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RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Nearly every month a programme is going on in any auditorium in the city where songs of the Sufi saints and Bhakti saints are sung. The popularity of these programmes can be seen from the attendance that is there. They are patronized by the government, by big business houses and even by individuals. The songs and the teachings of the Sufi and the Bhakti saints are relevant even today. Do you know the medieval period in India saw the rise and growth of the Sufi movement and the Bhakti movement. The two movements brought a new form of religious expression amongst Muslims and Hindus. The Sufis were mystics who called for liberalism in Islam. They emphasised on an egalitarian society based on universal love. The Bhakti saints transformed Hinduism by introducing devotion or bhakti as the means to attain God. For them caste had no meaning and all human beings were equal. The Sufi and Bhakti saints played an important role in bringing the Muslims and Hindus together. By using the local language of the people, they made religion accessible and meaningful to the common people.



OBJECTIVES

After reading this lesson you will be able to:

- understand the reasons for the rise of Sufism and Bhakti movements in Medieval India;
- trace the growth of the Sufi movement;
- identify the major silsilahs of the Sufis;
- explain the main tenets of Sufism;
- explain the philosophy of the Bhakti saints, Sant Kabir and Guru Nanak;



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- rise of Sikhism;
- explain the ideology of the Vaishnavite saints;
- recognise the contribution of Sufi and Bhakti saints towards the growth of a composite Indian culture.

9.1 THE SUFI MOVEMENT

Background-Rise of Islam

You will recall that Islam was founded by Prophet Muhammad. Islam saw the rise of many religious and spiritual movements within it. These movements were centered mainly around the interpretation of the Quran. There were two major sects that arose within Islam - the Sunnis and Shias. Our country has both the sects, but in many other countries like Iran, Iraq, Pakistan etc. you will find followers of only one of them.

Among the Sunnis, there are four principal schools of Islamic Law, These are based upon the Quran and Hadis (traditions of the Prophet's saying and doings). Of these the Hanafi school of the eighth century was adopted by the eastern Turks, who later came to India.

The greatest challenge to orthodox Sunnism came from the rationalist philosophy or *Mutazilas*, who professed strict monotheism. According to them, God is just and has nothing to do with man's evil actions. Men are endowed with free will and are responsible for their own actions. The *Mutazilas* were opposed by the Ashari School. Founded by Abul Hasan Ashari (873-935 AD), the Ashari school evolved its own rationalist argument in defence of the orthodox doctrine (*kalam*). This school believes that God knows, sees and speaks. The Quran is eternal and uncreated. The greatest exponent of this school was Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111 AD), who is credited with having reconciled orthodoxy with mysticism. He was a great theologian who in 1095 began to lead a life of a Sufi. He is deeply respected by both orthodox elements and Sufis. Al-Ghazali attacked all non-orthodox Sunni schools. He said that positive knowledge cannot be gained by reason but by revelation. Sufis owed their allegiance to the Quran as much as the *Ulemas* did.

The influence of the ideas of Ghazali was greater because of the new educational system set up by the state, It provided for setting up of seminaries of higher learning (called *madrasas*) where scholars were familiarised with Ashari ideas. They were taught how to run the government in accordance with orthodox Sunni ideas. These scholars were known as *ulema*. *Ulema* played an important role in the politics of medieval India.

The Sufis

Contrary to the *ulema* were the Sufis. The Sufis were mystics. They were pious men who were shocked at the degeneration in political and religious life. They opposed the vulgar



display of wealth in public life and the readiness of the *ulema* to serve “ungodly” rulers. Many began to lead a retired ascetic life, having nothing to do with the state. The Sufi philosophy also differed from the *ulema*. The Sufis laid emphasis upon free thought and liberal ideas. They were against formal worship, rigidity and fanaticism in religion. The Sufis turned to meditation in order to achieve religious satisfaction. Like the Bhakti saints, the Sufis too interpreted religion as ‘love of god’ and service of humanity. In course of time, the Sufis were divided into different *silsilahs* (orders) with each *silsilah* having its own *pir* (guide) called *Khwaja* or *Sheikh*. The *pir* and his disciples lived in a *khanqah* (hospice). A *pir* nominated a successor or *wali* from his disciples to carry on his work. The Sufis organised *samas* (a recital of holy songs) to arouse mystical ecstasy. Basra in Iraq became the centre of Sufi activities. It must be noted that the Sufi saints were not setting up a new religion, but were preparing a more liberal movement within the framework of Islam. They owed their allegiance to the Quran as much as the *ulema* did.

Sufism in India

The advent of Sufism in India is said to be in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. One of the early Sufis of eminence, who settled in India, was Al-Hujwari who died in 1089, popularly known as *Data Ganj Baksh* (Distributor of Unlimited Treasure). In the beginning, the main centres of the Sufis were Multan and Punjab. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Sufis had spread to Kashmir, Bihar, Bengal and the Deccan. It may be mentioned that Sufism had already taken on a definite form before coming to India. Its fundamental and moral principles, teachings and orders, system of fasting, prayers and practice of living in *khanqahs* had already been fixed. The Sufis came to India via Afghanistan on their own free will. Their emphasis upon a pure life, devotional love and service to humanity made them popular and earned them a place of honour in Indian society.

Abul Fazl while writing in the *Ain-i-Akbari* speaks of fourteen *silsilahs* of the Sufis. However, in this lesson we shall outline only some of the important ones. These *silsilahs* were divided into two types: *Ba-shara* and *Be-shara*. *Ba-shara* were those orders that followed the Islamic Law (*Sharia*) and its directives such as *namaz* and *roza*. Chief amongst these were the Chishti, Suhrawardi, Firdawsi, Qadiri and Naqshbandi *silsilahs*. The *be-shara silsilahs* were not bound by the *Sharia*. The Qalandars belonged to this group.

The Chishti Silsilah

The Chishti order was founded in a village called Khwaja Chishti (near Herat). In India, the Chishti *silsilah* was founded by Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti (born c. 1142) who came to India around 1192. He made Ajmer the main centre for his teaching. He believed that serving mankind was the best form of devotion and therefore he worked amongst the downtrodden. He died in Ajmer in 1236. During Mughal times, Ajmer became a leading pilgrim centre because the emperors regularly visited the Sheikh’s tomb. The extent of his popularity can be seen by the fact that even today, millions of Muslims and Hindus visit his



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dargah for fulfilment of their wishes. Among his disciples were Sheikh Hamiduddin of Nagaur and Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki. The former lived the life of a poor peasant, cultivated land and refused Iltutmish's offer of a grant of villages. The *khanqah* of Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki was also visited by people from all walks of life. Sultan Iltutmish dedicated the Qutub Minar to this Saint. Sheikh Fariduddin of Ajodhan (Pattan in Pakistan) popularised the Chishti *silsilah* in modern Haryana and Punjab. He opened his door of love and generosity to all. Baba Farid, as he was called, was respected by both Hindus and Muslims. His verses, written in Punjabi, are quoted in the *Adi Granth*.

Baba Farid's most famous disciple Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya (1238-1325) was responsible for making Delhi an important centre of the Chishti *silsilah*. He came to Delhi in 1259 and during his sixty years in Delhi, he saw the reign of seven sultans. He preferred to shun the company of rulers and nobles and kept aloof from the state. For him renunciation meant distribution of food and clothes to the poor. Amongst his followers was the noted writer Amir Khusrau.

Another famous Chishti saint was Sheikh Nasiruddin Mahmud, popularly known as Nasiruddin *Chirag-i-Dilli* (The Lamp of Delhi). Following his death in 1356 and the lack of a spiritual successor, the disciples of the Chishti *silsilah* moved out towards eastern and southern India.

The Suhrawardi *Silsilah*

This *silsilah* was founded by Sheikh Shihabuddin Suhrawardi. It was established in India by Sheikh Bahauddin Zakariya (1182-1262). He set up a leading *khanqah* in Multan, which was visited by rulers, high government officials and rich merchants. Sheikh Bahauddin Zakariya openly took Iltutmish's side in his struggle against Qabacha and received from him the title *Shaikhul Islam* (Leader of Islam). It must be noted that unlike the Chishti saints, the Suhrawardis maintained close contacts with the state. They accepted gifts, jagirs and even government posts in the ecclesiastical department.

The Suhrawardi *silsilah* was firmly established in Punjab and Sind. Besides these two *silsilahs* there were others such as the Firdawsi *Silsilah*, Shattari *Silsilah*, Qadiri *Silsilah*, Naqshbandi *Silsilah*.

9.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SUFI MOVEMENT

The Sufi movement made a valuable contribution to Indian society. Like the Bhakti saints who were engaged in breaking down the barriers within Hinduism, the Sufis too infused a new liberal outlook within Islam. The interaction between early Bhakti and Sufi ideas laid the foundation for more liberal movements of the fifteenth century. You will read that Sant Kabir and Guru Nanak had preached a non-sectarian religion based on universal love. The Sufis believed in the concept of *Wahdat-ul-Wajud* (Unity of Being) which was promoted

by Ibn-i-Arabi (1165-1240). He opined that all beings are essentially one. Different religions were identical. This doctrine gained popularity in India. There was also much exchange of ideas between the Sufis and Indian yogis. In fact the *hatha-yoga* treatise *Amrita Kunda* was translated into Arabic and Persian.

A notable contribution of the Sufis was their service to the poorer and downtrodden sections of society. While the Sultan and *ulema* often remained aloof from the day to day problems of the people, the Sufi saints maintained close contact with the common people. Nizamuddin Auliya was famous for distributing gifts amongst the needy irrespective of religion or caste. It is said that he did not rest till he had heard every visitor at the *khanqah*. According to the Sufis, the highest form of devotion to God was the service of mankind. They treated Hindus and Muslims alike. Amir Khusrau said “Though the Hindu is not like me in religion, he believes in the same things that I do”.

The Sufi movement encouraged equality and brotherhood. In fact, The Islamic emphasis upon equality was respected far more by the Sufis than by the *ulema*. The doctrines of the Sufis were attacked by the orthodoxy. The Sufis also denounced the *ulema*. They believed that the *ulema* had succumbed to world by temptations and were moving away from the original democratic and egalitarian principles of the Quran. This battle between the orthodox and liberal elements continued throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Sufi saints tried to bring about social reforms too.

Like the Bhakti saints, the Sufi saints contributed greatly to the growth of a rich regional literature. Most of the Sufi saints were poets who chose to write in local languages. Baba Farid recommended the use of Punjabi for religious writings. Shaikh Hamiduddin, before him, wrote in Hindawi. His verses are the best examples of early Hindawi translation of Persian mystical poetry. Syed Gesu Daraz was the first writer of Deccani Hindi. He found Hindi more expressive than Persian to explain mysticism. A number of Sufi works were also written in Bengali.

The most notable writer of this period was Amir Khusrau (1252-1325) the follower of Nizamuddin Auliya. Khusrau took pride in being an Indian and looked at the history and culture of Hindustan as a part of his own tradition. He wrote verses in Hindi (Hindawi) and employed the Persian metre in Hindi. He created a new style called *sabaq-i-hindi*. By the fifteenth century Hindi had begun to assume a definite shape and Bhakti saints such as Kabir used it extensively.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 9.1

1. Who were called Ulemas?



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2. What do you mean by Kalam?

3. Who was called Data Ganj Baksh?

4. How many Silsilahs Ain-i-Akbari speaks about?

5. Where is the Khwaja Muinuddin Chisti Khanqah located?

6. What is the other name of Islamic law?

7. Who is called Chirag-i-Dilli (The Lamp of Delhi)?

9.3 THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

The development of Bhakti movement took place in Tamil Nadu between the seventh and twelfth centuries. It was reflected in the emotional poems of the Nayanars (devotees of Shiva) and Alvars (devotees of Vishnu). These saints looked upon religion not as a cold formal worship but as a loving bond based upon love between the worshipped and worshipper. They wrote in local languages, Tamil and Telugu and were therefore able to reach out to many people.

In course of time, the ideas of the South moved up to the North but it was a very slow process. Sanskrit, which was still the vehicle of thought, was given a new form.

Thus we find that the Bhagavata Purana of ninth century was not written in the old Puranic form. Centered around Krishna's childhood and youth, this work uses Krishna's exploits to explain deep philosophy in simple terms. This work became a turning point in the history of the Vaishnavite movement which was an important component of the Bhakti movement.

A more effective method for spreading of the Bhakti ideology was the use of local languages. The Bhakti saints composed their verses in local languages. They also translated Sanskrit works to make them understandable to a wider audience. Thus we find Jnanadeva writing in Marathi, Kabir, Surdas and Tulsidas in Hindi, Shankaradeva popularising Assamese, Chaitanya and Chandidas spreading their message in Bengali, Mirabai in Hindi and Rajasthani. In addition, devotional poetry was composed in Kashmiri, Telugu, Kannad, Oriya, Malayalam, Maithili and Gujarati.



The Bhakti saints believed that salvation can be achieved by all. They made no distinction of caste, creed or religion before God. They themselves came from diverse backgrounds. Ramananda, whose disciples included Hindus and Muslims, came from a conservative brahman family. His disciple, Kabir, was a weaver. Guru Nanak was a village accountant's son. Namdev was a tailor. The saints stressed equality, disregarded the caste system and attacked institutionalised religion. The saints did not confine themselves to purely religious ideas. They advocated social reforms too. They opposed sati and female infanticide. Women were encouraged to join *kirtans*. Mirabai and Lalla (of Kashmir) composed verses that are popular even today.

Amongst the non-sectarian Bhakti saints, the most outstanding contribution was made by Kabir and Guru Nanak. Their ideas were drawn from both Hindu and Islamic traditions and were aimed at bridging the gulf between the Hindus and the Muslims. Let us read in some detail about them.

Kabir (1440-1518) is said to have been the son of a brahman widow, who abandoned him. He was brought up in the house of a Muslim weaver. Kabir believed that the way to God was through personally experienced bhakti or devotion. He believed that the Creator is One. His God was called by many names - Rama, Hari, Govinda, Allah, Rahim, Khuda, etc. No wonder then that the Muslims claim him as Sufi, the Hindus call him Rama-Bhakta and the Sikhs incorporate his songs in the *Adi Granth*. The external aspects of religion were meaningless for Kabir. His beliefs and ideas were reflected in the *dohas* (Sakhi) composed by him. One of his dohas conveyed that if by worshipping a stone (idol) one could attain God, then he was willing to worship a mountain. It was better to worship a stone flour-grinder because that could at least fill stomachs.

Kabir emphasised simplicity in religion and said that bhakti was the easiest way to attain God. He refused to accept any prevalent religious belief without prior reasoning. For him, a man could not achieve success without hard work. He advocated performance of action rather than renunciation of duty. Kabir's belief in the unity of God led both Hindus and Muslims to become his disciples.

Kabir's ideas were not restricted to religion. He attempted to change the narrow thinking of society. His poetry was forceful and direct. It was easily understood and much of it has passed into our everyday language.

Another great exponent of the *Nankana* school was Guru Nanak (1469-1539). He was born at Talwandi (Nakana Sahib). From an early age, he showed leanings towards a spiritual life. He was helpful to the poor and needy. His disciples called themselves Sikhs (derived from Sanskrit *sisya*, disciple or Pali *sikkha*, instruction).

Guru Nanak's personality combined in itself simplicity and peacefulness. Guru Nanak's objective was to remove the existing corruption and degrading practices in society. He showed a new path for the establishment of an egalitarian social order. Like Kabir, Guru



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Nanak was as much a social reformer as he was a religious teacher. He called for an improvement in the status of women. He said that women who give birth to kings should not be spoken ill of. His *vani* (words) along with those of other Sikh Gurus have been brought together in the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs.

The Vaishnavite Movement

You have read that saints such as Kabir, Namdev and Guru Nanak had preached devotion toward a *nirankar* form of God. During this period, another movement based upon devotion towards a *sakar* form of God had also developed. This movement, called the Vaishnavite movement, centered around the worship of Rama and Krishna, who were seen as incarnations (*avatars*) of Lord Vishnu. Its main exponents were Surdas, Mirabai, Tulsidas and Chaitanya. Their path to salvation was expressed through the medium of poetry, song, dance and *kirtans*.

Surdas (1483-1563) was a disciple of the famous teacher, Vallabhachara. He was a blind poet, whose songs are centered around Krishna. His *Sursagar* recounts the exploits of Krishna during his childhood and youth with gentle affection and delightfulness.

The love for Krishna was also expressed through the songs of Mirabai (1503-73). Widowed at an early age, she believed in a spiritual marriage with her Lord. Her poems have a quality of their own and are popular even today.

The Vaishnavite movement spread in the east through the efforts of Chaitanya (1484-1533). Chaitanya considered Krishna not as a mere incarnation of Vishnu but as the highest form of God. The devotion for Krishna was expressed through *Sankirtans* (hymn session by devotees) which took place in homes, temples and even street processions. Like other Bhakti saints, Chaitanya too was willing to welcome everyone, irrespective of caste, into the fold. The saints thus promoted a sense of equality amongst the people.

The worship of Rama was popularised by saints like Ramananda (1400-1470). He considered Rama as the supreme God. Women and outcastes were welcomed. The most famous of the Rama bhaktas was Tulsidas (1532-1623) who wrote the *Ramacharitmanas*.

The Vaishnavite saints developed their philosophy within the broad framework of Hinduism. They called for reforms in religion and love amongst fellow beings. Their philosophy was broadly humanist.

9.4 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BHAKTI AND SUFI MOVEMENTS

You will recall that the Bhakti movement was a socio-religious movement that opposed religious bigotry and social rigidities. It emphasised good character and pure thinking. At a time when society had become stagnant, the Bhakti saints infused new life and strength.



They awakened a new sense of confidence and attempted to redefine social and religious values. Saints like Kabir and Nanak stressed upon the reordering of society along egalitarian lines. Their call to social equality attracted many a downtrodden. Although Kabir and Nanak had no intention of founding new religions but following their deaths, their supporters grouped together as Kabir *panthis* and Sikhs respectively.

The importance of the Bhakti and Sufi saints lies in the new atmosphere created by them, which continued to affect the social, religious and political life of India even in later centuries. Akbar's liberal ideas were a product of this atmosphere in which he was born and brought up. The preaching of Guru Nanak were passed down from generation to generation. This resulted in the growth of a separate religious group, with its separate language and script Gurmukhi and religious book, Guru Granth Sahib. Under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Sikhs grew into a formidable political force in the politics of North India.

The interaction between the Bhakti and Sufi saints had an impact upon Indian society. The Sufi theory of *Wahdat-al-Wujud* (Unity of Being) was remarkably similar to that in the Hindu Upanishads. Many Sufi poet-saints preferred to use Hindi terms rather than Persian verses to explain concepts. Thus we find Sufi poets such as Malik Muhammadi Jaisi composing works in Hindi. The use of terms such as Krishna, Radha, Gopi, Jamuna, Ganga etc. became so common in such literature that an eminent Sufi, Mir Abdul Wahid wrote a treatise *Haqiq-i-Hindi* to explain their Islamic equivalents. In later years this interaction continued as Akbar and Jahangir followed a liberal religious policy.

The popular verses and songs of the Bhakti saints also served as forerunners of a musical renaissance. New musical compositions were written for the purpose of group singing at *kirtans*. Even today Mira's *bhajans* and Tulsidas's *chaupais* are recited at prayer meetings.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 9.2

1. Which work became the turning point in the history of Vaishnavite movement?

2. Adi Granth is a holy work of which religion?

3. How did Kabir and Guru Nanak become popular among the masses?

4. Who said this, 'Women who give birth to kings should not be spoken ill of?'

5. Who wrote Sur Sagar?



Notes

Philosophy in Medieval India

The major religious movements were brought about by the mystics. They contributed to the religious ideas and beliefs. Bhakti saints like Vallabhacharya, Ramanuja, Nimbaraka brought about new philosophical thinking which had its origin in Shankaracharya's *advaita* (non-dualism) philosophy.

Vishistadvaita of Ramanujacharya

Vishistadvaita means modified monism. The ultimate reality according to this philosophy is Brahman (God) and matter and soul are his qualities.

Sivadvaita of Srikanthacharya

According to this philosophy the ultimate Brahman is Shiva, endowed with Shakti. Shiva exists in this world as well as beyond it.

Dvaita of Madhavacharya

The literal meaning of *dvaita* is dualism which stands in opposition to non-dualism and monism of Shankaracharya. He believed that the world is not an illusion (*maya*) but a reality full of differences.

Dvaitadvaita of Nimbaraka

Dvaitadvaita means dualistic monism. According to this philosophy God transformed himself into world and soul. This world and soul are different from God (Brahman). They could survive with the support of God only. They are separate but dependent.

Suddhadvaita of Vallabhacharya

Vallabhacharya wrote commentaries on Vedanta Sutra and Bhagavad Gita. For him, Brahman (God) was Sri Krishna who manifested himself as souls and matter. God and soul are not distinct, but one. The stress was on pure non-dualism. His philosophy came to be known as *Pushtimarga* (the path of grace) and the school was called Rudrasampradaya.



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

- The Bhakti and Sufi movements were liberal movements within Hinduism and Islam emphasising a new and more personalised relationship between the human being and God.



- The message of the Sufi movement was universal love and brotherhood of man.
- Because of their belief in the concept of unity of being, Sufis were able to establish an ideological relationship with Hindu thought.
- The Bhakti movement grew amongst Nayanars and Alvars of the south and stressed a new method of worship of God based upon devotional love.
- The Bhakti saints were divided into the *Nirgun* and *Sagun* believers.
- Unlike the *Nirgun* believers the *Sagun* believers saw God as having a definite form such as Rama or Krishna.
- The Bhakti and Sufi saints made valuable contributions to medieval Indian society in terms of laying a liberal foundation and promoting a tremendous growth of regional literature and local languages.



TERMINAL EXERCISES

1. How did Sufi movement progress in Islam?
2. How will you differentiate the Chisti Silsilah with the Subrawardi Silsilah?
3. The Bhakti Saints and the Sufi Saints were the two faces of a coin. Elaborate.
4. What were the similarities between Guru Nanak and Kabir?
5. Write a short paragraph on the Vaishnovite movement of India?



ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

9.1

1. Scholars with orthodox sunni ideas.
2. Orthodox doctrine of Islam religion.
3. Al-Hujwari
4. Fourteen
5. Sharia
6. Ajmer
7. Sheikh Nasiruddin Mahmud.

9.2

1. Bhagavata Purana

MODULE - IV

Religion and Philosophy

Religion and Philosophy in Medieval India



Notes

2. Sikh religion
3. These ideas were drawn from the Hindu and Muslim traditions. They also used simple languages.
4. Guru Nanak
5. Surdas