoy all delicious food and some people have no enough food and had to beg for a coarse meal.

He ridicules the belief that God will be polluted by the touch of a lower caste or Shudra person. He says God is beyond purity and impurity. Saint Chokhamela feels sad about the injustice done to the lower caste. He sees no hope that the people will treat him equally. His only hope lies with Lord Vitthala, who do not discriminate. But saint Chokhamela realises that he cannot go against well established social norms so he accepts his humble position outside the Vitthal temple and feels satisfied that he has the pleasure of looking at God's feet from outside the main door.

Saint Chokhamela realised the unity of Saguna (embodiment) and Nirguna (disembodiment) with spiritual progress. He says Saguna form is only a manifestation of one Guna (Aspect, quality) and Nirguna, in fact God is without form and is present everywhere. Saint Chokhamela was a saint of the highest order. But he considered himself a servant of Lord Vitthal, just like a Mahar was the servant of the Village Chief.

Saint Chokhamela like many Bhakti saints made high philosophical and spiritual knowledge accessible to masses by using simple language like Marathi. This is surprising because as a lower caste person he was not expected to have an access to religious scriptures nor expected to read and write. Probably he must have listened to the mythological stories of saints at the meetings in Pandharpur which he memorised them and make references to them while composing his devotional poetry ; Abhang. Further, because of respect among the saint community, a Brahmin named Anant Bhatt volunteered to become a writer for saint Chokhamela to note down his abhangs. There

are 350 abhangas which are available now of saint Chokhamela. Many of his abhangas are popular even now. Saint Chokhamela had critical view on hypocrisy and showing off of spirituality. He also dislikes the begging of alms on the pretext of religion. He criticised hypocritical Sadhus for this.

However, because of this respectable position, he became an eyesore for the high caste priest and community of Pandharpur. So they hatched a conspiracy against him. He was accused of stealing God's ornament and was beaten up. The legend says that, in the temple the priests observed that Vithoba's gold necklace was missing. At that moment priest remembered that Chokhamela had been at the temple doors last night in his devotion to god. The priest got furious by the fact that the temple was not only polluted by his entry and the necklace also was stolen by Chokhamela. And the priests found Chokhamela still sleeping with a gold necklace around his neck. He was punished for the crime of stealing necklace and polluting temple. Chokhamela was tied to bullocks and were about to be dragged to death. But the animals stood firm and did not move an inch despite the whip-lashing on them. The legend came to an end with Vithoba / vithal revealing himself to the entire public, holding the bullocks by the horns that chokhamela is innocent. Lord Vithal protected saint Chokhamela for his uncommittee crime of stealing ornament and polluting temple.

Another incident says, once he was questioned about his devotion to Vithal. He got humiliated and deeply hurt by the question so he stopped taking food and wept continuously till Vitthal appeared before him. The legend says, Vitthal embraced him and took him inside the temple to talk to him. The temple priests were outraged as they felt that the temple was again pollution by Chokhamela. The priests became angry and ordered him to stay on the other side of the river Chandrabhaga.

Even though saint Chokhmela was highly accomplished and respected but could not escape the forced labour that the feudal government was imposing on the lower caste people during those days. While doing work of constructing a boundary wall for the village Mangalvede. The wall which was under construction fell and many workers died, saint Chokhamela was among them.

It is said that Saint Namdev brought his remains at Pandharpur and constructed a tomb or Smadhi for him in front of the Vitthala's temple. According to tradition saint Chokhmela's bones were also chanting Vitthal's name. Saint Tukaram paid tribute to saint Chokamela in one of his abhangas which says: "you are a tome of ideologies, Innumerable are the wicked that you have taken to task."

Saint Ravidas

In the 15th century CE Saint Ravidas was born in the Chamar caste and was believed to be active in the Bhakti movement of North India. He was the one of the most respected

saint like many poet saints of that era. He is highly respected in the states of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh as well as Maharashtra. His sacred songs and verses has eternal sway on the bhakti movement even today.

Saint Ravidasis a thinker, a humanist, spiritual figure and socio-cultural reformer who devoted whole of his life for the annihilation of the caste system. Saint Ravidas believed in one God. He said, If God is actually in every human being, then it is rather vain to separate people on the basis of castes, creeds and other such graded social orders.

He wrote religious poems on the philosophy of equality. His poems made numerous followers. There are about 41 poems of him which are included in the religious text of the Sikhs, "Adi Granth" or "Guru Granth Sahib". The religion of Sikhism was evolved to counter the Hinduism which was based on stratification of people in different caste according to their occupation or karma. The Sikhism preached for equality and fraternity for the followers. His poems are based on this philosophy were assembled by the Guru Arjan Dev in Guru Granth Sahib.

Saint Ravidas poems depicts the preaching about an egalitarian society. In fact, his teachings, through his poems, became the philosophy of the lower castes or Dalit people in Punjab. Now many people are following the teachings of saint / Guru Ravidas and becoming self-professed Ravidasias, a new religion.

He visualised a city or place which will be without sorrow, Begumpura is a term coined in a poem by Ravidas. Be-gum-pura, that is, be means no, gum means sorrow and pura means place. It is an romanticised city where people will stay fearlessly and as equals. The poetry reveals sense of caste humiliation and its consequence of poverty, and a desire to find an ideal place free of pain has common property holding or where there is no terror or torture.

Conclusion

However the orthodox elements in general failed to realise the need of time. They discouraged the intellectual growth of the lower caste and tried to maintain the supremacy of the Brahmin, thus perpetuating injustice. The Bhakti saints like Ramdas had desire to maintain the supremacy of the Brahmins.

The saint reformers who altogether rejected the caste system are accepted among the Indian masses. It is found that Buddhism rejected the caste system so it became widespread. It is finally defeated Hinduism which was the imagination of these saints.

References

Kharat S. (2002). '*Chokhobacha Vidroha*', Pune, (Marathi), Sugava Prakashan.

- Patton Burchett (2009). *Bhakti* Rhetoric in the Hagiography of ‘Untouchable’ Saints: Discerning *Bhakti*’s Ambivalence on Caste and Brahminhood, *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 13, 2: 115–41 Springer.
- Sharma K. (1987). ‘Bhakti and Bhakti Movement; A New Perspective’, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Upadhye P.M. (1976). Saint Literature in Marathi, Indian Literature, Sahitya Akademi Vol. 19, No. 5 (September-October 1976), pp. 49-62.
- Zelliot, Eleanor and Rohini Mokashi-Punekar (2005). *Untouchable Saints: An Indian Phenomenon*, New Delhi: Manohar.