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## A SOCIAL STUDY OF THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN NORTH INDIA IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

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### ABSTRACT

*The Bhakti movement, which emerged in the fifteenth century, brought about a significant shift in the social and theological dynamics of North India. This revolution was remarkably significant. The Bhakti movement is the subject of this sociological investigation, which dives closely into the movement's origins, significant individuals, social repercussions, and enduring legacy among other aspects. Bhakti, which began as a devotional movement in Hinduism, has subsequently evolved to incorporate various regional languages and customs. This has enabled believers to create a more intimate connection with the god of their choice. During this historical period, Bhakti saints such as Kabir, Guru Nanak, and Mirabai rose to prominence. They taught spiritual equality and inclusivity through teachings that transcended the restrictions of gender and caste. The movement's goal was to eliminate the disparities that were already present in society by spreading a message of unconditional love, compassion, and oneness. The area provided a secure environment in which women and members of lower castes could express their religious ideas and question the standards that had been established. Music, poetry, and gatherings of the community were all components of the Bhakti movement, which was responsible for bringing about a cultural revolution that revitalized social norms and religious customs. In addition to its influence on religion, it was also felt in the fields of art, literature, and philosophy in North Indian culture. The purpose of this research is to investigate the role that the Bhakti movement played in the seismic transformations that occurred in North Indian culture. Through the use of historical sources, literary works, and academic interpretations, this research reveals how the Bhakti movement brought in a cultural milieu that was more accepting and spiritually alive. In order to provide light on the enduring significance of Bhakti as a historical catalyst in India, this research investigates the manner in which the movement impacted social norms, religious practices, and personal identities to a greater extent than was previously known.*

**Keywords:** Bhakti movement, Hinduism, devotional movement, religious practices.

### INTRODUCTION

Bhakti is a religious idea that refers to the act of submitting one's will to a higher power, which is considered to be a means of attaining redemption. The Brahmanical and Buddhist schools of thinking that existed in ancient India, in addition to written works such as the Gita, are regarded

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as the origins of this philosophical school of thought. As a popular movement that advocated for religious equality and widespread social engagement, bhakti originally expressed itself in South India during the seventh and eleventh centuries. This movement moved it outside of the realm of religious doctrine. In the tenth century, popular saint-poets were the driving force behind the movement's ascent to its highest point, after which it began to decline. On the other hand, beginning with Ramanuja in the eleventh century, a series of itinerant intellectuals, sometimes known as acharyas, recast it as an ideology and philosophical movement. Over the course of the same time period when the Sultanate of Delhi was being created, a multitude of large-scale social and religious groups across the nation emerged that drew inspiration from bhakti concepts. The more traditional bhakti traditions of South India have been interpreted by some as a return to these currents, which have been taken by others. It is important to note that the historical circumstances and characteristics of each of these following revolutions were distinct from one another.

### **Bhakti Movement in the North**

The period of the Sultanate, which lasted from the 13th to the 15th century, saw the establishment of a great number of well-known socioreligious organizations in Maharashtra, as well as in North and East India. An emphasis on bhakti and a dedication to religious equality were two things that these movements had in common. There were a number of significant ways in which the bhakti movements that emerged during the Middle Ages in India were unique from one another and from the more established South Indian bhakti tradition.

Following the Turkish conquest, nonconformist groups proliferated, with much of their inspiration coming from anti-caste and anti-Brahmanical philosophy. The Nathpanthis, a nonconformist sect, were among the first to benefit from the diminishing dominance of the Rajput-Brahman alliance on the political landscape. Poems produced by Bhakti saints such as Kabir, Nanak, Raidas, and others feature revolutionary critiques of feudalism; nonetheless, these poems do not call for the expulsion of the ruling elite. Through the use of images that reflect ordinary life, they made an effort to connect with the Bhakti sorrows of the typical person in some way.

### **Nirgun Tradition**

The bulk of monotheists were members of lower castes and were conscious of the fact that their beliefs were unified despite their differences. In addition, they were aware of the influence and lessons that each other had imparted, and they make oblique references to both one another and their predecessors in poems that give the impression that they came from the same ideological background. A nirguna worldview emerged as a result of their combination of the Vaishnava Bhakti concept, the Nathpanthi movement, and Sufism. This viewpoint was held by each and every one of them without exception. They condemned what they considered to be the worst aspects of the two most prominent religions of the time, which were Hinduism and Islam, and they categorically refused to be linked with either of these religions.

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Kabir was the first and most significant character in the Nirguna traditions, which are an example of monotheistic movements. A significant portion of his life was spent in Banaras (Kashi), where he was born into a family of weavers who had converted to Islam from Muslim people who were originally from the region. As a result of his support of new principles, which led to his rejection of the varnashrama and all rules that were based on caste distinction, new groups and unorthodox/protestant sects came into being. Poetry written by him was included in the Adi Granth, which is considered to be a sacred text for Sikhs. Kabir had an influence on a great number of individuals, such as the Banaras tanner Raidas, the Punjabi Khatri Guru Nanak, and the Rajasthani Jat peasant Dhanna.

### **Sagun Bhakti**

The theologian Ramanuja, who lived in the 12th century, is credited with popularizing the term "Vishishtadvaita" by combining Sankara's Advaitavada with the Vaishnava Pancharatna school of thought. This school of thought maintained that Vishnu existed before anything else. It is because of the effect of Ramanuja's writings and his lengthy stint as priest of the famed Vishnu temple at Srinangam that his beliefs were brought to the attention of the Vaishnavites. As a result, Ramanuja is believed to be the founder of Srivaishnavism.

Ramananda, who lived between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, was a person who bridged the gap between the Vaishnava and South Indian schools of devotional worship. He was a devotee of Ram, not Vishnu, and he held Ram in the highest respect. He, like the monotheist bhakti saints, preached in the native tongues and did not believe in caste structures in order to propagate the religion. All of this was done in an effort to spread the faith.

A well-known bhakti saint by the name of Vallabacharya was responsible for spreading devotion to Krishna throughout the early 16th century. Surdas and Mira Bai were both followers of Vallabacharya, who was their teacher. Surdas is credited with spreading the cult of Krishna throughout northern India. In addition to being a passionate devotee of Krishna, Mirabai rose to prominence in Rajasthan as a result of her bhajan work.

In his work Ramcharitmanas, which is the Hindi translation of the Ramayana, Tulsidas, who was a devotee of Rama, advocated for the caste system and expressed his support for the Brahmins' superiority. In spite of the fact that he was absolutely devoted to the worship of idols, he argued for a religion that emphasized surrender and uncomplicated trust in a single deity.

### **In Bengal**

In Bengal, the Vaishnava bhakti movement was notably different from its equivalents in the south and the north. This was due to the fact that the Vaishnava bhakti legacy of the Bhagavatapurana, as well as the Sahajiya Buddhist and Nathpanthi traditions, had an impact on the movement. Within the context of these traditions, there was a strong focus placed on the more intangible and subjective aspects of devotion.

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According to this narrative, Jayadeva was a bhakti saint who lived in the 12th century and had a significant impact. As an example of the mystical aspect of love, he offered the characters of Krishna and Radha. Chaitanya, in addition to being recognized as Krishna's incarnation, was another well-known bhakti saint who originated from this region. However, he did not express any skepticism regarding the claims that the texts and Brahmans made regarding divine revelation. In addition to this, he played a significant role in the propagation of Sankirtan, which is a form of collective devotional singing and dancing. Alongside him, the Bengali bhakti movement began to develop into a reform movement that questioned traditional views about caste divisions. This transformation occurred concurrently with his arrival.

### **In Maharashtra**

The Bhagavatapurana and the Siva Nathpanthis were the two texts that served as the movements' primary sources of motivation. The Jnaneswar was one of the first Bhakti saints to come from the state of Maharashtra. His exposition on the Bhagavad Gita, known as Jnanesvari, served as the foundation for the Bhakti ideology that was prevalent in Maharashtra. He believed that Bhakti was the only way to reach God, despite the fact that he was vocal in his opposition to caste systems. This particular sect worshipped Vithoba as their deity, and they would travel to the temple twice a year in order to pay their respects to the deity himself. The Vithoba of Pandarpur was a pivotal figure in the rebellion that took place in Maharashtra.

Namdev, who lived from 1270 to 1350, was another acclaimed bhakti saint with Maharashtrian roots. In contrast to the adoration that he receives in the north Indian monotheistic tradition as a nirguna saint, he is considered to be a member of the Vaishnava devotional tradition in the state of Maharashtra. A number of renowned Bhakti saints, including Choka, Sonara, Tukaram, and Eknath, were also born and raised in the Maharashtra region. While Tukaram's teachings are delivered in the form of the Avangas (dohas), which are the components that make up the Gatha, Eknath's goal was to shift the focus of Marathi literature away from spiritual compositions and toward narrative compositions..

### **Dvaita (Dualist) Tradition**

Dvaita, which is an acronym that stands for "Dualism of Jivatma and Parmatma," was named after Madhava, who lived about 1199-1278 and characterized the school of Dvaita in the thirteenth century. After Ramanuja (about 1050-1137), Madhava connected the Brahman, or absolute truth, of the Upanishads with a personal god, and he contended that Vishnu is the supreme God. Madhava's efforts were similar to those of Ramanuja. Within the framework of Madhva's theory, there are three ontological orders: God, the soul, and the inanimate reality. The non-material body of God, who is perfect in every manner, is composed of saccidananda, which can be translated as "being, spirit, and bliss." This body would have prevented God from creating the world by chopping himself in half or transforming into a defective planet. Neither of these things would have been possible. There are an infinite number of individual souls, and their existence is wholly dependent on the favor of God. The actions of these souls are

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completely under God's control. Despite the fact that the soul is depicted as a shadow, image, or reflection of the divine, it is never asserted that the soul is a perfect reproduction of the divine. As a result, Bhakti is defined as Moksha, which means liberation, which is the realization that the Supreme is ultimately responsible for making all limited reality possible. Like souls, there are an infinite number of inanimate beings that are a component of the creative machinery that operates throughout the universe.

In the center of the God-soul-inanimate universe triple category, the soul, also known as the Jiva, becomes entangled in the meshes of Samsara or bondage if it leans towards one side, and it becomes emancipated if it leans towards the other side. The concept of mukti, which means freedom, does not suggest that there is no such thing as a world; rather, it refers to the liberation from the constraints of the world.

### **Sikhism and Guru Nanak**

The religion of Sikhism, which was established in the 15th century, is a remarkable example of religious homogenization. In addition to devotional melodies penned by saints like as Kabir, Namdev, Sheikh Farid, Jaydev, Surdas, and many more, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, which is their sacred scripture, includes the sayings of a large number of well-known religious luminaries from a variety of faiths and traditions. The names of a great number of prominent persons hailing from a variety of religious and cultural traditions are also included. It is common practice to hold Guru Nanak in high esteem and to acknowledge him "by the Hindus as the teacher and by the Muslims as the saint" due to the fact that he was a fervent supporter of secular philosophy. Whether it was the Mandir or the Mosque, the Puja or the Namaz, the Puran or the Quran, he did not care about any of these things. Since he adhered to the monotheistic belief system, he believed that there was only one God who was all-powerful, eternal, and devoid of any form. The divine equality of man and God, the divine unity of God and man, and the notions of God as Sat (Reality), Chit (knowledge), and Anand (Bliss) were all highlighted by him. He also emphasized the relationship between God and man.

A charismatic leader, known as the Guru, an ideology, known as the Shabad, and an organizational framework, known as the Sangat, are the three pillars that provide the foundation for his philosophy. He emphasized the value of a congregation that was collectively referred to as Saad Sangat, which literally translates to "communion of good people." He advocated for the virtues of love, commitment, and humility. Instead of adhering to the stringent Varna and Ashrama systems, he followed the three tenets of a universal code of behavior, which are as follows: (i) work, (ii) devotion, and (iii) charity. As a result, he placed an emphasis on the Kar Seva message, which is the act of serving one's community and the world at large without expecting anything in return.

### **OBJECTIVES**

1. To study the development of political and social theories based on the bhakti movement
  2. To determine limitations and impact of Bhakti Tradition
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## **EVOLUTION OF SOCIO-POLITICAL IDEAS AND POLITY**

In order to adapt the political aspirations of saints, a hegemonic elite culture and ideology must be accommodated. This includes the state structure, taxes, technology, caste, class religion, gender dominance, and subaltern protest movements in a variety of forms. While this was happening, the rise of trade gave up opportunities for individuals and groups to climb higher and lower on the social hierarchy. The subalterns voiced their disapproval of the feudal reaction and the daily prejudice, while the elite reacted negatively to their pursuit of upward mobility.

### **Reflection of Individualism**

Particularly illustrative of the exceptional individualism that is characteristic of the Bhakti tradition is the defiance of the collective authority that is found in both Brahmanic Hinduism and Islam. Linda Hess has liked the statements that these saints have made on their independence, vigor, fearlessness, and iconoclasm. They inspired the ordinary man to be independent, powerful, fearless, and reactive against all sorts of exploitation, humiliation, distinction, and touch-me-notism, while simultaneously opposing the authorities who were considered to be elitist.

### **Religious Reforms and Rejection of Rituals**

Ceremony was vehemently rejected by the entire Bhakti movement, which vehemently questioned and condemned the actions of both "Turks" and "Hindus." On the other hand, the rejection of pilgrimage, worship, singing, fasting, and holy dipping was highlighted. The focus was placed on living a complete life in the world.

The believers of the Nirgun group believe that the divine is contained within individuals rather than in external sites. In spite of this, the internalized divine might manifest itself in a variety of ways. According to the Advaitic theory that is adhered to by classical Brahmanism, the self and the cosmos are considered to be precisely the same thing. This indicates that the Atman that resides within one is connected to the Brahman that exists everywhere. Within the Yogic tradition, this meant attempting to achieve Jivan-Mukti, bodily immortality, and magical powers by identifying oneself with Siva via the practice of Bhakti. Saints such as Kabir, who were adamant in their belief that "if you can't see what's before your eyes, you're as good as blind," were among those who rejected the Advaitic identity.

### **Reaction against Caste Structure**

In the Bhakti tradition, it was customary to avoid following established social orders. It was a cultural act of rebellion against the domination of the system that was carried out by a common individual. The vast majority of Bhakti saints were able to transcend the caste system by concentrating on the classes. The ruling elite actively supported a rejection of the religious, ceremonial, and cultural traditions that had been practiced in the past in order to ensure that they would continue to hold power. When confronted with the preexisting social order, Bhakti provided an alternative, a means of protest, and an escape from all of these limitations. In point

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of fact, the consciousness and the other aspects of the world were merged together. He developed an anti-caste worldview as a result of his status as a member of the people and a subaltern. A significant amount of criticism was directed towards the caste structure as well as the haughtiness of Brahmins.

### **Focus on Classes**

It was the growing merchants, shopkeepers, and commercial classes that were responsible for fracturing the old cultural moorings and structure. They did this by connecting cities and villages, creating possibilities to social mobility, and introducing new ideas and technology. Both a commercialized economy and a revolt against old caste systems were potential consequences that may have resulted from the trading activities. It acknowledged the establishment of the bourgeois social order as a consequence of the shift brought about by the transition from the feudal to the capitalist social order. The process of monetizing the economy was brought about by the collection of revenue in the form of cash or output for the market, which influenced society in a variety of different ways.

### **Critical of the Zamindari System**

In general, the bulk of Bhakti saints held the Zamindari system, which was the institution that upheld the traditional framework of pre-capitalist social development, in a low regard. Both members of the Muslim and Hindu elites contributed to the upkeep and development of this system and provided assistance. Both Muslims and Hindus were members of the subaltern class and lived in poverty, despite the fact that their doctrinal beliefs were different. Despite the fact that the victims were subjected to religious persecution at the hands of those in positions of power, their economic standing consigned them to their social class. mainly due to the fact that the majority of people lived in rural regions, were employed in agriculture, and were victims of excessive extraction. As a consequence of this, the perspective of the underprivileged individual shed light on their political and social condition, just like Kabir did.

### **Universal Humanism**

A new cultural movement that is representative of global humanism emerged as a result of the Bhakti movement, which fostered the development of linguistic expansion. The ruling elite consisted of nomads who built a restricted civil society that was defined by personal liberty. These nomads included large merchants, shopkeepers, financiers, administrative personnel, members of the church, and other individuals. Under the circumstances of pre-capitalist social formation, the mark of the trade was found in the concept of individual liberty. Due to the fact that it rejected cultural and commercial exploitation, it was a meditative effort because it utilized the poetry of saints such as Kabir. The notion of a global society that is free from economic and basic stratification served as the foundation for their defiant beliefs and self-aware views. Those who were bhakts campaigned for social justice in their capacity as representatives of those who were oppressed and underprivileged. It was a society that was



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reasonable and caring, and it represented the independence of its members as well as their equality with one another. These are attributes that would eventually lead to universal liberty.

The bhakti, which refers to the communal engagement of people in decision making and social building, that was going to be utilized in the construction of the utopia required a separation from the socioeconomic divisions that were already in place. It was a reflection of the freedom of religious expression on an equal footing, as there were no religious divisions or internal hierarchies. It resulted in the blending of many philosophies and the secularization of Bhakti, who was embodied by the majority of saints at the time.

### **Absence of Critique of Patriarchy**

In this tradition, there was no such thing as gender equality, and it was largely uncritical of patriarchy. However, despite the fact that patriarchal beliefs acknowledged the domestic labor performed by women, they glorified the ideal wife. It is important to note that Basava, a wise man who lived in Karnataka during the 12th century, argued for gender equality by asserting that men and women are equal since they share the same Atman.

The job that women conducted in the public and home realms was regarded as beneath them and unvalued by the feudal-patriarchal society that existed during the fifteenth century. The acknowledgment of wives' employment in the private sphere, which was revolutionary for that age in and of itself, served as the antidote to the feudal-patriarchal ideas that were prevalent during that time period.

### **Liberal Religious Policies adopted**

The Bhakti Movement was responsible for the emergence of new philosophical and theological traditions and ideas, which contributed to the development of religious tolerance and an appreciation for the significance of diversity in both thinking and practical application. Certain kings and queens, in reaction to the impact of the Bhakti movement, created religious policies that were more tolerant than they had been previously.

### **Promotion of Regional Languages**

The Bhakti saints did not preach in difficult languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic, or Persian; rather, they preached in languages that were widely recognized in the local community. Consider Kabir's language as an example; it was a combination of a number of languages that are often used. Brij was one of the dialects the Surdas spoke. Awadhi was the language that Goswami Tulsi Das used to compose her poems and other works. There was a common conversation that included folk tales, literary groups, and literary expressions. All of these things were present. In most cases, the state or its elites did not exercise oversight over these. A varied group consisting of individuals from a variety of social strata and religious backgrounds included them.

### **LIMITATIONS OF BHAKTI TRADITION**

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- There are substantial difficulties in defining and adopting political thinking due to the fact that metaphysics is an essential component of the Bhakti tradition.
  - As a result of the absence of an organized methodology, there are issues that present themselves for both readers and researchers.
  - Finding source texts that are significant and pertinent, in addition to secondary commentary that is considered to be classical on political issues
  - The challenge of understanding the writings appropriately within the context of their respective cultural and historical contexts
  - Moreover, the problem of non-English vocabularies for political terminology is another limitation that must be considered.
  - There was no way to rely on verbal ablutions as a means of demonstrating ethical virtue.

### **IMPACT OF BHAKTI TRADITION**

M.G. Ranade, in his book, *The Rise of Maratha Power*, sums up the deep impact of this spiritual awakening.

“The main results of Bhakti movement were the development of vernacular literature, modification of caste exclusiveness, sanctification of family life, elevation of status of women, preaching of humaneness and tolerance, partial reconciliation with Islam, subordination of rites and ceremonies, pilgrimages, fasts etc., learning and contemplation to worship God with love and faith, the limitation of excess of polytheism and the uplift of the nation to a higher level of capacity, both of thought and action.”

- The advocates of Bhakti voiced their vehement opposition to a variety of immoral behaviors, including the killing of infants and the practice of sati, as well as their support for the prohibition of alcoholic beverages, tobacco products, and toddy. Both the act of sodomy and the act of adultery were considered to be unacceptable. They had the intention of establishing a social order that was respectable and adhered to strong moral ideals.
- Another notable benefit was the facilitation of harmony between groups in the Hindu and Muslim communities. An effort was made by the movement to decrease the growing hostility in an effort to heal the divide that had been created. The Sufi saints and the saints of the Bhakti movement both preached the importance of friendship, amity, tolerance, peace, and equality in their own communities.
- During the course of the movement, there was a change in the manner in which people worshipped God and felt about him. The devotion and affection for God, who is the God of all, the God of both Hindus and Muslims, was thus elevated to a central position



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as a result of this. The concept of Bhakti, which can be translated as devotion to the Supreme Being, served as the foundation of this movement.

- As a result of the Bhakti saints' legacy of tolerance, harmony, and mutual respect, which will last for all of eternity, a new form of worship that is shared by Muslims and Hindus has evolved. This group of people is referred to as the Satyapir cult. King Husain Shah of Jaunpur was the one who first proposed the idea, and it was he who created the foundation for the liberalism that Akbar would eventually adopt.
- The Bhakti movement was instrumental in the dissemination of vernacular literature and language throughout the nation. While Kabir communicated his teachings in Hindi, Nanak communicated them in Gurmukhi, and Chaitanya communicated them in Bengali, all three of these great spiritual gurus did so in their own native languages. As a consequence of this, a number of Muslim authors translated Sanskrit writings into regional languages, and Bhakti literatures were later formed in these languages as well.
- The Bhakti movement in Orissa and the medieval Vaishnavism that Shri Chaitanya brought to the region were the beginning of a new trend in Oriya literature. Panchasakha literature, which is distinguished by its socio-religious exposition of Bhakti, was initiated by five eminent authors: Achyuta, Balaram, Jagannath, Yasobanta, and Ananta. This period of literature is marked by its socio-religious presentation of Bhakti.
- During the Middle Ages, there were two significant religious organizations that tried to oppose birth-oriented casteism and social inequality. These movements were known as Sikhism and the Sufis and Saints.
- In the nineteenth century, reformers such as Vivekananda, Dayananda Saraswati, and Rammohun Roy, as well as in the twentieth century, leaders of oppressed groups such as Jotirao Phule and Dr. Bhim Rao Amdebkar, amongst others, continued the reformative and modification-based demands of the Bhakti tradition.

#### **The Negative Impact of the Bhakti Movement:**

- For the most part, the Bhakti Organization was not successful in accomplishing its objectives, which included promoting religious tolerance and transformation within Hinduism as well as promoting peace between Hindus and Muslims.
- Both the Muslim population and the Turkish-Afghan government did not accept Rama-Sita and Radha-Krishna as legitimate political figures.
- It is possible that the Bhakti movement had an effect on Akbar; nevertheless, to assert that this was the case would be an instance of bending the truth.
- For the same reason, the movement caused a rift among the Hindu community.
- As an example, throughout the course of time, the people who followed Kabir came to be known as Kabir Panthis.



- Tantra is a new form of superstition that is introduced into Indian civilization as a result of this activity.
- The tantra school of philosophy originated from the concept of Bhakti.
- Through the use of mysterious gestures and the recitation of magical words (mantra), it was believed that one might obtain what they desired and enhance their power to an extraordinary degree.

## CONCLUSION

The Bhakti movement sought to rescue Hinduism from its corrupt priestly elite and oppressed masses. Bhakti saints came from all backgrounds, notably lower castes. Bhakti opposed religion's centralization and tried to decentralize it. Bhakti traditions gave lower castes respect, challenging upper caste rule. Muslims were also welcome in this tradition. The Bhakti tradition opposed upper-class customs and dominance. They adopted popular languages. Bengali, Kannada, Marathi, Hindi, and Marathi thank saints who preached in their own languages. Bhakti practitioners introduced syncretic practice to India to promote religious tolerance and diversity. They strengthened Hinduism-Islam relations by combining their diverse and orthogenetic elements. Holy men and women like Kabir Bhakti mocked both faiths' dogmas. Bhakti believed in the radial purpose's biological, subaltern intelligence. Denying the monarch's power. Some famous people denied the king's divinity. He clearly and persistently challenged the establishment and his own culture. Saints promoted monotheism and universality. They fiercely opposed exploitation, injustice, and hierarchy and the elite's intellectual dominance. Power dynamics regarding property interactions were revealed. This event welcomed all oppressed individuals as a symbol of competing political beliefs. They embodied subaltern, indigenous modernity. Disobedience occurred when people broke conventions. Disobedient to authority and the social and political order, it threatened the status quo. Its composite narratives offered an alternative political framework for philosophical opposition of dominance.

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