

Part-II: CHAPTER 2

BHAKTI-SUFI TRADITIONS: Changes in Religious Beliefs and Devotional Texts

(Eighth to Eighteenth Century)

Revision Notes

Key concepts in nutshell

- From eighth to eighteenth century striking features was a visibility of wide range of gods and goddesses in sculpture and texts.
- There was integration of cults - composition, compilation and presentation of puranic texts in simple Sanskrit verses.
- Explicitly meant to be accessible to women and shurdas who were generally excluded from vedic learning.
- Tantric forms of worship - more prevalent among women. Often associated with the goddess were forms of worship that were classified as Tantric. Tantric practices were widespread in several parts of the subcontinent they were open to women and men, and practitioners often ignored differences of caste and class within the ritual context.
- Bhakti traditions classified into saguna (with attributes) and nirguna (without form).
- The Alvars and Nayanars of Tamil Nadu - The worshippers of Vishnu and Nayanars - devotees of Shiva - common features - traveled singing hymns in Tamil.
- Alvars and Nayanars initiated movement against caste system & dominance of Brahmins. Nalayira Divyaprabandam - important composition of Alvars equal to four Vedas.
- Status of women - composition of Andal (a women Alvar) popular, songs of Karaikkal Ammaiyar - were widely sung.
- State patronage in south for Vedic gods rather than Jainism & Buddhism, Cholas patronized brahminical tradition, making land grant as to lord shiva at Gangaikonda Cholapuram bronze sculpture of shiva.
- Singing of hymns under royal patronage were encouraged - Chola ruler Parantaka I consecrated metal image of Appan, Sambandan and Sundarar in Shiva temples.



- Karnataka saw a new movement under basavanna a brahamana in court of Chalukyan ruler - his followers Virashaivas (heroes of Shiva) or Lingayat wearers of Linga) - important community to this day - who worship shiva in form of a linga. Of the group of Sufis who migrated to India in the late twelfth century, the Chishtis were the most influential.
- By the sixteenth century the shrine had become very popular, in fact it was the spirited singing of pilgrims bound for Ajmer that inspired Akbar to visit the tomb.
- He went there fourteen times, sometimes two or three times a year to seek blessings for new conquests, fulfillment of vows and the birth of sons. He also had a mosque constructed with the composer of the dargah.
- Lingayats challenged idea of caste and questioned the theory of rebirth. They encountered remarriage of widows. North India saw the emergence of Rajput states which patronized Brahmans - performed secular and ritual function. The Naths, Jogis, Siddhas also.
- Through guided by ulema, rulers followed a flexible policy granting religious tax exemptions to non Muslims sometimes.
- Those who accepted Islam in India accepted in principal the five pillars of faith but these were overlooked with diversion in practice derived from local customs and affiliations (sunni, shia) some like in Malabar court adopted local language Sufism - Sufis were critical of dogmatic definitions & scholastic method of interpreting - Quran.
- They emphasized interpretation of Quran on basis of personal experiences. Chishtis - were a part of Sufis - hospices of khangah were small room & hall for students to live and pray.
- Life in chisti khangah was like the life of a monastery & catered to all travellers rich or poor. Shaikh Nizamuddin chishti had many followers.
- The practice of visits to dargahs gained prominence by 14th century - shrines became very popular.
- Also music, dance and mystical chants were performed to evoke divine ecstasy. The Bhakti movement saw the emergence of poet saint like kabir where poems written in form in which every meaning are inverted.
- The message of **Baba Guru Nanak** is spelt out in his hymns and teachings. These suggest that he advocated a form of nirguna Bhakti.
- Guru Nanak's Hymns in the Adi Granth Sahib called "Gurubani", are composed in



various languages. **Mirabai** (c. fifteenth – sixteenth centuries) is perhaps the best known woman poet within the Bhakti traditions.

- She defied her husband and did not submit to the traditional role of wife and mother, in stead recognizing Krishna, the avatar of Vishnu as per lover.
- Historians draw on a variety of sources to reconstruct histories of religious traditions.
- Virtually all these religious traditions continue to flourish to date.

A Mosaic of Religious Beliefs and Practices

- i. The Bhakti Movement, Islam and Sufi Movement played an important role in the history of medieval India during eighth to eighteenth century.
- ii. Historians suggest that there were at least two processes - one was a **process of disseminating Brahmanical ideas**. This is evident through the composition, compilation and preservation of Puranic texts in simple Sanskrit verse, explicitly meant to be accessible to women and Shudras, who were generally excluded from Vedic learning.
- iii. The second process was that of the **Brahmanas accepting and reworking the beliefs and practices** of these and other social categories. In fact, many beliefs and practices were re-shaped through a continuous dialogue between “great” Sanskrit Puranic traditions and “little” traditions throughout the land.
- iv. Instances of integration are evident amongst goddess cults. For example, worship of the goddess, often simply in the form of a stone smeared with ochre, was evidently widespread.
- v. Often associated with the goddess were forms of worship that were classified as **Tantric**.
- vi. Tantric practices were widespread in several parts of the subcontinent – they were open to women and men, and practitioners often ignored differences of caste and class within the ritual context. Many of these ideas influenced **Shaivism** as well as **Buddhism**, especially in the eastern, northern and southern parts of the subcontinent.
- vii. The divergence is perhaps most stark if we compare Vedic and Puranic traditions.
- viii. The principal deities of the Vedic pantheon, Agni, Indra and Soma, become marginal figures. Rather there were glimpse of Vishnu, Shiva and the goddess in Vedic mantras and had little in common with the elaborate Puranic mythologies.
- ix. In spite of these obvious discrepancies, the Vedas continued to be revered as authoritative.



- x. there were sometimes conflicts as well – those who valued the Vedic tradition often condemned practices that went beyond the closely regulated contact with the divine through the performance of sacrifices or precisely chanted mantras.
- xi. Those engaged in Tantric practices frequently ignored the authority of the Vedas.
- xii. Devotees often tended to project their chosen deity, either Vishnu or Shiva, as supreme. Relations with other traditions, such as Buddhism or Jainism, were also often fraught with tension if not open conflict.
- xiii. The singing and chanting of devotional compositions was often a part of such modes of worship. This was particularly true of the Vaishnava and Shaiva sects.

The Bhakti Traditions

- i. The early bhakti tradition evolved and was characterised by remarkable diversity. It accommodated and acknowledged women and the “lower castes”, who were considered ineligible within orthodox Brahmanical framework, while Brahmanas remained important intermediaries between gods and devotees in several forms of bhakti.
- ii. Historians of religion often classify bhakti traditions into two broad categories: saguna (with attributes) and nirguna (without attributes).
- iii. **Alvars:** Some of the earliest bhakti movements (sixth century) were led by the Alvars (literally, those who are “immersed” in devotion to Vishnu) and Nayanars (literally, leaders who were devotees of Shiva). They travelled from place to place singing hymns in Tamil in praise of their gods.
- iv. The Alvars and Nayanars initiated a movement of protest against the caste system and the dominance of Brahmanas or attempted to reform the system.
- v. Their compositions were as important as the Vedas. One of the major anthologies of compositions by the Alvars, the Nalayira Divyaprabandham, was frequently described as the Tamil Veda, thus claiming that the text was as significant as the four Vedas in Sanskrit that were cherished by the Brahmanas.
- vi. Women's participation could be widely seen through the presence of women devotees like - **Andal**, a woman Alvar who saw herself as the beloved of Vishnu; her verses express her love for the deity; and **Karaikkal Ammaiyar** was a devotee of Shiva who adopted the path of extreme asceticism in order to attain her goal. Their very existence and their compositions posed a challenge to patriarchal norms.



- vii. From the second half of the first millennium there is evidence for states, including those of the Pallavas and Pandyas (c. sixth to ninth centuries CE). Buddhism and Jainism had been prevalent in this region and received occasional royal patronage.
- viii. One of the major themes in Tamil bhakti hymns is the poets' opposition to Buddhism and Jainism. The reason behind this hostility was the competition between members of other religious traditions for royal patronage
- ix. Rulers tried to win their support of Nayanars and Alvars.
- x. The **Chola kings** often attempted to claim divine support and proclaim their own power and status by building splendid temples that were adorned with stone and metal sculpture to recreate the visions of these popular saints who sang in the language of the people.
- xi. These kings also introduced the singing of Tamil Shaiva hymns in the temples under royal patronage.

. The Virashaiva Tradition in Karnataka

- i. In twelfth century, there emerged a new movement in Karnataka, led by a Brahmana named **Basavanna** (1106-68) who was initially a Jaina and a minister in the court of a **Chalukya king**. His followers were known as **Virashaivas** (heroes of Shiva) or **Lingayats** (wearers of the linga).
- ii. They worship Shiva in his manifestation as a linga, and men usually wear a small linga in a silver case on a loop strung over the left shoulder.
- iii. Lingayats believe that on death the devotee will be united with Shiva and will not return to this world. Therefore they do not practise funerary rites such as cremation, prescribed in the Dharmashastras. Instead, they ceremonially bury their dead. They also questioned the theory of rebirth.
- iv. The Lingayats challenged the idea of caste and the "pollution" attributed to certain groups by Brahmanas. The Lingayats also encouraged certain practices disapproved in the Dharmashastras.
- v. These won them followers amongst those who were marginalised within the Brahmanical social order.

Religious Ferment in North India

- i. In north India this was the period when several Rajput states emerged. Brahmanas



occupied positions of importance, performing a range of secular and ritual functions. There seems to have been little or no attempt to challenge their position directly.

- ii. At the same time other religious leaders, who did not function within the orthodox Brahmanical framework, were gaining ground. These included the Naths, Jogis and Siddhas.
- iii. Many of these new religious leaders questioned the authority of the Vedas, and expressed themselves in languages spoken by ordinary people. Although they were popular but were not in a position to win the support of the ruling elites.
- iv. The coming of the Turks which culminated in the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in thirteenth century added a new element which undermined power of many of the Rajput states and the Brahmanas who were associated with these kingdoms.

New Strands in the Fabric Islamic Traditions

- i. From the seventh century, with the advent of Islam, the north-western regions became part of what is often termed the Islamic world.
- ii. Arab merchants frequented ports along the western coast in the first millennium CE. Central Asian peoples settled in the north-western parts of the subcontinent during the same period.
- iii. In 711, an Arab general named Muhammad Qasim conquered Sind, which became part of the Caliph's domain.
- iv. In the thirteenth century) the Turks and Afghans established the Delhi Sultanate which was followed by the formation of Sultanates in the Deccan and other parts of the subcontinent.
- v. Islam continued to be an acknowledged religion of rulers in several areas even with the establishment of the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century as well as in many of the regional states that emerged in the eighteenth century.
- vi. Muslim rulers were to be guided by the **ulama**, who were expected to ensure that they ruled according to the **shari'a**.
- vii. Rulers often adopted a fairly flexible policy towards their subjects. Several rulers gave land endowments and granted tax exemptions to Hindu, Jaina, Zoroastrian, Christian and Jewish religious institutions and also expressed respect and devotion towards non-Muslim religious leaders. These grants were made by several Mughal rulers, including Akbar and Aurangzeb.



- viii. **Popular Practice:** Islam permeated far and wide, through the subcontinent, amongst different social strata.
- All those who adopted Islam accepted, in principle, **the five “pillars”** of the faith: that there is one God, **Allah**, and Prophet Muhammad is his messenger (**shahada**); offering prayers five times a day (**namaz/salat**); giving alms (**zakat**); fasting during the month of Ramzan (**sawm**); and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca (**hajj**).
 - The universal features were often overlaid with diversities derived from sectarian affiliations (Sunni, Shi’a), and the influence of local customary practices of converts.
 - Arab Muslim traders who settled in Kerala adopted the local language, Malayalam.
 - The complex blend of a universal faith with local traditions is best exemplified in the architecture of mosques.
- ix. **Names for communities:**
- The terms 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' did not gain currency for a very long time. Historians point out that the term musalman or Muslim was virtually never used.
 - people were occasionally identified in terms of the region from which they came.
 - the Turkish rulers were designated as Turushka, Tajika were people from Tajikistan and Parashika were people from Persia.
 - Sometimes, terms used for other peoples were applied to the new migrants. Like, the Turks and Afghans were referred to as Shakas and Yavanas (a term used for Greeks).
 - A more general term for these migrant communities was **mlechchha**, indicating that they did not observe the norms of caste society and spoke languages that were not derived from Sanskrit.
 - Such terms had derogatory connotation but it never denoted a distinct religious community of Muslims in opposition to Hindus.
 - The term “Hindu” was used in a variety of ways, not necessarily restricted to a religious connotation.

The Growth of Sufism

Who were sufis?

- In the early centuries of Islam a group of religious-minded people called sufis turned to asceticism and mysticism in protest against the growing materialism of the Caliphate as a religious and political institution.
- They were critical of the dogmatic definitions and scholastic methods of interpreting the



- Qur'an and sunna (traditions of the Prophet) adopted by theologians.
- iii. Instead, they laid emphasis on seeking salvation through intense devotion and love for God by following His commands, and by following the example of the Prophet Muhammad whom they regarded as a perfect human being.
 - iv. The sufis thus sought an interpretation of the Qur'an on the basis of their personal experience.

Khanqahs and silsilas:

- i. By the eleventh century Sufism evolved into a well-developed movement with a body of literature on Quranic studies and sufi practices. Institutionally, the sufis began to organise communities around the hospice or **khanqah** (Persian) controlled by a teaching master known as **shaikh** (in Arabic), **pir** or **murshid** (in Persian). He enrolled disciples (**murids**) and appointed a successor (**khalifa**). He established rules for spiritual conduct and interaction between inmates as well as between laypersons and the master.
- ii. The word **silsila** literally means a chain, signifying a continuous link between master and disciple, stretching as an unbroken spiritual genealogy to the Prophet Muhammad. Sufi silsilas began to crystallise in different parts of the Islamic world around the twelfth century.
- iii. When the shaikh died, his tomb-shrine (**dargah**, a Persian term meaning court) became the centre of devotion for his followers. This encouraged the practice of pilgrimage or ziyarat to his grave. This was because people believed that in death saints were united with God, and were thus closer to Him than when living. Thus evolved the cult of the shaikh revered as **wali**.

Who were radical or be-shari'a sufis?

Some mystics took to radical interpretation of sufi ideals. Many scorned the khanqah and took to mendicancy and observed celibacy. They ignored rituals and observed extreme forms of asceticism. They were known by different names – **Qalandars**, **Madaris**, **Malangs**, **Haidaris**, etc. Because of their deliberate defiance of the **shari'a** they were often referred to as **be-shari'a**, in contrast to the **ba-shari'a** sufis who complied with it.

The Chishtis in the Subcontinent

- i. Of the groups of sufis who migrated to India in the late twelfth century, the Chishtis were



the most influential.

- ii. **Chishti khanqah:** The khanqah was the centre of social life. A well-known example is the **Shaikh Nizamuddin's** hospice (of fourteenth century) on the banks of the river Yamuna in Ghiyaspur, on the outskirts of what was then the city of Delhi.
- iii. The inmates included family members of the Shaikh, his attendants and disciples. The Shaikh lived in a small room on the roof of the hall where he met visitors in the morning and evening.
- iv. On one occasion, fearing a Mongol invasion, people from the neighbouring areas flocked into the khanqah to seek refuge.
- v. There was an open kitchen (langar), run on futuh (unasked-for charity).
- vi. **Visitors:** From morning till late night people from all walks of life visited there. Hindu jogis (yogi) and qalandars – came seeking discipleship, amulets for healing, and the intercession of the Shaikh in various matters. Other visitors included poets such as Amir Hasan Sijzi and Amir Khusrau and the court historian Ziyauddin Barani, all of whom wrote about the Shaikh.

Major Teachers of the Chishti Silsila		
SUFI TEACHERS	YEAR OF DEATH	LOCATION OF DARGAH
Shaikh Muinuddin Sijzi	1235	Ajmer (Rajasthan)
Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar kaki	1235	Delhi
Shaikh Fariduddin Ganj – j Shakar	1265	Ajodhan (Pakistan)
Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya	1325	Delhi
Shaikh Nariruddin Chiragh – i Delhi	1356	Delhi

Chishti devotionalism: ziyarat and qawwali

- i. Pilgrimage, called ziyarat, to tombs of sufi saints is prevalent all over the Muslim world. This practice is an occasion for seeking the sufi's spiritual grace (barakat).
- ii. People expressed their devotion at the dargahs of the five great Chishti saints for more than seven centuries.
- iii. The most revered shrine of these is that of **Khwaja Muinuddin**, of fourteenth century, popularly known as “**Gharib Nawaz**” (comforter of the poor).



- iv. It was evidently popular because of the austerity and piety of its Shaikh, the greatness of his spiritual successors, and the patronage of royal visitors.
- v. By the sixteenth century the shrine had become very popular; in fact it was the spirited singing of pilgrims bound for Ajmer that inspired **Akbar** to visit the tomb. He went there fourteen times.
- vi. Also part of ziyarat is the use of music and dance including mystical chants performed by specially trained musicians or **qawwals** to evoke divine ecstasy.
- vii. The sufis remember God either by reciting the **zika** (the Divine Names) or evoking His Presence through '**sama**' (literally, "audition") or performance of mystical music. Sama' was integral to the Chishtis, and exemplified interaction with indigenous devotional traditions.

Languages and communication:

- i. The Chishtis adopted local languages. In Delhi, those associated with the Chishti silsila conversed in Hindavi, the language of the people.
- ii. Other sufis such as Baba Farid composed verses in the local language, which were incorporated in the Guru Granth Sahib.
- iii. Some composed long poems or masnavis to express ideas of divine love using human love as an allegory. For example, the prem-akhyana (love story) Padmavat composed by Malik Muhammad Jayasi revolved around the romance of Padmini and Ratansen, the king of Chittor. Their trials were symbolic of the soul's journey to the divine. Such poetic compositions were often recited in hospices, usually during sama.
- iv. A different genre of sufi poetry was composed in and around the town of Bijapur, Karnataka. These were short poems in **Dakhani** (a variant of Urdu) attributed to Chishti sufis who lived in this region during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
- v. These poems were probably sung by women while performing household chores like grinding grain and spinning. Other compositions were in the form of **lurinama** or lullabies and **shadinama** or wedding songs. It is through this medium that Islam gradually gained a place in the villages of the Deccan.

Sufis and the state

- i. A major feature of the Chishti tradition was austerity, including maintaining a distance from worldly power. However, this was by no means a situation of absolute isolation



from political power.

- ii. The sufis accepted unsolicited grants and donations from the political elites. The Sultans in turn set up charitable trusts (auqaf) as endowments for hospices and granted tax-free land (inam).
- iii. The Chishtis accepted donations in cash and kind.
- iv. Kings did not simply need to demonstrate their association with sufis; they also required legitimation from them.
- v. There were instances of conflict between the Sultans and the sufis. To assert their authority, both expected that certain rituals be performed.

New Devotional Paths Dialogue and Dissent in Northern India

Many poet-saints engaged in explicit and implicit dialogue with these new social situations, ideas and institutions.

Kabir:

- i. Kabir (fourteenth-fifteenth centuries) is one of the most outstanding examples of a poet-saint in this context.
- ii. Kabirdas (Kabir itself is an Arabic word meaning “great”), was raised by a poor Muslim family belonging to the community of weavers or julahas, who were relatively recent converts to Islam.
- iii. Verses ascribed to Kabir have been compiled in three distinct but overlapping traditions.
- iv. The **Kabir Bijak** is preserved by the Kabirpanth (the path or sect of Kabir) in Varanasi and elsewhere in Uttar Pradesh; the **Kabir Granthavali** is associated with the Dadupanth in Rajasthan, and many of his compositions are found in the **Adi Granth Sahib**.
- v. Kabir’s poems have survived in several languages and dialects; and some are composed in the special language of nirguna poets, the sant bhasha. Others, known as **ulatbansi** (upside-down sayings), are written in a form in which everyday meanings are inverted.
- vi. The range of traditions Kabir drew on to describe the **Ultimate Reality** include Allah, Khuda, Hazrat and Pir. He also used terms drawn from Vedantic traditions, alakh (the unseen), nirakar (formless), Brahman, Atman, etc.
- vii. Diverse and sometimes conflicting ideas are expressed in these poems. Some poems draw on Islamic ideas and use monotheism and iconoclasm to attack Hindu polytheism and idol worship; others use the sufi concept of zikr and ishq (love) to express the Hindu



practice of nam-simaran (remembrance of God's name).

- viii. His valuable legacy, which is relevant for later generations, was claimed by several groups which is most evident in later debates about whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim by birth.

Baba Guru Nanak

- i. Baba Guru Nanak (1469-1539) was born in a Hindu merchant family in a village called Nankana Sahib near the river Ravi in the predominantly Muslim Punjab.
- ii. He also travelled widely and spent most of his time among sufis and bhaktas.
- iii. The message of Baba Guru Nanak is spelt out in his hymns and teachings. These suggest that he advocated a form of nirguna bhakti.
- iv. He rejected sacrifices, ritual baths, image worship, austerities and the scriptures of both Hindus and Muslims.
- v. For Baba Guru Nanak, the Absolute or “**rab**” had no gender or form.
- vi. He proposed a simple way to connect to the Divine by remembering and repeating the Divine Name, through hymns called “**shabad**” in Punjab.
- vii. His attendant was Mardana who played the rabab when Nanak used to sing the ragas.
- viii. Baba Guru Nanak organised his followers into a community.
- ix. He set up rules for congregational worship (sangat) involving collective recitation.
- x. He appointed one of his disciples, Angad, to succeed him as the preceptor (guru), and this practice was followed for nearly 200 years.
- xi. The fifth preceptor, Guru Arjan, compiled Baba Guru Nanak's hymns along with those of his four successors and other religious poets like Baba Farid, Ravidas (also known as Raidas) and Kabir in the **Adi Granth Sahib**. These hymns, called “**gurbani**”.
- xii. In the late seventeenth century the tenth preceptor, Guru Gobind Singh, included the compositions of the ninth guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, and this scripture was called the **Guru Granth Sahib**.
- xiii. Guru Gobind Singh also laid the foundation of the **Khalsa Panth**.

Mirabai

- i. Mirabai (fifteenth-sixteenth centuries) is the best-known woman poet within the bhakti tradition.
- ii. Her bhajans were transmitted orally for centuries.



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- iii. She was a Rajput princess from Merta in Marwar who was married against her wishes to a prince of the Sisodia clan of Mewar, Rajasthan. She defied her husband and did not submit to the traditional role of wife and mother, instead recognising Krishna, the avatar of Vishnu, as her lover.
 - iv. Her in-laws tried to poison her, but she escaped from the palace to live as a wandering singer composing songs that are characterised by intense expressions of emotion.
 - v. her preceptor was Raidas, a leather worker, which indicates her defiance of the norms of caste society.
 - vi. After rejecting all her comforts, she donned the white robes of a widow or the saffron robe of the renouncer.

Conclusion

- i. The devotional worship of god with ultimate objective of attaining moksha (salvation) is called Bhakti. The word 'Bhakti' was derived from the root word 'Bhaj' meaning to adore. The impact of bhakti movement on the Indian society was significant and far-reaching.
- ii. Virtually all these religious traditions continue to flourish to date. This continuity has certain advantages for historians as it allows them to compare contemporary practices with those described in textual traditions or shown in old paintings and to trace changes.

