

The Bhakti Movement as Early Cultural Activism

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Abstract: The Bhakti Movement played a crucial role in the formation of Indian culture and consciousness. As a movement, it began in 7th century in South India, especially in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, but attained its prime in North India, especially in Hindi speaking belt, in 15th and 17th centuries, shifting spiritual experience from being an institutionally regulated affair to a highly personal and socially inclusive. Historians have mainly studied this movement as a religious movement but recent approaches postulate that it was a kind of activism that went against the established power hierarchy, caste hierarchy, ritual orthodoxy, and social exclusion. The Bhakti saints, whether they belong to south or north India, played a critical role in utilizing cultural resources, vernacular literature, and devotional poetry, music, discourse, and so on to change social consciousness and make spiritual knowledge widely available. The saints of this movement heralded metamorphosis, challenging the dominant norms of the day and creating alternate spaces of expression. The current research paper studies the Bhakti Movement in India, through an analysis of its historical context, ideological foundations, literary practices, and social impact as an early instance of cultural activism. According to the text's analysis, it proved to be radical cultural agent who employed language, poetry, performance as well as spirituality in the cultural phenomena of the country. An analysis of key Bhakti saints Kabir, Ravidas, Mirabai, Guru Nanak, and Tukaram shows that such devotional expression can be viewed as a medium of resistance, inclusivity, and cultural democratization. Additionally, an analysis of the movement is performed in terms of pluralism, social justice, and the contemporary debates on cultural activism.

Keywords: Bhakti Movement, Cultural Activism, Vernacular Literature, Social Reform, Devotional Poetry, Cultural Resistance

Bhakti Movement: The Revolution of the Heart

The Bhakti Movement refers to an insurrection or social philosophy in Indian history that removed religion from ritual and hierarchy and transferred it to devotion and humanity. The sixth century CE marked not only the beginning of hymn composition in Tamilakam by the Alvars, a group of 12 Tamil

poets devoted to Lord Vishnu and his avatars and Nayanars, a group of 63 Tamil poets devoted to Lord Shiva, but also the beginning of the Bhakti Movement. Being “immersed in God” (Olson, 2007, p. 231), both Alvars and Nayanars have firm faith in the conviction that God can be reached only through love, not through rites and the intervention of priests. What they thought, they preached. And it is the moment when the first expression of Bhakti Movement occurred. It was the moment when Religion was set free from the confinement of the orthodoxical social set-up. The saints of this movement, like Ramanuja, Basava, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Ravidas, Mirabai, Surdas, Tulsidas, and Chaitanya Maha Prabhu preached that religion is for all without any distinction. Later on, they discoursed that real devotion does not care for caste, wealth, knowledge or social position. As a medium of their expression, they chose local or regional languages. In this language, through their songs and lyrics, they spread spirituality from temples to scriptures and later on, brought it to the hearts of common people. Between the fifteenth and seventeenth century, somewhere in eastern and northern India, this movement became a strong force for social and religious reform. Through this religion, prejudice was fought against, spiritual equality was emphasized, and there was felt a personal rapport with God. As a movement, the Bhakti movement was not only a religious movement but also a movement that placed love over ritual, faith over formalism, and humanity over division. It reminded all that it is not power and privilege but a glowing heart radiating with devotion that is the shortest way to God. Minute observation on it reveals that it was more than a movement. It was cultural activism, activism in thoughts and theories, activism in actuality and practicality.

However, people generally narrate the social transformation mainly in political revolutions, economic changes, and military conflicts. Cultural movements have long challenged and transformed social structures, particularly in the modern era as they emerge as a powerful force. Cultural activism is the utilization of cultural practices, artistic expression, literature and language, and other symbolic forms to disrupt dominant power structures or advocate for social change. Many cultural expressions were already used as a means of resistance to the establishment long before modern social movements emerged. Of these, the best example in the Indian context is the bhakti movement. During a period of severe casteism, dogmatism, and differentiation, the Bhakti Movement came into actuality. The pre-existing devotional traditions in India were relatively inclusive but the Bhakti movement which emerged in the medieval period brought a radical notion of inclusivity. In contrast to ritual expertise, priestly mediation, or social status, Bhakti saints preached devotion to the divine. The widespread dissemination of religion created social possibilities that challenged elite control and subverted the monopoly of cultural production by elite groups, opening space for the lower orders to assert their agency and voice. This movement affected more than theology. Bhakti saints expressed alternative notions of social value through songs, poems, sermons, and other oral performances that claimed equality, compassion, and human dignity. By rendering their teachings into the local or regional languages rather than Sanskrit, the masses were made more intelligent and spiritually enriched. According to Hawley (2015), the Bhakti tradition has played an important role in transforming the vernacular literary cultures of India. The popularization of devotional texts helped form regional identities and enhance ethical universality. Bhakti based cultural activism engages the social difference that is its most potent weapon. Saints like Kabir and Ravidas openly condemned distinction based on caste and religion. Kabir poignantly remarked, “*Jāti na pūchho sādhu kī, pūchh lījīye jñān; mol karo talvār kā, parā rahne do myān*” (Do not ask a saint's caste; ask about his wisdom. Value the sword, not the sheath) (Kabir, trans. Vaudeville, 1974). The remark rejected the claim that birth is better than virtue or brains. In addition, Ravidas dreamed of a society without social oppression and asserted that “*Begampura sahar ko nāu, dūkh andoh*

nahīm tih thāu” (which translates to “Begampura is the city where there is not suffering or anxiety”) (Ravidas, trans. Omvedt 2008).

Having all this in attention, the current research paper scrutinizes the Bhakti Movement as a precursor of cultural activism which traces historical roots and literature and social interventions of the movement and its legacy. It argues that Bhakti turned culture into a medium of resistance and reform and foreshadowed many traits associated with modern cultural politics.

Understanding Cultural Activism: A Theoretical Framework: Cultural activism is a set of efforts directed at utilizing cultural symbols and stories, art, and collective expressions to oppose dominant power relations and instigate social change. Cultural activism aims for transformations in consciousness, values, and social imagination, unlike political interventions. The cultural studies’ scholars emphasize that culture is not mere a reflection of society but also a site of production and contestation of social meanings. Therefore, cultural activism works to redefine identities, challenge dominant ideologies, and propose alternative visions of social reality. Since it used the devotional culture for social intervention, the Bhakti Movement can be understood in this frame. Rather than staging political revolts, Bhakti saints changed cultural debate itself. Songs and poems questioned caste, purity, religious authority, and gender roles assumptions. By oral forms and public presentation, they create counter narratives against dominant structures. The main relevance of Bhakti is its ability to connect the spiritual with the social critique. According to Oommen (2004), social movements first arise by challenging symbols before the institutional change takes shape. Bhakti saints enacted challenges to power by redefining spiritual authority. It was said by them that anybody could personally experience the truth which came from god. This methodology is embodied in Kabir’s poetry. He criticized sectarian division, wrote: Kabir's poetry exemplifies this approach. Criticizing sectarian divisions, he wrote, “*Pahan pūje Hari mile, to main pūjūm pahār*” (If God were found by worshipping stones, I would worship a mountain) (Kabir, trans. Vaudeville, 1974). The verse denounces rituals and brings out the added virtue of inner spirituality. In a similar vein, Guru Nanak’s assertion, “There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim” (Nanak, trans. Singh, 2012), is not to deny identity but to assert unity. Through these interventions, it is revealed that how bhakti operated as a cultural activism in turning religion into a reflective space for society. The purpose of the movement was not struggle for power but transformation of consciousness. But it is the culture that is the site of the (real) transformation.

Historical Context of the Bhakti Movement: The Bhakti Movement arose against the backdrop of a diverse socio-political landscape that included religious pluralism and social hierarchies. In Medieval India, people were stratified by caste, which determined their education, religious status and capacity for social mobility. The people’s religious life and ritual conduct were heavily influenced by Brahmanical institutions. During the same time, many other regional kingdoms came into existence in the subcontinent, and various Islamic rules were set up. These events sparked fresh forms of cultural exchanges and discussions regarding values, authority, and spirituality. The existence of different religions resulted in both conflict and creativity. Within this context, devotional movements emerged as options against rigid institutions. The devotional poems of the Alvars and the Nayanars mark the emergence of early Bhakti traditions in South India. The compositions highlighted emotional devotion and personal connection with the divine. As these ideas spread northwards, they created different regional traditions which took shape – based on local social realities. One reason why Bhakti was popular was because it was accessible. Bhakti saints expanded participation by rejecting sole use of Sanskrit and using vernacular languages. Thapar argues that vernacularization has transformed cultural

communication and expanded social engagement (2004). The use of vernacular languages made devotional teachings accessible to artisans, peasants, women and outcastes who were outside elite intellectual traditions. Historical evidence indicates that the Bhakti was not one but various regional traditions that were linked by shared concerns. Even though differentiation was evident in all these traditions, they sought devotion, equality and independence. The combined impact of their activities fundamentally altered India's cultural landscape and led to the emergence of new forms of social engagement.

The Bhakti Movement: Origins and Development: The Bhakti movement owes its genesis to the early devotional trends in Hindu thought, particularly those which stressed the personal devotion towards Vishnu and Shiva. Despite having a long history of worship, the medieval Bhakti Movement signified a radical break between worship and accessibility, emotion, and caste. Alvars and Nayanars of South India sung the hymns in praise of God's love and criticized ritual formalism. The groundwork for subsequent evolutions throughout the continent was set by them. Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab, Bengal, and Northern India saw the Bhakti traditions being established in the 12th and 13th centuries. Regional circumstances and useful leadership inspired the entire movement in a variety of areas. In Maharashtra, saints urged people to maintain integrity of character and sincerity of devotion. According to Tukaram, who stated, "The servant of God sees God in all beings" (Tukaram, trans. Abbot & Godbole, 1994), all are equal. Mira, an original poetess and princess from Rajasthan, freely rejected the patriarchal norm for the Hindu god Krishna. Her oft-cited remark, "*Mere to Giridhar Gopal, doosaro na koi*" (For me there is only Giridhar Gopal and no one else) (Mirabai, trans. Alston, 1980), reflects both a spiritual commitment and a subversive repudiation of social restraints. Oral communication, music, and people's participation contributed to the dissemination of the movement. There were songs and hymns, all of which were memorized, performed, and circulated. The inclusive nature of Bhakti teachings allowed for the formation of identities among various social groups and communities. According to John Stratton Hawley (2015), Bhakti cannot be reduced to a single doctrine and was expressed differently in different regions and communities. Despite significant variation, the core ideas in religions remained broadly the same: contacts with God, criticism of social inequality and affirmation of dignity. These ideas made Bhakti a potent cultural force whose impact went much beyond religion.

Bhakti as Cultural Activism: Through cultural expression rather than political confrontation, the Bhakti Movement may be understood as one of the earliest forms of cultural activism in South Asia that sought to challenge social inequalities. In general, the Bhakti saints did not seek institutional power; rather, they intended to transform the society's moral imagination. By using bhakti poetry, music, preaching and communal prayer, they questioned the legitimacy of caste differences, ritual exclusiveness and sectarian divisions. Their interventions were cultural because they functioned within the sphere of beliefs, values, and daily practices, but they were also activist because they attempted social transformation. Creating alternative narratives which question the mainstream is a prominent feature of cultural activism. By establishing bhakti or devotion as the essential criterion of spiritual worth, the bhakti saints did so. A position like this directly impinged upon social systems based on birth, caste and ritual status. Kabir consistently rejected religious formalism and social divisions. One of his most celebrated verses states, "*Moko kahān dhūṇḍhe re bande, maiṁ to tere pās meṁ*" (Where do you search for me, O seeker? I am close to you) (Kabir, trans. Vaudeville, 1974). Kabir undermined the authority of religious institutions by locating divinity within lived human experiences rather than sacred texts.

The movement made sacred knowledge accessible. It shunned the control of medieval religious discourse by Elites. A small number of learned elites controlled medieval religious discourse that had access to Sanskrit texts. The monopoly of the Brahmins over scriptures began to be disrupted by the Bhakti saints through the forms of ideas which were philosophical and spiritual in nature. Their poetry reached the artisans, the labourers, the women, the peasants, and other deprived members who were excluded from the official record of religion. Through this process Bhakti transformed culture into a zone of participation instead of exclusion. The cultural activism of Bhakti also critiqued the idea of social identity. Saints have repeatedly emphasized the universality of human existence and that all souls are equal before God. Guru Nanak declared, “*Aval Allah Noor Upaya, Kudrat Ke Sab Bande; Ek Noor Te Sab Jag Upjaya, Kaun Bhale Ko Mande*” (First, the Divine created the light; from that light came all beings. From the same light emerged the entire world, so who is superior and who is inferior?), (Singh, 2012). The notion that we are all human because of the common origin from God challenged social hierarchy. The success of the movement was to be able to connect the spirituality with social awareness. The Bhakti saints stand away from abstract doctrines and speak of experience of inequality and exclusion, existing in the society. Their cultural engagement altered the public discourse and also gave birth to more inclusive visions of a communal and identity being.

Language and Literature as Tools of Cultural Resistance: One of the most revolutionary aspects of the Bhakti Movement was the use of vernacular languages. The status of Sanskrit was extremely elevated and regarded as a religious, philosophical, and authentically Scriptural language in the medieval age. Most of the people could not learn or teach in Sanskrit. Bhakti saints knew that social change was only possible if they spoke through the languages of the common man. The use of the vernacular languages itself was a political and cultural act. The Bhakti poets challenged the linguistic hierarchy by using Hindi, Marathi, Punjabi, Bengali, Tamil, Gujarati, and other regional languages, writings that invented regional languages for philosophical thinking and literary creative activity. The growth of Indian vernacular literatures was immensely aided by this. Kabir’s poetry was composed in the language of the common people to give them power. His verse, “*Bura jo dekhan main chala, bura na milyā koi; jo dil khojā āpna, mujhse bura na koi*” (I went in search of the wicked, but found none. When I looked within myself, I found no one worse than me) (Kabir, trans. Vaudeville, 1974), conveys a deep ethical insight in very simple language. Through this type of poetry, the reader contemplated whilst enjoying.

Bhakti saints used several important literary techniques to communicate. The poems weren’t complex scholastic arguments but rather use of metaphors, symbols, songs and oral performance. The methods they applied ensured the widespread distribution and memorization and the gatherings of their followers opened up a new form of social practice that offered an alternate vision. By rejecting elite literary conventions and embracing popular forms, the Bhakti poets challenged cultural hegemony. The essayists questioned social hypocrisy, ritual practices, and asserted the dignity of marginalized people in their compositions. The resulting literary culture created possibilities for interclass dialogue. Mirabai’s poetry is a vivid instance of literature as resistance. Her commitment to Krishna helped her to better reject the patriarchal demands placed on women in aristocratic households. The statement “*Payo ji maine Ram ratan dhan payo*” which means “I have received the jewel of divine wealth” was made by her (Alston, 1980). Such verses may be devotional in form but they express a vision of spiritual freedom beyond social limits. Through her poetry, Mirabai established her own identity and questioned the norms of gender. The Bhakti Movement demonstrates that language and art can be instruments of cultural change through its literary achievement. Bhakti literature became an empowering resistance tool, by presenting spiritual and ethical reflection in an accessible way to common people.

Social Reform and the Bhakti Movement: The Bhakti Movement cannot be viewed in isolation from social reform as many leaders resisted structures of exclusion and discrimination. Although not a modern political reform movement, its teachings had significant social consequences. A large section of the population was denied dignity and opportunity, questioned by the Bhakti saints who stressed on spiritual equality. One of the main targets of Bhakti criticism was caste hierarchy. People's birth was a main factor in litigation and religion in medieval society. Bhakti saints often rejected the idea that one's spiritual merit depends on one's caste identity. As he himself belongs to marginal community, Ravidas envisions the equality of one caste that contradicts the caste system. The dream of Begampura symbolizes a society free from oppression, inequality, and social barriers (Omvedt 2008). Women were also offered new choices to contribute to the sacred movements. Despite societal restrictions, some bhakti traditions recognized women's engagement and allowed them to address God as "I". Mirabai remains an example that is most well-known. By refusing to comply with acceptable behaviour as a royal and claiming one's own devotional identity, she was able to pose a direct challenge to patriarchal hegemony. She proved through her poetry and her life that spiritual authority was not only a man thing.

Bhakti teachings emphasized significant values, such as compassion, humility and service. Guru Nanak stressed earning your livelihood and sharing with others. His famous proclamation "*Pavan guru, Pani Pita, Mata dharat mahat*" (Air is the teacher, water the father, and earth the great mother) reflects a holistic ethical vision underpinned by interconnectedness and respect for creation (Singh 2012). Social responsibilities along with spiritual devotion were taught through such lessons. The movement's character was reformist, and it was inclusive. Bhakti congregations often brought together people from various backgrounds. The movement opened up avenues for alternative social interactions, although caste distinctions did not completely fade away. These cultural practices gradually saw the onset of different cultural attitudes. Historians continue to debate the impact of Bhakti on society. There are some scholars who argue the movement did not overthrow caste. Some argue its most important success was more ideological than institutional. Despite all these debates, it is fairly agreed that the Bhakti movement expanded the moral and cultural horizons of the Indian society by questioning the assumptions regarding status, authority, and identity.

Major Bhakti Saints as Cultural Activists: The lives and works of the prominent saints of the Bhakti Movement bring out its transformative nature. While each personality reacted to very particular social situations, they all used cultural expression to critique and reform. Kabir is one of the greatest influences of bhakti activism. He resided in North India during the fifteenth century and critiqued the orthodoxy of Hindus and Muslims. One may argue that his poetry denounces religious formality, sectarianism and casteism while advocating inward spirituality. Kabir's declaration, "*Prem gali ati s̄nkarī, t̄ameṃ do na samāi*" (The lane of love is extremely narrow; two cannot pass through it) (Kabir, trans. Vaudeville, 1974), suggests that genuine spirituality requires the abandonment of ego and social pride. Through such compositions, Kabir wanted to change individual consciousness and collective values. Another authoritative voice of resistance was Ravidas. His lectures examined equality, justice and human dignity. Ravidas, who belonging to a socially marginalized community, resisted caste oppression through his devotional expressions. People still discuss social justice and egalitarianism in relation to Begampura. Many academics now consider his poetry to be one of the earliest expressions of a utopian social imagination in India. Mirabai participated in cultural activism by resisting patriarchal norms and conventions. Being a Rajput princess, she had to abide by societal and family standards. Rather, she held herself out for a life of devotion to Krishna. Her declaration, "*Mere to Giridhar Gopal, doosaro na koi*" (For me there is only Giridhar Gopal and no one else) (Alston, 1980), buttressed a spiritual identity that

supersedes social obligations. The poet Mirabai's creative expression of poetry and performance expanded the possibilities for female agency. Guru Nanak presented a spiritual vision emphasizing equality, ethical behavior, and harmony in the community. He laid emphasis upon devotion, honest labor and service to humanity while rejecting ritualism and sectarianism. The foundation of the Sikh religion was laid by his teachings; through which a tradition based on social responsibility and human unity developed. Tukaram played a similar role in Maharashtra. His abhangas blended devotion and social criticism. He discussed Humility, compassion and sincerity to ridicule hypocrisy and arrogance. Tukaram's poetry and public performance promoted a spiritual outlook on everyday life, which made Bhakti ideals accessible to different audiences. As a group, they made devotional culture an agent of social action. Works of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Ghandi still essential readings, because they relate to important issues of dignity, equality, and freedom.

Bhakti Movement and Cultural Pluralism: The Bhakti Movement contributed the longest to cultural pluralism and the contemporary world has a long way to go to catch up with this legacy. Medieval India consists of different religions, languages and society structures. As a result, Bhakti saints created forms of devotion that crossed rigid communal boundaries and stressed on similar spiritual values. The Bhakti movement is predominantly linked to Hindu devotional traditions but many of its leading personalities interfaced with nonexclusive ideas and promoted intercommunity dialogue. The Bhakti and Sufi traditions, when brought together, contributed significantly to the country's composite culture. The two movements stressed personal devotion and love for the divine, as well as the importance of the inner experience. Researchers have often commented on the similarities between Bhakti and Sufi mystical traditions, especially regarding their usage of poetry and musical instruments. The shared practice of devotion amongst several communities while maintaining their own distinctiveness was made possible due to these interactions.

This pluralistic vision finds an extraordinary instance in the case of Kabir. He rejected mutually exclusive barriers of Hinduism and Islam in his poetry. He aimed his criticism at dogmas in both styles while advocating the unity of God. In one of his famous poems he says "*Kankar pathar jor ke masjid layi chunay; ta chadh mulla bang de, kya bahra hua Khuday?*" (You built a mosque with stones and mortar; the mullah climbs and calls aloud—have God become deaf?), (Kabir, trans. Vaudeville, 1974). He-Kabir-often observed the loss of true spirituality due to blind faith and rituals and thus highlighted this observation to the world. In the same way, Guru Nanak promoted the idea of universal humanity. His teachings were meant to understand that God is beyond religions. The spiritual philosophy of the teacher was based on equality, service and compassion. Nanak's emphasis on conversation rather than conflict helped develop a tradition of tolerance and coexistence amongst the different groups.

The Bhakti Movement's pluralistic ethos was also manifest in its multiple languages. Poetry composed by saints in many regional languages created cultural bridges among communities. The songs and teachings of these saints quickly reached the common people cutting across the lines of social and religious backgrounds of the people; thus creating a common cultural experience, which helped to forge social unity. Through this, we see how the Bhakti Movement is still relevant today in matters of pluralism. The notion of human dignity calls for the affirmation and recognition of the worth and value of others and ourselves.

Impact of the Bhakti Movement on Indian Society: The Bhakti Movement had a profound impact on the Indian society. It has influenced literature, language, social relation, ethics and cultural identity other

than religion. The movement that does not sought for political power, has long-term consequences. This reflects the transformation of Indian society. The democratization of religious experience was perhaps one of the movement's greatest successes. The Bhakti movement made participation possible through personal commitment rather than through ritual knowledge. Individuals from poorer and marginalized communities were allowed to voice their concerns about religion with greater autonomy. Thanks to the democratization of worship, Chetty communities became more inclusive and less authoritative. Moreover, the vernacular literatures experienced much in the growth of the movement. The discourse was confined to elite languages of the times before the advent of Bhakti, including those of the Brahmins. The regional languages became powerful literary vehicles for the Bhakti poets to express complex theological, moral, and emotional ideas. The cultural development of Maharashtra, Punjab, Rajasthan, Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh came much from the literary traditions that sprung through bhakti.

The caste structure of Hinduism was harmful due to the Bhakti Movement's disintegrating impact. The movement provided ways to fight caste hierarchies even though it did not eradicate caste hierarchies. The later reformers drew from the teachings of saints like Kabir, Ravidas, Nanak and others, preaching equality, justice, and more. The writings of Nanak and Kabir continue to be invoked by modern struggles against discrimination and exclusion. The influence of Bhakti was also seen in arts and music. Hymn, devotional music, performances became part of Indian culture. The folk music, classical music, storytelling, and public performance traditions were informally enhanced by the movement. These cultural forms ensured easy preservation and transmission of devotional teachings.

Historian Karen Pechilis (2012) argues that the Bhakti Movement created new kinds of religious subjectivity by encouraging individuals to develop personal relationships with the divine. The religious experience underwent transformations that had wider ramifications in the cultural milieu. The movement urged self-reflection, moral responsibility, and emotional investment, which led to changed identities. Besides, later movements on social and political matters were affected by it. Gandhi and other reformers were inspired by the Bhakti ideal of equality and humility. Gandhi's love for Bhakti songs and commitment to social inclusion show that Bhakti's teachings are still relevant in India. The ability of this movement to link spirituality with social concern is its lasting strength. The Bhakti movement aided in the development of a more pluralistic and humane social imagination by countering exclusionary practices and values.

Bhakti and Contemporary Cultural Activism: The Bhakti movement centuries ago has certain similarity to contemporary cultural activism. Literature, music, visual arts, performance arts and digital media are often used by contemporary cultural activists against injustice and for social change. Bhakti saints used similar methods within the cultural background of medieval India. Through their poetry, songs, and public teachings, they served as instigators of awareness, resistance and transformation. A current discussion of social justice often calls for giving voice to marginalized groups. The principle was pre-empted by the Bhakti Movement which encouraged the participation of socially marginal sections in cultural and spiritual debate. Ravidas and similar Saints proved that the marginalized community of their time had the capacity to contribute culturally. The movements of their example have inspired representation and equality. The movement provides an important lesson about culture and power relationship. Bhakti saints have realized that social hierarchies are maintained by beliefs, symbols, and cultural practices apart from institutions. As a result, they wanted to change culture. Modern activists likewise realize that social changes of lasting effect require changes in public consciousness and cultural norms. Teachings of Bhakti are relevant today in terms of environmental

ethics. Guru Nanak's proclamation: "*Pavan Guru Pani Pita, Mata Dharat Mahat*" (Air is the teacher, water the father, and earth the great mother (Kaur Singh, 2012), indicates a green vision that is highly relatable to today's environmental issues. The line, therefore, indicates a relationship of respect and responsibility, revealing the continuing significance of Bhakti thought. The movement that emphasizes the importance of debates and pluralism provides insights for societies today experiencing tensions due to different religions and cultures. In polarized and identity politicized times, the messages of Kabir and Nanak remind us of the importance of love, compassion, and universal brotherhood. Also, the continuing cultural relevance of Bhakti poetry is reflected in the popularity of various adaptations through contemporary literature, music, theater, and public discourse. The reworking of the hymns indicates Bhakti is alive and the traditions are capable of realizing reworking as per present needs while keeping memory alive.

Critical Evaluation: While the Bhakti Movement had far-reaching cultural and social consequences, it also had its limitations which should be considered. Historians and sociologists have debated the impact of Bhakti on social structures. While saints condemned caste discrimination, caste identities remained persistent in society and even in devotional communities at times. The idea of equality reflected in the Bhakti movement was not always structural change as some scholars argue. Devotional communities often encouraged openness to the 'other', yet larger social hierarchies remained untouched. This movement's achievement of its aim was often idiomatic and symbolic. Noteworthy symbolic changes should be recognized. They often lay the groundwork for future reforms. The varied forms of Bhakti traditions imposed another limitation as the movement had several local and theological variations and its social impact was uneven. Some traditions were more radical, with a strong emphasis on equality and inclusion, while others adhered closely. Histories and regional contexts are fundamental to Bhakti movement all generalizations.

In spite of these limitations, this movement has accomplished much more. The engagement with Bhakti opened up discourses in religion and enriched vernacular literatures. Moreover, social groups engaged in self-reflection and turned the notion of exclusion on its head. Significance of utopian thinking is not radically changing the society but imagining alternatives of existing structure of power. Bhakti envisioned equality, dignity, and spiritual freedom paving the way for new intellectual and cultural spaces that could later be developed by reformers. The success of the cultural activism movement will depend on its lasting impacts. The Bhakti saints passed away many centuries ago, but their legacy continues to give rise to important debates and movements. It is important to teach teaching because it is connected to identity, justice as well as living together.

Conclusion: The Bhakti Movement is considered to be the first cultural movement of India which had a great impact. Bhakti transformed the culture of devotion into an instrument of social engagement in a historical context marked by a hierarchical, exclusionary and appearance of formal religion. The bhakti saint used poetry, music, popular language, and public discourse, which was an openly challenge to authority structures. They also asked for equality, compassion, and spiritual independence. The movement's cultural activism mainly worked through its symbols. The bhakti saints never aimed at acquiring power; they sought to transform consciousness and social values. The rejection of caste discrimination, critique of ritualism, support for regional expression, and assertion of human dignity made it possible to create more inclusive cultural spaces. The devotional expression acquired a means of dissent, opposition and social protest through the efforts of Kabir, Ravidas, Mirabai, Guru Nanak, and Tukaram.

The Bhakti Movement played an imperative role in India's cultural pluralism. Working as a cultural activism, it took the literary traditions of the country to an unimaginable zenith which is beyond common computation. The Islamic faith shaped and influenced the language, literature, ethics, music, and community identity. In spite of this social inequalities remained but people with powerful intellectual and moral tools to fight against it. If we look at bhakti as cultural activism, it is not only an act of devotion, but also a cultural force. Cultural objects can inspire reflection, inclusivity and work against systems of domination in ways that still resonate today. The Bhakti Movement presents an important historical instance of how culture can act as an enabling factor of social change in this sense.

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