Mosaic of Religious Beliefs and the Emergence of Bhakti

The period between the eighth and eighteenth centuries witnessed significant transformations in the religious landscape of the Indian subcontinent.

Earlier, the subcontinent had been characterised by visible religious structures such as stupas, monasteries and temples, each reflecting distinct religious beliefs and practices.

However, during this phase, new forms of religious expression began to emerge, drawing upon both textual and oral traditions. Among these were the Puranas, which were compiled and preserved in relatively simple Sanskrit, making them accessible to a wider audience including women and Shudras, who had traditionally been excluded from Vedic learning.

Alongside these, compositions of poet-saints, often transmitted orally in regional languages, became an important source for reconstructing devotional traditions.

These sources, however, present challenges to historians. The compositions were not static; they were modified, elaborated and sometimes even reinterpreted by successive generations of devotees.

Hagiographies, or biographies of saints written by followers, further complicate the picture, as they are often more reflective of devotional perceptions than historical accuracy.

Nevertheless, taken together, these sources reveal a religious environment marked by dynamism, diversity and continuous negotiation.

One of the most striking features of this period is the increasing visibility of a wide range of gods and goddesses in both sculpture and textual traditions. Major deities such as Vishnu, Shiva and the goddess came to be worshipped in multiple forms.

This expansion of devotional imagery was not merely an extension of earlier traditions but the result of complex processes of interaction. Historians identify two parallel developments.

On the one hand, Brahmanical ideas were disseminated through the composition and spread of Puranic texts. On the other, Brahmanas themselves absorbed and reworked local beliefs and practices. This interaction between what sociologists describe as “great” Sanskritic traditions and “little” local traditions led to the formation of new, composite religious practices.

The integration of local cults into broader religious frameworks is exemplified by the cult of Jagannatha at Puri. Here, a local tribal deity, whose image was made of wood by local specialists, was incorporated into the Vaishnava tradition as a form of Vishnu.

Similarly, local goddess cults were assimilated into the Puranic framework by identifying them as consorts of major male deities such as Vishnu or Shiva. These processes highlight the adaptability and inclusiveness of religious traditions during this period.

At the same time, diversity often gave rise to differences and conflicts. Tantric practices, for instance, were associated with goddess worship and were characterised by their openness to both men and women and their relative disregard for caste distinctions.

These practices influenced both Shaivism and Buddhism, especially in eastern and southern regions. However, they were often criticised by those who adhered strictly to Vedic traditions, which emphasised ritual precision and hierarchical social order.

The divergence between Vedic and Puranic traditions is particularly significant. While Vedic deities such as Indra, Agni and Soma became marginal, Puranic traditions elevated Vishnu, Shiva and the goddess, developing elaborate mythologies around them.

Despite these differences, the Vedas continued to be revered as authoritative texts. Tensions also emerged between different sects, with devotees often projecting their chosen deity as supreme, and between Brahmanical traditions and other religious traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism.

It is within this complex and often contested religious environment that the traditions of bhakti, or devotional worship, must be situated. Bhakti had a long history, but during this period it assumed new forms.

Devotion could range from routine temple worship to intense, emotional expressions of love for the divine, often accompanied by singing and chanting. These practices were particularly prominent among Vaishnava and Shaiva sects.

A notable feature of bhakti traditions was their inclusiveness. While Brahmanas continued to play an important role as intermediaries, these traditions also recognised the spiritual potential of women and lower castes, groups traditionally excluded from orthodox frameworks.

Bhakti was also marked by conceptual diversity. It is often classified into saguna bhakti, which involved the worship of a deity with attributes, and nirguna bhakti, which focused on an abstract, formless divine.

Among the earliest organised bhakti movements were those led by the Alvars and Nayanars in Tamil Nadu around the sixth century. These poet-saints travelled extensively, composing and singing hymns in praise of Vishnu and Shiva respectively.

They identified sacred sites associated with their deities, which later developed into major temple centres. Their compositions became integral to temple rituals, and their images were worshipped alongside those of the deities.

The social implications of these movements were significant. The Alvars and Nayanars included individuals from diverse social backgrounds, suggesting a challenge to caste hierarchies. Their compositions were sometimes regarded as equivalent to the Vedas, as seen in the designation of the Nalayira Divyaprabandham as the “Tamil Veda.”

The presence of women saints such as Andal and Karaikkal Ammaiyar further highlights the transformative potential of bhakti. These women not only expressed intense devotion but also challenged conventional gender norms by renouncing social expectations.

The relationship between bhakti and political power was equally important. In regions such as Tamil Nadu, rulers like the Pallavas, Pandyas and Cholas supported bhakti traditions by constructing temples and patronising devotional literature.

This patronage was not merely religious but also political, as it helped rulers legitimise their authority by associating themselves with popular devotional movements.

Regional Developments and Islamic Traditions

The development of devotional traditions was not uniform across the subcontinent. In Karnataka, the twelfth century witnessed the emergence of the Virashaiva or Lingayat movement under the leadership of Basavanna. This movement represented a radical departure from orthodox Brahmanical practices.

The Lingayats worshipped Shiva in the form of a linga and rejected many established beliefs, including caste hierarchy, ritual pollution and the doctrine of rebirth. They also advocated social reforms such as widow remarriage and post-puberty marriage, which were discouraged in the Dharmashastras.

The teachings of the Lingayats were expressed in vachanas, short compositions in Kannada that often critiqued ritualism and emphasised personal devotion. The movement attracted followers from marginalised sections of society, highlighting its egalitarian character.

In this sense, the Virashaiva tradition represents an important strand within the broader spectrum of bhakti movements.

In contrast, north India during the same period did not witness similar early developments in bhakti poetry. Historians attribute this to the socio-political context of the region, where Rajput states dominated and Brahmanas occupied positions of considerable influence.

There was little direct challenge to their authority. However, alternative religious leaders such as the Naths, Jogis and Siddhas began to emerge. These groups often came from artisanal backgrounds and expressed their ideas in vernacular languages. They

questioned the authority of the Vedas and emphasised experiential knowledge.

The establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the thirteenth century marked a turning point in the religious and cultural history of north India. The arrival of Turks not only altered political structures but also introduced new religious traditions, particularly Islam.

However, Islamic traditions in the subcontinent developed through a process of interaction and adaptation rather than simple imposition.

Islam had been present in the subcontinent even before the establishment of Muslim rule, primarily through Arab traders along the western coast and migrations from Central Asia. With the conquest of Sind in 711 and the later establishment of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire, Islam became associated with ruling elites. Theoretically, Muslim rulers were expected to govern according to the shari'a, as interpreted by the ulama. However, the realities of governing a diverse population necessitated flexibility.

The concept of the zimmi, originally applied to non-Muslims such as Jews and Christians, was extended to Hindus in India. These communities were granted protection in return for the payment of a tax called jizya.

In practice, many rulers adopted policies of accommodation, granting land and patronage to various religious institutions irrespective of their affiliation. This reflects the pragmatic approach adopted by rulers in managing a plural society.

Islamic practices among the general population also exhibited considerable diversity. While the core principles of Islam, encapsulated in the five pillars, were widely accepted, local customs and traditions significantly shaped religious practices.

For instance, the Khojahs developed devotional poetry known as ginan in regional languages, while Muslim communities in Kerala adopted local customs such as matriliny.

Architectural forms further illustrate this synthesis. While mosques shared certain universal features, such as orientation towards Mecca, their design and construction often reflected local styles and materials. This blending of universal and local elements underscores the adaptability of Islamic traditions in the subcontinent.

The use of terms such as "Hindu" and "Muslim" as rigid religious identities was not common during this period. Instead, people were often identified by their region or cultural practices.

Terms like Turushka or Tajika referred to geographic origins, while the term mlechchha was used more broadly to denote those outside the Brahmanical social order. This suggests that religious identities were fluid and context-dependent rather than fixed.

Sufism and Cultural Synthesis

The growth of Sufism represents one of the most significant developments within Islamic traditions in the subcontinent. Sufism emerged as a response to the increasing formalism and materialism associated with political power.

Sufis emphasised personal devotion, love for God and the pursuit of spiritual truth through inner experience. They sought to interpret religious texts not through rigid scholastic methods but through lived experience and emotional engagement.

By the eleventh century, Sufism had developed into an organised movement with its own institutions and practices. Central to this were the khanqahs, or hospices, where Sufi masters (shaikhs or pirs) lived with their disciples.

These spaces functioned not only as centres of spiritual instruction but also as hubs of social interaction, attracting people from diverse backgrounds.

The relationship between the master and disciple was formalised through initiation rituals, and spiritual lineages, known as silsilas, traced their origins back to the Prophet Muhammad.

The tombs of Sufi saints, or dargahs, became important sites of devotion. Pilgrimage to these shrines, known as ziyarat, was believed to bring spiritual and material benefits. The celebration of the saint's death anniversary, or urs, symbolised the union of the soul with God. These practices contributed to the development of a vibrant devotional culture centred around Sufi saints.

Not all Sufis followed the same path. While some adhered to the shari'a, others rejected formal religious practices and embraced extreme asceticism. These groups, often referred to as be-shari'a, challenged conventional norms and highlighted the diversity within Sufism.

Among the various Sufi orders, the Chishtis were particularly influential in the Indian subcontinent. They adapted effectively to local conditions, incorporating elements of Indian devotional traditions.

The khanqah of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi exemplifies the inclusive nature of Chishti practices. It welcomed people from all walks of life, including Hindus and Muslims, rich and poor. The institution of the langar, or free kitchen, further reinforced this inclusivity.

Devotional practices within the Chishti tradition included the use of music and poetry. Qawwali, a form of musical expression, played a central role in evoking spiritual ecstasy. The use of local languages such as Hindavi facilitated communication with a broader audience. Sufi literature, including masnavis and prem-akhyans, often used the metaphor of human love to express the soul's longing for the divine.

The relationship between Sufis and political authorities was complex. While Sufis generally maintained a distance from worldly power, they accepted donations and patronage.

Their moral authority and popularity made them important figures in society, and rulers often sought their support to legitimise their rule. At the same time, tensions occasionally arose over issues of authority and ritual.

Ultimately, the interaction between Bhakti and Sufi traditions contributed to the emergence of a composite cultural and religious landscape. Both emphasised personal devotion, challenged rigid hierarchies and utilised vernacular languages to reach a wider audience.

This shared emphasis facilitated cultural exchange and mutual influence, leading to the development of a rich and diverse devotional culture that continues to shape the subcontinent.