

Love as Path to God

Transcending Boundaries of Religions

Religious Movements and Institutions in Medieval India

edited by J S Grewal;
Oxford University Press,
New Delhi, 2006;
pp xxv+600 (A4), Rs 1,950.

M V NADKARNI

This magnificent collection of scholarly essays has been brought out as Volume VII, Part II under an ambitious Project of History of Indian Science, Philosophy and Culture (PHISPC) in Indian Civilisation under D P Chattopadhyay as the general editor. As many as 16 volumes (each having two to 10 parts under separate covers) and 15 independent monographs have been planned under this project and several have already come out. A few series on India's history have been already published but this one is simply outstanding in the sheer scale of the effort. Its another distinction is that while political history is in the focus and other aspects are in the periphery of other series, the focus of PHISPC is on India's civilisation, reflected in science, philosophy and culture, with political aspects in the background. All those associated with this project deserve our appreciation and gratitude not only for the boldness of their promise, but also for its meticulous fulfilment.

The book under review, edited by J S Grewal, consists of 24 essays, in nine out of which he is associated as an author or a joint author, apart from the editor's Introduction. This exemplary participative editorship is reflected also in good planning, and a minimum overlap between essays. The first two essays are on movements based on Shaivism. It includes one on Verashaivism, two on Shaktism and Tantra, one on Srivaishnavism and one more on Rama bhakti. The next group of five essays is on various manifestation of Krishna bhakti, which emerged as a rather conspicuous feature of Bhakti movements of the medieval age. They include essays respectively on the Varkari movement, Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Vaishnavism in Assam, Pustimarg of Vallabhacharya and on Mirabai. All these movements took

place within the mainstream Hinduism, even while protesting against social evils, particularly caste discrimination.

Religious Movements

We, in India, are mostly familiar with only Bhakti movements under Hinduism. A welcome contribution of the book under review is towards improving our knowledge of religious movements under Islam too. We have, thus, an essay each on sunni Muslims, shia Muslims, and on smaller sects like Ismailis, and two on Sufism. We have, in the next group, four essays on, what the editor prefers to call, movements which were neither under Hinduism nor Islam, but independent. These essays are respectively on Kabir (and Kabir-panth), Sant Ravidas (and Ravidas-panth), Dadu (and Dadu-panth) and the Sikh movement. The last section in the book is devoted to religious institutions that evolved in the medieval India, an essay each dealing with temples in south India, 'devadasis', 'khanqah' (and dargas and peers) and the gurdwara.

We have thus a fairly comprehensive picture of both religious movements and institutions of medieval India. Since it is difficult to offer even a cursory summary of all these essays, I have only listed the topics above to give an idea of the range of the themes covered. The essays are based mostly on primary sources and offer an in-depth treatment. They are addressed to scholars, though interested general readers are obviously no bar. The focus of the book being religious movements and institutions, issues like the status of women and lower castes/classes are only incidentally covered, insofar as they are involved or reflected in the movements. The overall approach, apart from being very scholarly, is non-partisan and unprejudiced.

While the editor's Introduction offers an excellent summary of all the essays each in the volume, one misses an overall conclusion from taking a holistic view of all the essays, or all the religions movements and institutions covered. Though, of course, generalisations would always have qualifications and limitations, a general view may still be useful particularly from the point of informing the

present-day readers on what they can learn from medieval India's cultural and religions history. After all, as the general editor of the project has remarked "history is not only contemporaneous but also futural" (p xxv). Instead of summarising the views contained in essays by essay, therefore, I make an attempt here to draw a few general insights of interest to the present, and offer critical comments where required. In doing so, I emphasise the commonness rather than differences between different 'panths' of bhakti [Nadkarni 2006].

Bhakti or Love

Religious movements in the medieval India stand out in one major common characteristic – viz, bhakti or love as a path to god irrespective of whether the movements come under Hinduism or Islam, or independent of both. Neither in the preceding period nor in the modern period, religious movements could boast of one dominant common denominator that influenced the whole religions involved. Even 'tantra' which otherwise seems like an outlier, was an attempt to spiritualise physical love or sex. The basic essence, and even defining characteristic of all religions, turned out to be bhakti. In spite of tussles between rulers on the political plane, the people as such could see an eye to eye and establish a spiritual rapport with each other because of this. This was a unique and new development, though bhakti itself was not new in Hinduism. The origin of bhakti in the form of a feeling of wonderment and awe at divine power and devotion it inspired, can be traced to Rigveda. Later, Bhagavadgita formally recognised bhakti as an important path to realise god along with two more paths – work and knowledge. The concept of bhakti as pure love, was reiterated by 'Naarada Bhaktisootras' which defined bhakti as 'saa tu parama prema roopaa'. The significance of bhakti, acknowledged by all 'achaaryas' and other religious leaders was that, unlike the path of knowledge ('jnana') and rituals, 'bhakti' could be practised by anyone, even the poor and illiterate. It was the most accessible pathway to experience divine grace and liberation, and had the potential to bring religion to all people, and thus make it democratic and broad-based. But, for this potential to be a reality, certain conditions were necessary which were fulfilled in the medieval age. And that is why, the medieval age stands out in its uniqueness in the history of religion.

One of the conditions which the medieval age fulfilled was that religious preaching was available to people in their own language. Almost all Bhakti 'sants' composed their songs in local languages. A translation of the Gita also was made available in Marathi, viz, 'Jnaaneshwari', which initiated Bhakti movement in Maharashtra. Even Sufi sants in Bengal composed their works in Bengali. This trend of composing religious works in local languages had started in Tamil Nadu much before the medieval age, with Thirukkural, and later under the leadership of Siddhas (called "sitters" by western scholars) and Alwars. It became prominent in Karnataka also, by the 12th century. The mass of people could thus understand the message of religion in their own language. Interestingly, the movements spread from region to region and became a pan-Indian phenomenon despite differences in languages. Language was no barrier. Nor was religion.

Secondly, Bhakti movements were not guided from above, but emerged mainly from the working classes. The bhakti sants included potters, cobblers, weavers, cotton-carders, blacksmiths, washermen, gardeners, peasants, grocers, shepherds, plain labourers, and – in Veerashaiva movement – even a butcher. It is significant to note that protest against caste discrimination, rituals and mediation of brahmin priests between devotees and god, was not confined to the sants whom the authors of the book here call as neither Hindu nor Muslim. Leaders of the movement within what was acknowledged as Hinduism also did so. The conspicuous leadership of working class in religious movements, whether Hindu or Muslim, was unique, but the authors in the book have not emphasised this uniqueness. Nor have they raised the question of why such conspicuous working class upsurge took place, not just in one place but all over India. If Buddhism and Jainism were led by kshatriyas earlier, the Bhakti movements were led by the working class without excluding upper castes and classes. Though we do not have to grudge giving some credit to interaction with Islam for the upsurge of working class in religion, it is also pertinent to note that it took place also where the influence of Islam had not significantly reached.

Was there also any other major development that substantially increased the demand for artisans and other workers that boosted their prominence in society? My guess is that construction and maintenance of temples, which began around the early

decades of the first millennium, created this demand and also gave room for the latent feeling of bhakti to express itself. My reasoned hypothesis is that many more temples were constructed during the second millennium than during the first. A few Muslim rulers may not have allowed the construction of new temples and major repairs, and even demolished existing temples; nevertheless, temple construction continued into the medieval age significantly. Temples and dargas became the major centres of the economy. A paper by Narayanan and Veluthat on 'The Temples in South India' in the book, and one more by Rekha Pande on devadasis, show how temples not only boosted agrarian expansion, but also became a major source of employment for priests, musicians, dancers, artisans and servants. A working class thus emerged that developed a mutual rapport irrespective of differences in religion and linguistic background, and they found a unifying factor in Bhakti movement. For the first time, Hinduism became a working class religion.

It is not surprising therefore, that there was a great rapport between Bhakti movements (including the so-called independent movements under Guru Nanak, Kabir, Ravidas and Dadu) and Sufism. Just as there was some tension between brahmins and Bhakti sants, there was a similar tension between Sufis on the one side and mullas and maulvis on the other. The latter wanted to retain control over Islam, while the Sufis defied it. But there was no such tension between Hindus and Sufis, to the extent that Hindus did not feel that Sufism was a different religion. It was through Sufism that many Hindus came under Islam and did not feel they were different from those who remained within Hinduism. It was, much later, under the British rule in fact, and after 1857, that separate identities of Muslims and Hindus got concretised due to movements like Tabligh and Deoband which insisted on Muslims eradicating any Hindu influence from Islam that was practised. Those who harp on separate religious identities as the major characteristic of religion in India, should remember a cordially shared past, where defining boundaries was the least important part of religion. **EPW**

Email: mv_nadkarni@rediffmail.com

Reference

Nadkarni, M V (2006) *Hinduism: A Gandhian Perspective*, Ane Books India, New Delhi.