

11th History Lesson 8 Notes in English

8. Cultural Syncretism: Bhakti Movement in India

Introduction

- Like all cultural traditions, **religion** too does not exist in isolation. It adapts to existing situations and meets both **social** and **spiritual** needs of the people.
- As a country with a long history, religion in India developed by interacting with various **traditions**.
- **Vedic religion**, which came with the advent of **Aryan** speaking peoples to India, absorbed many elements from the **Indus civilization**.
- **Mother goddess** worship had its origins in **Harappa**.
- Similarly an image found in the Indus script has been identified as that of **Siva**.
- The prime Vedic gods were **Indra, Varuna, Agni**, etc. and it was only later that the worship of **Siva** and **Vishnu** developed.
- In the mid-first millennium before the Common Era (B.C.) two great religions emerged in the **Indo-Gangetic valley**

Bhakti Movement spread all over India

- **Buddhism** and **Jainism** (apart from other heterodox religions such as Ajivika) which challenged the orthodox Vedic religious practices.
- Similarly, in the mid-first millennium of the Common Era, in the **southern country**, a great religious tradition flourished in the form of a **devotional** or **bhakti** movement.
- **Bhakti** as a religious concept means devotional surrender to a supreme god for attaining salvation.
- Even though texts such as the **Bhagavad Gita** talk about the path of **bhakti**, or **bhakti-marga**, the **movement** gained force only in this period.
- Historians argue that this emerged in **opposition** to the ethical, fatalistic and atheistic traditions of Jainism and Buddhism.
- Vedic theism incorporated certain features from both.
- While **Adi Sankara** provided Hinduism with a philosophic **doctrine of Advaita** to counter the heterodox religions it remained at the intellectual level.
- It was **the great Saiva Nayanmar and Azhwars**, with their moving verses, gave form to **the Bhakti doctrine** and **Cultural Syncretism**: won the support of the people.
- Historians refer to this as the Bhakti movement. This movement, **supported** by the **ruling kings**, made a deep and lasting impact on all aspects: **social, political, religious, cultural and linguistic**.
- Thus **south India** became the **home of religious renaissance** from the **7th to the 10th century**.

- With theologians like **Ramanujar** it turned into a **philosophical and ideological movement** in the eleventh century.
- Inspired by many **poet-saints** the **bhakti** cult became **widespread** from **14th century** in the **whole of India**.
- We analyze here the general features of the bhakti movement, its main proponents, the two different trends of the movement and its impact on social and cultural life of the people.

Bhakti Movement in the South

- The transformation of a **tribal society** into a **well structured social order** and the emergence of a **powerful monarchical system** of governance necessitated patronizing one religion or the other to legitimize authority.
- **Buddhism and Jainism** were predominantly **patronized** by the merchant class and they were also **supported** by the state.
- The Bhakti movement originated among the **landholding castes**, and it was **critical** of Buddhists and Jains.
- This also **led** to a **fight** for royal patronage.

Conflict with Buddhism & Jainism

- Sources: The bhakti literature, mostly **puranas** and **hagiographical texts**, provide information about the religious **conflicts** in **Tamilnadu**.
- **Thevaram** consists of the **hymns** by the **three Nayanmars**: **Appar** (Thirunavukkarasar), **Sambandar** (Thirugnanasambandar) and **Sundarar**.
- Together these constitute **the seven of the twelve Saiva Thirumurais**. The Eighth **Thirumurai** consists of the **hymns** of **Manickavasakar**.
- Many of these hymns articulate their **criticism** of **Jainism** and **Buddhism**. **Periyapuranam** by **Sekkizhar** which narrates the **stories** of the **sixty three**
- **Nayanmars** is an **important** source for the study of the **Bhakti movement**.
- The hymns of the **Vaishnava saints**, **Azhwars**, are compiled as **Nalayira Divya Prabandham**.
- The importance of the **bhakti poems** lie in the fact that they are **still read, sung** and revered by people, and they also form an important part of Tamil literary tradition.
- **Epigraphical sources** and **iconography** also provide much information.

Conflicts

- The earliest instances of **conflict** between **Saivism** and **Vaishnavism** on the one hand and the **Sramanic** sects of Buddhism and Jainism on the other hand occurred during the **Pallava period**.
- **Mahendravarma Pallava I**, a **Jain** by faith, **persecuted** those belonging to **other religions**.
- **Appar**, a **Jaina** in his early life, called **Darmasena**, later turned to **Saivism** under the **influence** of his sister.

- **Mahendravarman** at the instance of his Jaina advisers tried to **reconvert** **Appar** first by persuasion and then by persecution.
- But eventually it ended in the **king's own conversion to Saivism**.
- According to tradition, **Sambandar** **defeated** the **Jains** in a theological debate and consequently his opponents were impaled.
- **Maravarman Arikesari (640- 670)**, also known as **Koon Pandyan**, who converted from **Saivism to Jainism**, was **later re-converted** under the **influence** of **Sambandar**.
- According to a **Saivite** legend, after his re-conversion, he ordered a **massacre** of **Jains** in **Samantham**, a village in **Madurai district**.
- **Bhakti** literature and hagiographies contain copious details about the **conflicts** between **Saivism and Vaishnavism** on the one hand and the **heterodox sects** such as **Buddhism and Jainism**.
- The **philosophical treatises** such as the **Saiva Siddhanta** texts contain elaborate disputations of Buddhist and Jain philosophies.
- Some of the **Saiva Siddhanta** texts, such as **Sivagnana Sithiyar**, contain a separate section called '**parapakkam**' which essentially refute Buddhist and Jain theological arguments.
- **Bhakti** literature and hagiography narrate instances of conflict and the **defeat of heterodoxy**.
- Inscriptions indicate that such **conflict** was **accompanied** by violence with the **impaling** of many **monks**.

Bhakti movement defeated other religions

- Despite the sophisticated philosophical disputation, it was the nature of the **Bhakti** movement and the royal patronage that it received that ultimately led to the **downfall of Buddhism and Jainism**.
- By the **eleventh century**, both these **religions** were **effectively defeated**.
- While **Buddhism** was **wiped out** in the **Tamil country** as in much of India **Tamil speaking Jain communities** have **survived** in pockets in **Tamilnadu** to this day.
- **Temples and shrines** were **destroyed** or fell into disuse while many artefacts were **lost** due to **neglect and vandalism**.
- To this day one can see **decapitated statues of Buddha** and the **Jain thirthankaras** in many parts of **Tamilnadu**.
- Despite this, the **orthodox and heterodox** interacted with each other and they have **left a mark**.
- The idea of **renunciation**, which is central to **Buddhism and Jainism**, was **adopted** by **Saivites and Vaishnavites**.
- In response to the simplicity and life negation of the heterodox sects **bhakti** movement celebrated life with **festivals and rituals**.
- Similarly, the high value accorded to **vegetarian food habits** and the **prohibition on killing of animals** may be traced to this influence.

- The supremacy accorded to the **Tamil language** was a response to the fact that the heterodox religions used **north India Prakrits**.
- Most importantly, bhakti exponents posited that, unlike the fatalistic religions of Buddhism and Jainism, **devotion to Vishnu and Siva** could overcome fate.
- Thus **Vedic Hinduism** was **transformed** by the conflict with Buddhism and Jainism.

Spread of Bhakti Movement to the North

- When the popularity of the **bhakti movement** in **south India** reached its **peak**, the doctrine of bhakti was expounded at the philosophical level by a series of **Vaishnava scholars and saints**.
- **Ramanujar** expounded the philosophy known as **Vishistadvaita**, or **qualified monism**.
- His teaching **qualified Adi Sankara's emphasis** on absolute monism or the oneness of the 'supreme' and the 'souls'.
- If the Bhakti movement **flourished** in the **Tamil country** from the **seventh century**, it was only from the fifteenth century that there was an **extraordinary outburst of devotional poetry in north India**.
- The society had degenerated into a **caste-ridden community** with practice of **segregation, polytheism and idolatry**.
- The religious minded saints raised their **voice of protest** against rites and ceremonies, superstitions, and unwanted formalisms.
- A popular monotheistic movement along with **Vaishnava Bhakti** movement came to be **launched**.
- The monotheists followed a path which was independent of **dominant** religions of the time, **Hinduism and Islam**.
- They denied their allegiance to either of them and criticized superstitious and orthodox elements of both the religions.

Islam spread in India

- The **advent of Islam** with the **Turkish** conquest posed a **challenge** to **Vedic** scholars and priests.
- By the end of the fourteenth century **Islam** had **spread** to large parts of **India**.
- A considerable section of the Indian population had taken to Islam.
- Combined with state power, **the universal message of Islam** with emphasis on equality attracted the lower sections of society.
- The new political and social situation created conditions for the growth of **non-conformist** movements with **anti-caste, anti-vedic and antipuranic traditions**.
- The resultant changes in the cultural sphere were: development of regional languages, **the evolution of Hindustani (Hindi)**, and of **Indo-Muslim music** and architecture.
- The Hindu response to **Muslim political** power was complex.

- While there was considerable hostility to the new religion there was also a tendency to internal reform to strengthen Hinduism so as to face the **challenge**.
- An important outcome of the **encounter** was the **rise of syncretic** sects and major poets and Saints such as **Kabir, Guru Nanak, and Ravidas**.

Impact of Sufism

- In parallel with the Bhakti movement in Hinduism, **Sufism** played a similar role **in Islam**.
- The terms **Sufi, Wali, Darvesh and Fakir** are used for Muslim saints who attempted to develop their intuitive faculties through ascetic exercises, contemplation, renunciation and selfdenial.
- By the **12th century**, Sufism had become an influential aspect of **Islamic social life** as it extended over **almost the entire Muslim community**.
- Sufism represents the **inward or esoteric side** and the mystical dimension of Islam.
- **Sufi saints** transcended religious and communal distinctions, and worked for promoting the **interest of humanity** at large.
- **The Sufis** were a class of **philosophers** remarkable for their religious **catholicity** and **tolerance**.
- Sufis regarded **God** as the **supreme beauty** and believed that one must admire it, take delight in His thought and concentrate his attention on Him only.
- They believed that God is '**Mashuq**' (beloved) and Sufis are the '**Ashiqs**' (lovers). Sufism crystallized into various '**Silsilahs**' or orders.
- The most popular Sufi orders were **Chistis, Suhrawardis, Qadiriya and Naqshbandis**.

Sufism blunted the conflict of Hindu and Muslims

- Sufism took root in both **rural** and **urban** areas, and exercised a deep social, political and cultural influence on the masses.
- It **rebelled** against all forms of religious **formalism, orthodoxy, falsehood** and **hypocrisy**, and **endeavoured** to create a **new world** order in which spiritual bliss was the ultimate goal.
- At a time when **struggle for political power** was the prevailing trend, the Sufi saints reminded people of their moral obligations.
- In a **world torn by strife** and **conflict** they tried to bring peace and harmony.
- The most important contribution of **Sufism** is that it helped to **blunt the edge of Hindu-Muslim conflicts** and prejudices by forging the feelings of solidarity and brotherhood between these two religious communities.

Salient Features of Bhakti Movement

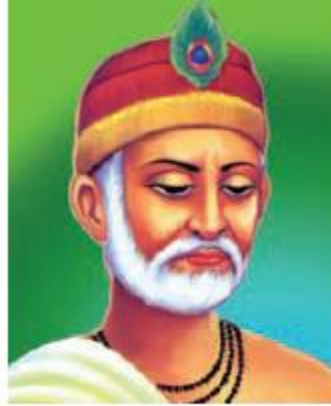
1. The bhakti reformers **preached** the principles of monotheism (oneness of God)

2. They believed in freedom from the **cycle of life and death**. They advocated that the salvation could be attained only by deep devotion and **faith in God**.
3. They emphasized the **self-surrender** for obtaining the bliss and grace of God.
4. **Gurus** could act as guides and preceptors.
5. They advocated the **principle of Universal brotherhood**.
6. They **criticized idol worship**.
7. They stressed the **singing of hymns** with deep devotion.
8. Arguing that all living beings, including humans, were god's children they strongly denounced caste system which **divided people** according to their birth.
9. They condemned **ritualism, pilgrimages and fasts**.
10. They did not consider any language as sacred and composed **poems** in the **language of the common people**.

Proponents of Bhakti Movement

Kabir

- **Kabir** is probably the most important cultural figure of **medieval India**.
- His iconoclastic poetry which ridiculed **ostentatiousness** and ritual, and emphasized the **universality of god** won many adherents.
- Little concrete **historical evidence** is available on his life.
- He was probably a **weaver**. Said to be a **disciple** of **Ramananda**, he learnt **Vedanta** philosophy from him.
- According to the popular **Tazkirah-i-Auliya-i-Hind** (Lives of Muslim Saints), he was a disciple of the **Muslim Sufi, Shaikh Taqi**.
- Kabir was a religious radical who denounced with **equal zest** the narrowness of **sectarianism, both Hindu and Islam**.



Kabir

- His message **appealed** to the **lower classes** of Hindu community.
- The most salient features of his teachings is denunciation of polytheism, idolatry, and caste.
- He was equally unsparing in his **condemnation** of Muslim formalism.
- He was a true seeker after God, and did his best to **break** the **barriers** that separated **Hindus from Muslims**.
- What appealed to the millions of his followers through the ages, however, is his passionate conviction that he had found the pathway to God, a pathway accessible to the lowest as well as the highest.
- His **poetry** is still **recited** across large parts of **India**.

Ravidas

- **Ravidas** was a poet saint of the **bhakti movement** during the **15th to 16th century**.
- Venerated as a **guru** (teacher) in the regions of **Punjab, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh**, the devotional songs of Ravidas made a lasting impact upon the bhakti movement.
- The life details of Ravidas are **uncertain and contested**.
- Most scholars believe he was born in a **family of tanners**.



Ravidas

- Ravidas was one of the disciples of the **bhakti saint-poet Ramananda**. Ravidas' devotional songs were included in **the Sikh Scriptures**.
- Ravidas spoke **against social divisions** of **caste** and **gender**, and promoted unity in the pursuit of personal spiritual freedoms

Guru Nanak

- The saint with the biggest institutional influence was **Guru Nanak (1469–1539)** who founded the **Sikh religion** which shows undoubted syncretic influence.
- As a monotheistic religion Sikhism emphasized the oneness of god and adherence to a **strict morality**.
- Over two centuries, under the **leadership** of its **ten gurus**, Sikhism expanded swiftly in the **Punjab region** winning numerous adherents.
- Sikh teachings resulted in the creation of a strong sense of community.



Guru Nanak

- The **politics** of the times created **conflicts** with the **Mughal empire** leading to persecution which resulted in the **martyrdom** of its gurus.
- **Guru Govind Singh** was the last guru.
- After him the **Granth Sahib** was considered the guru. While the teachings of **Guru Nank** is the **Adi Granth**.
- The Guru Granth Sahib, part from the teachings of its other gurus, **incorporates** the writings of many **Bhakti poets** and **Sufi saints** such as **Ramananda, Namadeva, Kabir** and **Sheikh Farid**.

Chaitanya (1485–1533)

- **Chaitanya of Bengal** represents an aspect of the bhakti movement that is very different from that seen in the lives and teachings of Kabir and his successors.
- Chaitanya's concern, unlike that of Kabir, was not with bringing people to an understanding of a God, beyond all creeds and formulations; it was to exalt the **superiority of Krishna** over all other deities.



Chaitanya

- It was, in other words, a revivalist, not a syncretic movement, a return to a worship of Vishnu under one of his most appealing forms, the **loving ecstatic Krishna**.
- The **Bengal Vaishnavites** did **not** try to **reform Hinduism**. Instead, they **emphasized** devotion to **Krishna**.
- Chaitanya, however, made **disciples** from all classes.
- He popularised the practice of group devotional singing accompanied by **ecstatic dancing**.
- His movement became popular in **Bengal and Orissa**.

Namadeva

- **Namadeva**, a son of a **tailor** and an inhabitant of the **village of Naras- Vamani** in Satara district of **Maharashtra**, under the **influence** of Saint **Janadeva**, was converted to the path of **bhakti**.
- A staunch devotee of **Vitthala of Pandarpur**, Namdeva spent much of his time in worship along with his followers, chanting mostly in his **own verses**.



Namadeva

- He wrote many **abhangs** (songs composed and sung by saints in Maharashtra in praise of God's glory) in **Marathi and Hindi**.
- He travelled as far as Punjab where his teachings became so popular that they were later absorbed in the **Guru Granth**.
- Love god with all your heart to **lead a pious life** surrendering everything to him with steadfast devotion is the essence of his message.

Ramananda (1400-1470)

- While Chaitanya of Bengal belonged to the philosophical school of **Madhavacharya** (a chief advocate of Dvaita school of vedhanta), **Ramananda** was of **Ramanuja's** philosophical thought.
- **Ramananda** was born at **Prayag** (Allahabad) and received his **higher education** in Hindu religious philosophy at **Banaras** and joined the school of Ramanuja as a preacher.
- He visited the **holy places of North India** and **preached Vaishnavism**.
- Ramananda introduced radical changes in Vaishnavism by founding his own sect based on the doctrine of love and devotion to **Rama and Sita**.



Ramananda

- He **preached equality** before God. He rejected caste system, particularly the supremacy of Brahmins as the sole custodians of Hindu religion.
- The people from the lower strata of the society became his **followers**.
- His **twelve disciples** included **Ravidas, Kabir and two women**. Ramananda was the first to preach his doctrine of devotion in **Hindi, the vernacular language**.
- It gained him a good deal of popularity among the people of all classes. His followers were divided into conservative and radical schools.

Mirabai (1498-1546)

- **Mirabai** was born in **Kudh of Merta** district of **Rajasthan**. She was the great grand daughter of **Rana Jodhaji**, founder of **Jodhpur**.
- She was married to **Bhoj Raj**, son of **Rana Sanga of Mewar**.
- She became a **devotee of Lord Krishna**, left the palace and began singing her songs (bhajans) and preaching the path of love on God.

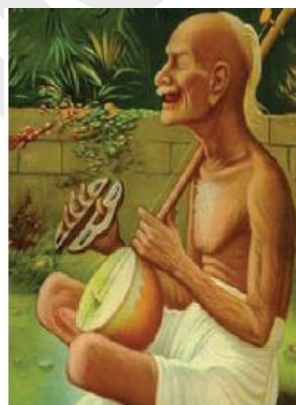


Mirabai

- Mirabai preached **the worship of God** in the name of Krishna and stressed that no one should be deprived of His divine grace on the ground of birth, poverty, age and sex.
- Her devotional **songs and lyrics** constitute a **rich cultural heritage**.
- Her **bhajans** are sung with fervour to this day.
- Her teachings carried **the message of divine worship** to almost every Hindu household.

Sur Das

- **Sur Das** lived at the **court of Akbar** and was popularly known as **the blind bard of Agra**.
- Sur Das is believed to have been a disciple of **Vallabacharya** who was a **Vaishnava preacher** in the **Sultanate period**.
- **Vallabhacharya** was the **founder of Pushtimarga** (way of grace). Sur Das preached religion of love and devotion to a personal God.



Sur Das

- He wrote inspiring and moving **poems, Hindi poems** about **Lord Krishna**. **Krishna's bal lila** constitutes the first great theme of Sur Das poetry.
- According to him, love is a sublimated theme **r e p r e s e n t i n g** the irresistible attraction of **the gopis of Brindavan** towards Krishna.
- The intensity of passion displayed by **the gopis** is an expression of the natural attraction of the human spirit towards the divine soul.
- His popular works are **Sur Sagar, Sur Saravali and Sahitya Lehari**.

- His monumental work **Sur Sagar** or **Sur's Ocean** is a story of Lord Krishna from the birth to the **departure for Mathura**.

Tuka Ram

- **Tuka Ram** was born in **1608** in a village near **Poona**, Maharashtra.
- He was a contemporary of **Maratha Shivaji** and saints like **Eknath and Ramdas**.
- After his early life as a trader he started spending his time singing devotional songs in praise of his favourite deity **Lord Vithoba of Pandarpur**.
- Tuka Ram believed in a **formless God**. According to him, it was not possible to enjoin spiritual joy with worldly activities.
- He stressed the **all-pervasiveness of God**. He rejected Vedic sacrifices, ceremonies, pilgrimages, idol worship, etc.



Tuka Ram

- He also preached the **virtue of piety, forgiveness and peace of mind**. He spread the message of equality and brotherhood.
- He tried to **foster Hindu-Muslim Unity**. Some of his verses are devoted to this theme.
- He wrote his **abhabngas** in **Marathi**

Impact of the Bhakti Movement

- **Salvation** which was previously considered attainable only by people of the first three orders in the social hierarchy became **available to everyone**.
- Bhakti movement provided **women and members of the lower strata** of the society an inclusive path to **spiritual salvation**.
- Literature on devotional songs in **regional languages** became **profuse**.
- The poet saints of this movement championed a wide range of philosophical positions, ranging from theistic dualism of **Dvaita** to absolute **monism of Advaita**.
- Much of the regional practices such as community singing, chanting together of deity names, conducting festivals, going on pilgrimages, performing rituals relating to **Saivism, and Vaishnavism** have survived to this day.