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Historical and Philosophical Aspects of Shaivite Bhakti Movement of South India

Dr. Sharath Chandra Swamy*

Historical Background: A common feature in the world history is the revolutions. Throughout the history, when a society was completely occupied by some upper class exploitation of the masses - politically, religiously, economically and mainly intellectually, then we have always witnessed a certain revolution. That revolution ends all chaos and contradictions of the society, meanwhile bringing a bright future for the people. The Indian history observed several revolutions through the ages. In those, two revolutions are very significant – The Buddhist revolution in north India and the Bhakti movement in South India. They both fought against anarchy and paradoxes of society and brings an immense transformation in social and religious order.

The history of the later middle ages of India witnessed several crucial incidents, including the decline of Buddhism and restoration of Vaidika Sanatana Dharma. This time is also remarkable due to so many religious and social reformations by the Saints of Maharashtra, Tamilnadu, Caitanya, Kabir, Gurunanak, and notably the saints or Sharanas of Karnataka. This movement was a reaction against the political social economic and religious condition of the period. The Bhakti movement in general can also be regarded as a reaction to the prevailing customs.

Bhakti is a major religious concept in most of all Indian philosophical schools. Bhakti is the complete devotional surrender to a personally perceived Supreme God for achieving ultimate salvation. Dr. Radhakrishnan explains Bhakti as, “Bhakti can be considered as the emotional attachment distinct from other paths like knowledge or action”.¹ The history of Bhakti can be traced back to the Rig Vedic Age. ‘Bhaj’ is the root of the word Bhakti. Which would mean, ‘to revere’, ‘to share’, ‘to partake’, and ‘to worship’.² Maitri-Upanishad, and Svetasatra Upanishad also refers to ‘Bhakti’.³

TamilNadu: South India is the major habitat of Bhakti doctrine. This movement has a history from 6th Century A.D in Tamilnadu. In between the sixth and tenth centuries, this Bhakti doctrine grew from a mere religious doctrine into a popular movement. It also proposed religious equality for socially backward people. Several great saint-poets have led this movement. Somewhere about 10th Century this movement begins to decline in Tamilnadu. In 12th Century A.D, this Bhakti movement once again gained momentum in Karnataka as Shiva Sharana Bhakti movement in the leadership of great social reformer Basaveshwara.

The shaiva saints of Tamilnadu, popularly known as Nayanmar, spread Bhakti siddhanta among various sects of the society, regardless any caste and creed. Some of these saints came from the "lower" castes and also some were women. The saint-poets preached Bhakti in a resilient passionate way and promoted shaiva religion impartiality. These saints opposed meaningless rituals and demonstrated a simple religion through Bhakti. Tamil Nayanmar saints used the local Tamil language to preach and also, they have written poetry in the same language. They didn't used Sanskrit to compose their devotional songs. All these features gave the movement a widespread atmosphere all over Tamilnadu.

By the time of emergence of Shaiva Bhakti saints, previously Buddhists and Jains were had a privileged status in the courts of South Indian kings. These Shaiva Bhakti Saints won over many enthusiasts of Buddhism and Jainism and re-established the Vaidika dharma in the south. Simultaneously these poet-saints resisted the authority of some orthodox people belonging to a particular cast by making Bhakti accessible to common people, without any caste and sex discrimination. This Shaiva Bhakti movement in Tamilnadu had its limitations as well. It never opposed vigorously the Varna and caste systems at the social level, like Basaveshwara's Bhakti movement in Karnataka. In later times it was integrated with the caste

system and the "lower" castes continued to suffer from various social disabilities. There was no elimination of rituals such as the worship of idols, recitation of the Vedic mantras and pilgrimages to sacred places in spite of the overriding emphasis on Bhakti as the superior mode of worship. This was also perhaps the reason why the temples played an important role in the growth of South Indian Bhakti movement. After the movement reached its highpoint in the tenth century, it was gradually assimilated into the conventional Vedic religion. Despite these limitations, the Tamil Shaiva Bhakti movement in its prime succeeded in championing the cause of religious equality and, consequently, the Brahmans had to accept the right of the "low-caste" to preach, to have access to Bhakti as a mode of worship and to have access even to the Vedas.

The Bhakti literature produced in Tamilnadu contains Several important texts- Tirumurai, Tevaram, Nalayira Divya Prabandham, and also there are so many saints who immensely contributed to this literature - Karaikkal Avvaiyar, Appar (Tirunavakkarasar), Sambandar, Sundarar, Mannikavasahar were the foremost shaiva Bhakti saint poets of that time.

Karnataka: In the history of South India, twelfth century A.D has a very momentous part. Especially the Karnataka region has witnessed an inordinate transformation in its social and religious state. This enormous change was happened due to the revolution of Lingayat or Virashaiva Sharanas. From ancient times to till date, Karnataka is one of the chief abodes of Shaivism. The early history of Virashaivism is obscure. There are several theories and opinions about the origin of this religion. Numerous scholars have presented their views on the time and the founder of this system. But till date there is no authoritative research was made. Still, it is a bone of contention. Historically, one of the great social reformers of South India, Basavanna (Basaveshvara or Basava) is the chief personage of Lingayatism. His name is practically unfamiliar outside his native Karnataka. Basavanna and his follower Sharanas works also remained confined.

Basavanna lived in the 12th Century (1134 – 1196 AD) in Northern region of Karnataka State. However, he was born as a Shaiva brahmin, rebelled against the rigid performs of the caste system and finally began expounding his own philosophy with a castles society at its fundamental. His philosophy began to attract large numbers of people from all over India. Several saints and mystic philosophers called as 'Sharanas', were also played crucial roles in spreading this movement. It has been gradually developed as a major Bhakti movement of common people. Sharana's like Allama Prabhudeva, Akka Mahadevi, Channabasavanna, Siddharameshwara etc. were the leading personnel of this astounding movement. This great band of Sharanas rallied together under the great leadership of Basavanna to trounce all the evils of the society of that time. This movement won the cause of the rebellion against the brahmanic system that promoted social inequality through a hierarchic system of castes, Varnashrama system that condemned an entire social class as being impure.

Major Philosophical Aspects:

Monotheism: From the ancient times to modern days, India is famous for its polytheism or worship of several gods. Especially the Sanatana Dharma is well-known for this multi God-goddess concept⁴. In falling times of Buddhism, the tantric Buddhist sect 'Vajrayana' also encouraged the polytheism. Several petty gods and goddesses⁵ were worshipped by the common people. The Sharanas condemned this practice and advocated monotheism. Similarly, they criticized in a sophisticated manner 'SakaamaBhakti' or Bhakti with a motive, which expressed itself in the creation as well as worship of hundreds of demi gods like Maari, Masani and so on and so forth. Basavanna objects:- "How Shall I, Sir, compare to Him/The wax-filled gods that melt and shrink/At sight of fire? / How shall I, Sir, compare to Him / The gods you sell / In an emergency? / How shall I, Sir, compare to Him / The gods you bury in the ground / When fear assaults? / Lord Kudala Sangama, who is one / With self-rapt reality, / Alone is God!!"⁶

The Sharanas do not accept the existence of several gods. To them God is one, he himself transcends the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshvara. He is the almighty and we must devote to him only, like a loyal wife who loves her husband only. Here we can perceive the Sharana concept of "Linga Pati - Sharana Sati" (Linga or Lord Shiva is a Husband and Sharana or devotee is wife). Hence the Sharanas advocate the worship of one God in the form of Ishtalinga. Basavanna and other Sharanas proposed a unique form of God Shiva – the "Ishtalinga". (A small sized linga, which can be worshiped in hand and every Virashaiva should wear it always in his body until his death). Thus, the devotee from worshipping the Ishtalinga will get single pointed belief and that faith may mature to its completeness and ultimately unite with the absolute. The ethical philosophy of Sharanas is based on monotheism. It was a progressive force in those days and they have set up Monotheism through the combination of rationalism and empiricism.

Religious reforms: In the medieval India superstitious and blind beliefs were deep rooted in the society. Today also they have a strong hold on Indian culture. The Bhakti saints tried to root out these evil beliefs from Indian psyche. It is true that they have not completely succeeded in that, however they have achieved some extent. Basavanna completely opposes superstitious about dates and time. He says, "Today is better than tomorrow"⁷ - "Don't say that day, this day, another day! / To one who bows to Shiva, today / Must ever be the day! / To one who bows to Hara / Today is ever be the day! / To one remembering ceaselessly / Our Kudala Sangama today / Must ever be the day!"⁸

They also condemned some meaningless beliefs, which were embedded in society. They simply reject the concept of heaven and hell. According to Basavanna, "To speak the truth is the heaven and to speak the untruth is the hell"⁹. The Bhakti saints never advocate complete renunciation of worldly life. They have viewed worldly and spiritual life as two faces of a same coin and they were not only preached, but also showed a lively example to how to know the art of realizing God while leading an everyday life. Basavanna says, "The mundane life is Gods mint. One who fits into worldly life will be successful in the spiritual world also"¹⁰.

Another revolutionary step of the Bhakti saints is to vigorously reject the Karmakanda part of the Vedas. Especially the Sharanas condemned Vedas for its violence in yajna, sacrifices, meaningless rituals and its discriminations. They were promoted complete non-violence in the religion. They also criticized in severe terms the Puranas and Agamas for spreading blind beliefs in society. Thus, the Basavanna enlightens the basic substance of all religions : "What sort of religion can it be / Without compassion? / Compassion needs must be / Towards all living things; / Compassion is the root / Of all religious faiths: / Lord Kudala Sangama does not care / For what is not like this!"¹¹

However, the Bhakti saints gave great importance to the Jnankanda or knowledge part of Vedas. They have also quoted numerous instances from the Upanishads. In the Bhakti way there is no need of a middle man in between the God and the devotee. He upheld the philosophy of "human body is the abode of God" and rejected the temple culture. Basavanna illuminates : "Those who have money build / Temples to Lord Shiva, what can I build / A poor man, Lord, am I / My body is the shrine, / Its pillars are my legs, / The golden pinnacle, is my head / Lord Kudala Sangama / There is destruction for what stands / But not for that which moves!"¹²

An Innovative Mystic path: The saints of Bhakti movement presented a pristine way of philosophy to Indian culture and heritage. This philosophy is unique in every aspect and offered divine experiences with a very simple ritual practices for laymen. For a devotee, Lord Shiva is "One, from which everything comes out and into which everything merges in the end". The Sharanas used some distinctive terms to describe it - Shunya, Bayalu, Anubhaava etc. They have frequently used the 'Shunya' word for paratpara Parashiva. This is very remarkable that, after Buddhist philosophers, the Sharanas are the only Indian philosophers who were given prominence to 'Shunya' in their philosophy. Nevertheless, in the concept of 'Shunya', they have major differences. Another exciting term used by the Sharanas is

'Anubhaava' = The only an approximate term in English for this word is "spiritual knowledge or knowledge of self". Anubhaava is an impeccable state of recognition of the truth. Anubhaava is not an intellectual knowledge obtained by Shastras or by discussions with scholars. It is an actual enlighten experience of truth in consciousness. One can attain this state through threefold principles – "Ashtavarana, Panchachara and Shatsthala". These three principles are the major concepts of Sharanas.

Ashtavarana consists of Guru, Linga, Jangama, Padodaka, Prasada, Vibhuti, Rudraksha and Mantra. Here first three are objects of worship, Padodaka and Prasada are the fruits of that devotion and remaining are the resources of the worship. Panchacharas are the certain religious, moral and social codes of conduct. The devotee must observe them during his spiritual journey. They are - Lingachara, Sadachara, Shivachara, Bhutyachara and Ganachara. The Sharana concept of metaphysics is known as "Shatsthala Siddhanta" (Theory of six stages). According to them one can achieve self-realization through these six stages. The believer should go on through these phases to attain ultimate salvation – Bhakta sthala, Maheshvara sthala, Prasadi sthala, Pranalingi sthala, Sharana sthala and Aikya sthala.

Conclusion: After a profound study of Bhakti movement, we can categorize these fourteen major works, which were bringing great changes in Indian culture and heritage –

- i. Introducing monotheism.
- ii. Opening the door of religion for people from every caste.
- iii. Condemning reincarnations and teaching people that, in this life itself, they can get salvation.
- iv. Upraising the status of women from teaching - women are equal to men.
- v. The people of rejected communities, from every right in society were becoming sacred here.
- vi. Presenting freedom of speech and freedom of philosophy to everyone.
- vii. Uplifting the position of the local language to divine as Samskrit.
- viii. Constituting an essential rule that, everyone should work for his or her livelihood.
- ix. Eliminating superstitious and blind beliefs from society.
- x. Bestowing a unique philosophy of "Karma is Knowledge and Knowledge is Karma".
- xi. Eradicating human ego through the exclusive philosophical view point "Dasoham".
- xii. Establishing a greater co-ordination between Bhakti-Jnana-Karma (Devotion-Knowledge-actions).
- xiii. Publicizing the view of "Gruhasta Dharma" (household ship) is superior to "Sannyasa Dharma" (renunciation) for spiritual life and ultimate salvation.
- xiv. Raising the status of people from untouchable communities.

The Bhakti poets are not saints in the strictest sense of the term. They are poets, wanderers, mystics, renouncers, sages, philosophers, godmen and godwomen, but they are not saints. The Bhakti poets who had respectful epithets such as Nayanmar (chieftains of Śiva), Sharana (Completely Surrendered to Lord Shiva), Alvaar (one who is immersed in the *Bhakti* of Vishnu) and Dasa (devotee). The Bhakti movement should be understood in broader context following the philosophy of each individual saint differently. It was a reaction against the prevailing rites and rituals against the prevailing social order. It is also observed that few of the Bhakti saints were philosophers, but few others were devotee of high order. Moreover, they used the vernacular languages instead of Sanskrit and used music as the medium to propagate their faith. They never established any school of philosophy. However, it can be said that all the Bhakti saints aimed at improving the life of the people in a spiritual way.

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3. Neog M.(ed), (1982), Bhakti Ratnakara of Sankara Deva and History of the concept of Bhakti, Punjab University, Patiala, p.6
4. We can also find some monotheistic views in some vedic texts - "Ekam sat, vipraā bahudha vadanti" etc.
5. The Yaksha and Yakshi'i puja was very famous all over India at that time.

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11. *Ibid*
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