

## Spiritual and metaphysical enlightenment in medieval Rajasthan: beginnings and impact

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### Abstract

Rajasthan has been a religious hub for almost all the religions since the early medieval period. Still, majority of population was Hindu. The realization of God was the ultimate aim of human life according to the Hindu philosophy. Since the beginning of medieval period only, Rajasthan was becoming the refuge centre of North India during every transition time. Religion in Rajasthan is more a direct experience than a code of conduct and from an early age different systems or margas (paths) have been prescribed for attaining the goal, variously called liberation, bliss and heaven. The paper aims at enlightening the various aspects of religious liberalisation in the form of "Bhakti" and its various aspects.

**Keywords:** Inscription, Philosophy, Cult, Bhakti, Historiography

### Introduction

Rajasthan has been a religious hub for almost all the religions since the early medieval period. Still, majority of population was Hindu. The realization of God was the ultimate aim of human life according to the Hindu philosophy. Different schools of thought and philosophy have evolved around this essence of Hinduism. Unlike most other religions, there was no one sacred book or one Prophet in Hinduism, and right and wrong were not clearly defined, allowing the practitioner to derive from one's own conscience to act upon one's duty.

### Beginnings

Since the beginning of medieval period only, Rajasthan was becoming the refuge centre of North India during every transition time<sup>[1]</sup>. During the medieval period, an era began to simplify the Hinduism and to meticulously tie the threads of religion which remain opened for centuries. This led to the beginning of Bhakti movement which tried to rejuvenate the Hindu religion and gave altogether a new direction to the socio-culture condition of Rajasthan. While the Islam was trying to expand itself, the rajputs on the other hand made every effort to maintain the glory of culture and regard for the hindu religion. The transition period gave rise to various new thinking. Such thinkers were called Saints who unfolded the complex religion and presented it in front of common people in an easy and graspable way. These saints created a new awakening in the people of Marwar during the hardest times.

Also, on one hand, Jainism and Buddhism flourished here being of indigenous origin, while on the other hand, the impact of Islam was also not less. Many rulers became the patron of Jainism in Rajasthan which is evident from Ghatiala Inscription<sup>[2]</sup> of 861 A.D, Rajgarh Inscription<sup>[3]</sup> of 923 A.D, Chittor Inscription<sup>[4]</sup> of 971 A.D and Sewadi Inscription<sup>[5]</sup> of 1090 A.D. But the main religion was Hinduism which existed in Rajasthan since time immemorial.

### Cults

The late 14th century was the time of popularity of the Saivism and Vaishnavite cults. Various branches of Saivism flourished

in Rajasthan. The Mandore Inscription<sup>[6]</sup> of 685 A.D and the Shankar Ghatta Inscription<sup>[7]</sup> of 713 A.D give indications that Saivism was spreading in the region. The Kapaliks, Pashupat, Veershaiv and the Kashmirak, all existed here during this period.

The Shakti cult was also gaining momentum during this period and temples of Tripur Sundari at Banswara, Sila Mata at Amber, Kaila Devi at Karauli, Nagnechi at Jodhpur, Karni Mata at Bikaner, Jeen Mata at Sikar, Sikraya Mata at Lohargal and Pipad Mata at Osiya were made. These deities were basically just a transformed form of Durga. The inscriptions of Basantgarh<sup>[8]</sup>, Pratagarh<sup>[9]</sup>, Sambholi<sup>[10]</sup> and Kinsariya<sup>[11]</sup> shows the prevalence of Shakti cult. In later period these mother deities were transformed into royal goddesses like Karniji of Bikaner, Nagnechiya of Marwar, Sangiyaji of Jaisalmer and Baanmata of Mewar.

Though some historiographers have also suggested impact of Christianity on Bhakti movement relating some facts but this view was not much accepted<sup>[12]</sup>.

Vaishnav bhakti which emphasized devotion in the form of enchanting of God's name was also prevalent in Rajasthan<sup>[13]</sup>. Following the contemporary tradition of Vaishnav Bhakti of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Ramanuja and Nimbarka; it is said that Baldev Vidhyabhushan of Jaipur wrote "Govind Bhashya" and proposed Achintya Bhedabhed. Followers of Shudhadvait by Vallabhacharya also existed in Rajasthan in huge number.

Apart from this, worshipping of deities like Ganesha, Devi and Hanuman also began. Later, in the beginning of 15th century, liberalization of religion started. Saints of various bhakti tradition, unveiled the simplicity hidden in the religious epic and introduced and altogether approach towards the complexity of Hinduism.

The traditional theory of worshipping idols and restriction to the holy place for the lower class was challenged by these saints. This process also restrained many lower class peoples from going outside the culture of Hinduism. But on the whole, the society was still too complex and orthodox because somewhere it still had the spores of the much stressed philosophies of saints like Sankara, Ramanuja and Ramanand<sup>[14]</sup>.

The other religion that existed in Rajasthan during medieval times was, Jainism, though it was not as popular as Hinduism and also it did not get much support from the contemporary monarchs, still, the sources prove that various Jain monks publicized the religion very much. Also, the various Jain temples like that of Mt. Abu, Ranakpur and Marwar support the fact that Jainism was an integral part of religious philosophy of Rajasthan. The people of Rajasthan willingly accepted various principles and theology of Jainism viz. non-violence, vegetarianism and abandoning from worldly pleasures.

Islam too was gradually expanding itself in Rajasthan since early 9th century but after the defeat of Prithviraj Chauhan, it established its roots deeper and stronger. Initially people were made to accept Islam forcefully but after the advent of various Sufi saints and their simplified view of the religion, some people accepted it voluntarily.

Also, the other hand, Sufi Saints like Khwaja Muinuddin Chisti and Sheikh Hamid ud din Nagauri publicized the advantages of conversion. Along with the invaders and Sufi saints, the muslim traders and craftsmen too played a vital role in popularizing the Islam. The muslim soldiers who came with the army settled in India and laid milestone in establishment of Islam in Rajasthan. In due course of time, Islam made huge progress and a large number of population was muslim in society in the later 14th century period. It is considered that some of the medieval saints were influenced by the views, beliefs and practices of the Sufi sect of Islam. Islam, in fact had an indirect role in triggering the bhakti movement. The proselytising Islam posed as a challenge to Hinduism which made the religious men to seek earnestly for the truths of their own religion.

Medieval Bhakti movement must be regarded as an attempt to remove such practices like polytheism, idolatory, caste etc. which were the obvious targets of Islam, in order to save Hinduism from being engulfed by Islam. The social views of saints of Bhakti movement who emphasized one Omniscient Brahma<sup>[15]</sup> may be looked upon as an attempt to bridge the wide gulf that separated Hindus and Muslims inhabiting the same country.

### **Origin of Bhakti and Bhakti Traditions**

Bhakti, as a fundamental aspect of Hinduism, is a relatively new phenomenon respective to the religion. Beginning as a concept given little mention in the Vedic and Upanishadic texts, bhakti has grown significantly in popularity amongst Hindu practitioners. Bhakti was given major significance in the period of Classical Hinduism.

The Epics and Puranas establish the various manifestations of the gods whilst shaping them into complex and rich characters. This period of Hinduism asserted the notion that through a personal relationship and loving devotion to these gods (whomever they happen to be), one can achieve moksha regardless of caste. The increased importance of bhakti proved significant to practicing Hindus as it represented a democratization of the religion. Bhakti is seen by some scholars as a movement which brought Hinduism to the masses without compromising tradition or waging rebellion against the religion itself. With modernity come new forms of popular worship in Hinduism, particularly in the forms of Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism. These movements emphasize the various ways and degrees in which one can love the gods as well as the practices by which one can experience this love and devotion. In some cases a guru<sup>[16]</sup> or spiritual teacher was

required to attain the total enlightenment though it was not mandatory.

### **Philosophical Aspects**

The existence of relationship between God and devotee is supposed to be there since the vedic times i.e. almost about 5000 years back. This relationship is considered to be devotional. The feeling of Bhakti or devotion can be traced back to the Rigveda. It is the very first hymn of the Rigveda, which gives appearance to a feeling of intimacy with the highest god. In the hymn Rig VI 45.26, Indra is addressed as a friend and it is said that there is no limit to his friendship and he gives cows to those who want cows, and horses to those who want horses. In the other Vedas also, intimations of Bhakti are perceptible in the hymns addressed to deities such as Varuna, Savitra and Usha.

However, the word “Bhakti” occurs for the first time in the Upanisads where it appears with the co-doctrines of grace and self surrender. In the Katha Upanisad it is said that the heavenly help, which is the reward to Bhakti, is necessary before one can be saved.

### **Trends in Spirituality**

Religion in Rajasthan is more a direct experience than a code of conduct and from an early age different systems or margas (paths) have been prescribed for attaining the goal, variously called liberation, bliss and heaven. However, the different margas were not contradictory and in some respects they supplemented each other; for example proficiency in Jnana-yoga, Raja-yoga and Bhakti yoga are demanded from the highest sadhakas (devotees).

Bhakti movement was a Hindu religious movement in which the main spiritual practice was loving devotion<sup>[17]</sup> among the Shaivite and Vaishnava saints. The word bhakti has been derived from the root “bhaj” by the application of the “kti” suffix, which expresses an action, and means among other things service, devotion, attachment, loyalty, worship and homage.

Total surrender to the almighty is signal on the path of devotion. Based on the Upanishads, the Puranas and personal experience, the builders of the path of devotion have chosen to reach God by their master-servant, mother-child, preceptor-disciple (Guru-Shishya), vatsalya (friendly) and madhura (love) Relationship. Love and devotion lead one to release from the trammels of worldly sufferings. The royal road starts with the directions in Bhagawatha Purana and the Geetha. Liberation is devotion’s slave.

All saints’ amazingly versatile compositions are illustrative of the above modes of approach to “Paramatma” through bhakti. These modes of approach are favored because of the difficulty of Jnana Marga, wherein God is conceived as Nirguna and Nirakara, remote and transcendental. In the 14th verse of Gita, Lord Krishna says that the location of both Manas and Buddhi in “Paramatma” is adequate for the realisation of the Divine. Thus, Bhaktimarga is unique in transcending Karma Marga, Jnana Marga and Yoga marga and the easiest mode of approach to reality.

In Hindu philosophy and thought, Bhakti has been one of the ways to reach God. During medieval Rajasthan, a religious movement broke out that emphasized the devotion to God, as exclusive means of salvation. Collectively known as the Bhakti Movement, it left a very reflective impact on the life and

traditions of Indians in the successive centuries. The movement was spontaneous and the various mystics had their own version of devotional expression.

Unlike in the South, where devotion was centered on both Shiva and Vishnu (in all his forms), the Rajasthan's devotional movement was centered on Rama and Krishna, both of whom are considered incarnations of Vishnu. Despite this, the sect of Shiva or of the Devi did not go into decline. In fact for all of its history the Bhakti movement co-existed peacefully with the other movements in Hinduism.

It was initially considered unorthodox, as it rebelled against caste distinctions and disregarded Brahmanic rituals, which according to Bhakti saints were not necessary for salvation. In the course of time, however, owing to its immense popularity among the masses (and even royal patronage) it became 'orthodox' and continues to be one of the most important modes of religious expression in modern India.

### **Impact of Bhakti Traditions**

During the 14-17th centuries A.D, a great bhakti movement swept through Central and Northern India, initiated by a loosely associated group of mystics <sup>[18]</sup> or Saints <sup>[19]</sup>. They taught that people could cast aside the heavy burdens of ritual and caste, and the subtle complexities of philosophy, and simply express their overwhelming love for God. This period was also characterized by a spate of devotional literature in vernacular prose and poetry in the ethnic languages of the various Indian states or provinces.

While many of the bhakti mystics focused their attention on Krishna or Rama, it did not necessarily mean that the sect of Shiva was marginalized. In the thirteenth century Basava founded the Vira-Shaiva school or Virshaivism. He rejected the caste system, denied the supremacy of the Brahmins, condemned ritual sacrifice and insisted on bhakti and the worship of the one God, Shiva. His followers were called Vira-Shaivas, meaning "stalwart Shiva-worshippers".

The path of bhakti was not directly accessible to the lower castes; for them the path of prapatti (unquestioned self-surrender) was prescribed. Singing of Bhajans and dancing formed an important part of this worship. Followers of Bhakti movement in medieval period included the saints such as Bhagat Namdev and Saint Kabir das who insisted on the devotional singing of praises of lord through their own compositions.

The collapse of Hindu political power in northern India was notable change to Hinduism. For over one hundred years Hinduism laid powerless before the invader. It was also deprived of political, social and rational leadership. Slowly Hinduism recovered from the conquest and everywhere, an intellectual and moral revival of Hinduism became noticeable.

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