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Dr. Anupama Rajoria
Assistant Professor, Govt. S.S.
College Mahapura, Jaipur,
Rajasthan, India

The bhakti movement and Meera Bai

Dr. Anupama Rajoria

Abstract

Bhakti movement was a significant movement which originated during the sixth century C.E and went on to become a religious movement in India. All kinds of sects joined the movement and all caste of people dedicated themselves to the Bhakti concept. In Rajasthan, one of the most prominent Bhakt was Meera Bai whose Bhakti towards Lord Krishna was unparalleled.

Keywords: Bhakti movement, Meera Bai, Bhakts, Krishna, Hindu

Introduction

The Bhagavat Gita propounds that 'Karma marga', 'Jana marga', 'Bhakti marga' are the three established ways of attaining the final goal of salvation or Moksha. Around the tenth century, there arose in southern parts of India an indigenous protest movement called The Bhakti movement which advocated the Bhakti marg with intense fervor. In due course, this protest became a Hindu religious movement, which lasted for more than four hundred years till the seventeenth century. It was a movement that was counter to the prevalent caste ideology which was dividing Hinduism. The movement was spontaneous and the followers, the Bhaktas, mystics, saints had their own version of devotional expression. In southern India the devotion was centered on Shiva and Vishnu represented by sixty-three Nayanars and twelve Alvars who came from all castes even the untouchables like the Pullayars and the Panars. They were sharply critical of the Buddhists and the Jainas and preached ardent love of Shiva and Vishnu as the path to salvation. They drew upon the ideals of love and heroism as found in the sangam literature (Tamil literature) and blended them with the values of Bhakti. The Nayanars and Alvars went from place to place composing exquisite poems in praise of the deities enshrined in the villages they visited and setting them to music. During the fourteenth to seventeenth century, the Bhakti movement swept through central and northern and eastern India through a loosely associated groups of teachers and saints like Ramananda, Ravidasa, Chetanya Mahabrabhu, Soordas, Kabir, Tulsidas, Namdev and Tukaram to name a few.

Some of the important features of Bhakti movement were:

The Bhakti movement gave birth to some revolutionary sects whose numbers swelled as they became established. These sects and saints while adhering to the basic tenets departed radically regarding some features of Hinduism. Ramanuja Charya and Madhava Charya were the first two prominent Brahmin priests of the south who started using Bhakti marg to rebel against the existence of a large number of religious-socio evils like injustice and exploitation. The second form of protest was the use of vernacular language instead of Sanskrit for religious worships, prayers and writings. The work of the saints was composed in regional languages which could be sung. They were handed down orally from generation to generation thus forming the oral and written tradition. They totally rejected the need for Brahmin pandit in religious performances for two reasons. Firstly, these pundits had started exploiting the masses in name of religion. Secondly, he was a barrier between the Bhakt and God. The ideology of the mystics was a Bhakt talking directly to God. Purity of mind and action was advocated instead of purity of body. Tukaram said 'Soap may clean the body, but will it clear the mind'. Thus, people of all castes creed, age and sections of society got associated with the movement. It was a movement that witnessed even the emergence of female saints.

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Anupama Rajoria
Assistant Professor, Govt. S.S.
College Mahapura, Jaipur,
Rajasthan, India

During the twelfth century itself, women entered the movement not only as mere passive followers but as religious leaders and saints too. Takarams clarion call 'come one come all' saw women like Akkamahadevi (Tamil), Bahinabai (Maharashtra), Lalleshwari (Kashmir) and Mirabai (Rajasthan). Meerabai (1498-1547) was the mystic saint of Rajasthan, a disciple of Ravidas and a devotee of Lord Krishna. She personifies both Shakti and Bhakti. She is quintessential because she is a saint, a poet, a dancer, a lyricist, a lover, a rebel and a woman with a mind of her own. She was born in Kurki, a little village near merta city in the Nagaur district of Rajasthan. Her hagiography tells that she was married to prince Bhojraja of Chittor. It was a marriage arranged to keep the two Rajput states united against the attack of Muslim rulers. It was also a marriage against Meeras wish because she had already accepted Krishna to be her husband. Legend says that one day she saw a wedding procession pass by the palace and asked her mother innocently 'Mother who is my husband?' to which her mother pointed to the idol of Lord Krishna and said that 'he is your husband'. Since that day Meera considered Krishna to be her Lord and God and worshipped him madly. As Shakti- Meera in the staunch conservative Rajput society rebelled against tradition and patriarchy. She refused to worship the family deity Bhawani or Durga at her in-laws house and rejected the Rajput Stri dharm. She challenged Manus dictum that 'husband is the wives only lord'. This amounted to a lot of anger from her in-laws who always insulted and tried to ostracise her. But her Bhakti forced her husband to impart overwhelming respect to her until he died. The widowed Meera shunned the veil and left the four walls of the palace, danced on the streets and travelled all alone to Mathura. Indian nationalists, Rajput historians and sociologists recognize her strength and power. They use her in their narrative patterns. In Tagores short story 'Letter from a Wife', the wife leaves the husband and tells that she draws inspiration from Meerabai. She finds hope and will to live through Meera and can affirm both her independence and identity to Meera. As a poetess- Her devotional songs are called Padas which are written in a simple rhythm with a repeating refrain and all are addressed to Krishna. They are written in Braj and Rajasthani. Its anthology is called padavali. The padas are an important part of our cultural heritage and academics. They are a part of school and university curriculum. They are sung in form of Bhajans in Kirtans and devotional congregations. They have been translated, adapted and modernized in order to be sung in all the Indian languages. Her padas are the corpus of the culture and tradition of her contemporary society. She talks of ornaments in her padas like the anklet, bajubandh, bangles, tagdi and the tika. Various festivals like holi, teej, gangaur and raslila are talked about. She also talks about milk and its products like milk butter and ghee. Her poetry erotically describes her rare encounters with Krishna. In one of her padas she evokes the fact that she is adorned with jewels and is waiting for her Lord. Swami Buddhananda calls this as a model of 'bridal mysticism' a theory which thus emerged to explain Meera and other Bhakti poets in reference to their love for God. This was the idea of spiritual marriage of the Gopis to Lord Krishna and Meera also considered herself to be a reincarnation of Gopi Lalita. Her padas are replete with geographical descriptions of Merata, Chittor, Mathura and Vrindavan where she goes in quest of her Lord. She talks about the various flowers, plants,

animals and also temples which she encounters on her journey. Her padas are autobiographical where she often talks about her sufferings, her exploitation and her pain. She also talks about the status of women in her society. As a dancer- In her devotion and ecstasy Meera would dance madly on the streets and in the temples shunning all the codes and conducts that a Rajput princess was supposed to observe. She would dance with her songs and the iktara. Meera is not only a legend or a saint but lives even today as a global personality. In Rajasthan, people name their daughters after her. Her stories and songs cross all linguistic, regional and religious boundaries. Her story is performed in every conceivable musical and dramatic style, paintings, images, posters, festivals and parks are devoted to her. Merta organizes a three day Meera Mahotsav every year on Buddha Purnima. In social imagination of people, she is an inspiration and hope. Women struggling to overcome social oppression and degradation, human lovers, lovers of God, spiritual people and bollywood all identify with her. Her stories and songs have been carried by the migrations of south-Asian people to regions like the Carribean, South Pacific, Europe and North America. In US her life story has become a popular subject for South-Asian cultural performances. So Meera is not only a saint of the Bhakti movement but the quintessential Meera.

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