

Social and Gender Equality in Medieval Bhakti Movement with Special Reference to Saivism

Abirami.B

PhD Research scholar, Department of History, Government Arts College (Autonomous) Coimbatore

Abstract

Social and gender equality had been a social evil through the 19th and 20th century which was major reason behind sprouting of various socio-reform movements across the country under various leaders. However, this social and gender equality was closed during the tough medieval times with the rise of Bhakti movement. Bhakti movement which began in South India had contribution from all sections of Indian society. Even women who had forever been portrayed as housewives, came out freely to express their aspirations through spirituality. Bhakti movement can not just be narrowed down to devotional movement, but was rather a revivalist and revolutionary movement. Religion and devotion is a very sensitive matter as since times immemorial, India has been a country with rich culture and religion has been interwoven in the very culture of Indian society. This topic reflects on social and gender equality through examples of various saints each from different sections of society with special reference to Saivism.

Keywords: Saivism, Social and Gender Equality, Bhakti, Social Structure, Different Sections of Society, Devotion, Spiritual freedom

INTRODUCTION

Social and gender equality had been a social evil through the 19th and 20th century which was major reason behind sprouting of various socio-reform movements across the country under various leaders. However, this social and gender equality was closed during the tough medieval times with the rise of Bhakti movement. Bhakti movement which began in South India had contribution from all sections of Indian society. Even women who had forever been portrayed as housewives, came out freely to express their aspirations through spirituality. Bhakti movement cannot just be narrowed down to devotional movement, but was rather a revivalist and revolutionary movement. Religion and devotion is a very sensitive matter as since times immemorial, India has been a country with rich culture and religion has been interwoven in the very culture of Indian society.

The Bhakti movement of 7th century began in South India broke the stereotyped perspective of ritualised mode of worship and opened doors for not just all sections of society but also for women whose participation in spirituality was earlier considered a taboo. Bhakti which meant pure love and devotion to God was used as a tool for people to set themselves free of the feudalised society. This topic reflects on social and gender equality through examples of various saints each from different sections of society like Nandhanar and Thiruneelankanta Kuyavanar with special reference to Saivism.

PARADIGM SHIFT IN CONCEPT OF BHAKTI

Bhakti was earlier conceived in various forms of religion in India. Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivikas, Brahmanism were few of the religious forms that existed before the emergence of Bhakti Movement of the medieval era. Also the 7th century Bhakti movement should rightly be accepted that it was not the first such movement to preach equality as its philosophy. In the 3rd century BCE, under Buddha and Mahavira, the northern India saw a shift in the form of worship. However, it cannot be taken as a revolutionary movement as the 7th century. The major difference between the 3rd century BCE and 7th century CE was that unlike the earlier form, the latter reached across the country rather than being constricted to Northern parts of the region. Though it was spread through various Gurus like Kabir, Guru Nanak, Ravidas and Dadupanth in the northern India while in south by Nayanmars of saiva movement and Alvares of Vaishnava movement, the underlying philosophy or the concept was the same “unity, social equality and showering pure love and devotion alone to God”. Despite the divisions like Nirguna (Formless) and Saguna(form) sects among these Bhaktas, the underlying concept reached across and was a great revolution during the medieval times. Rituals and gender and caste discriminations were disapproved during this time. Another reason for its reach was that the philosophies were preached in vernacular language of the people.

SOCIAL EQUALITY IN SAIIVISM

Bhakti thus during this timescale meant only pure love and devotion and was equal to all irrespective of one's caste, race, sex or creed. The novel approach of allowing even women folks to express their love to God was yet a revolutionary aspect where ascetism was not mandatory to serve the God. Saivism which got popular in the 7th century through Nayanmars. the nayanmars of this period were Tamil poetic saints who propagated the Saiva Bhakti ideologies across Tamil Nadu through their songs which is collectively termed “Thirumurai.” Though the 63 Nayanmar tradition were predominantly male saiva saints, we had three women saints in the list namely Karaikkal Ammayar, Isaiganiar and Mangayarkarasi. The Nayanmar section also had saints from socially underprivileged castes of that time like Nandanar, Thiru Neelakanta Kuyavanar.

Nandanar or Thiru Nalai Povar Nayanar

Born with the name Nandanar, Thiru Nalai Povar was born in Adanoor in Chola kingdom. He belonged to ‘paraiyah’ an untouchable caste. Though he had from childhood faced many discriminations, his devotion to Lord Shiva didn't change. He would often visit the holy places of pilgrimage, and supply leather drums and such other musical instruments for the temples. When he went near the temples, he always remained outside and worshipped the Lord mentally as was the norm that untouchables can't enter the temples. Once he had gone to Thirupunkur temple, with the beautiful drum and mantra chants, he wanted to worship the Lord Shiva. But the nandi was hiding his view, he thus prayed to Lord Shiva with full devotion and the nandi moved. Even today, in Thirupunkur temple, the nandi at the entrance would be shifted slightly. He then had a desire to worship Lord Shiva in Chidambaram temple, he then prayed to God and saved up money and went there with great difficulty. However, he couldn't enter the temple nor could he see the cosmic dance of Nataraj. His prayers got answers when lord shiva appeared simultaneously in his and Brahmin priests' dreams and brought him to Kanaka Sabha where he worshipped Lord Shiva. This incident shows a revolutionary change where a downtrodden caste of that time who with only undaunted pure love and devotion broke the social taboo and entered the temple

along with support of the priests. His biography as mentioned in Periya Puranam of Sekkizhar and Thiruthondar Thokai of Sundaramoorthy Nayanar shows the equality and how even their lives got included in the hymns of Thirumurai.

Thiru Kurippu Nayanar

Thiru Kurippu Nayanar was born in Kancheepuram in Thondaimandalam as a washerman. His devotion and service to Lord Shiva was through washing clothes of Saiva Bhaktas and saints who visit that city. Though he belonged to socially and economically poorer section, he became one of the Nayanar for his constant service. His service to Saivism was such that everyday only after rendering his free service to saiva saints, he would wash the clothes of people for money. His service too was tested by Lord Shiva before becoming a Nayanmar.

Isaignaniar

Isaignaniar, a Brahmin by birth was a perfect example that women in familial background could also render much service and follow the path of Bhakti without having to renounce provided there was support. She was married to Sadai nayanar who was a Nayanmar himself and she gave birth to Sundarar who was also a Nayanmar and was the first to compile Thiruthondar Thokai which was the first compilation of Nayanmars . Isaignaniar breached the traditional patriarchal concept of Bhakti. Her path of spirituality was not hindered by the members of her family which showed the revolutionary ideology of that period.

Thiru Neelakanta Kuyavanar

Thiru Neela Kanta Nayanar was potter by profession again despite his socio-economic background, for his love for Lord Shiva, he tirelessly provided his service by making bowls for saiva ascetics, saints and also for poorer people free of cost. His service continued throughout his life. This nayanar, is also a classic example of how people of all sections despite their socio-economic stand, with their service became a revolutionary legends making a great change.

OTHER SAIVA BHAKTAS FROM SOCIALLY DOWNTRODDEN SECTION OF SOCIETY

Other than these saiva nayanars, there are many saiva bhaktas who are mentioned in Periya Puranam written by Sekkizhar from socially downtrodden section. ‘Vandi’, a roadside hawker is one among them who lived during the 9th century . Her story occurs in ‘Pittuku Man Sumantha Peruman’ story. Alagi, 11th century low caste Shudra woman is also mentioned as a Saiva saint. 12-13th century Auvaiyar, daughter of Pulaya (low caste) woman, married to a Brahmin through Anuloma attained old age by divine grace was also a saiva saint. Uttiranallur Nangai, a 15th century Paraiyah caste Saiva saint was author of the famous “Paichalur padikam”

CONCLUSION

Among the 63 Nayanmars, we find a pattern that each rising from different sections of society like Brahmin(Nami Nandi Adigal), hunter(Kannappa Nayanar), farmer(Ilayankudimara Nayanar), landowners(Manakanchara Nayanar), Kings(Meiporul Nayanar), queen (Mangayarkarasi). They all found expression and sought to relentless service to Lord Siva by serving saiva saints and bhaktas. This exhibits the humanitarian approach of the people even during the hard times. Most of these Nayanmars names were compiled and mentioned first by Sundaramoorthy Nayanar who is also a Nayanar in one of

his Thirumurai (songs composed to Lord Shiva) named “Thiruthondar Thokai”. Later in the 12th century again compiled in final form by Sekizhar as “Periya Puranam” The Bhakti movement thus is a very complex movement which saw revivalism and revolutionised the concept of religion with novel techniques like usage of vernacular language, humanitarian approach of selfless service to god through serving the bhaktas, pure love and devotion as form of worship and equality.

REFERENCE

1. Vijaya Ramaswamy, “ Rebels – Conformists? Women saints in medieval South India” Anthrops 87.1992, pp-133-146
2. Personal Interview: Kongu Naadu Deiva Tamizhisai Selvar Thiru.Kalidas-Odhuvavar, Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam Sowripalayam Institution. Recorded on 9 Oct, 2022
3. Indira Vishwanathan Peterson, Poems to Siva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1991, pp. 329-331
4. Rekha Pande, Divine Sounds from the Heart-Singing Unfettered in their Own Voices: Bhakti Movement and its Women Saints (12th to 17th century), Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010
5. Sri Swami Sivananda, Sixty three Nayanar saints, The Divine Life Society, www.dlshq.org. Accessed on 12 January, 2023
6. Arvind Kumar Mishra, Equality and Bhakti Movement in India, Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education [JASRAE] (Vol:15/ Issue: 7) DOI: 10.29070/JASRAE
7. Govinda Pillai, The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism?, Askar Books Publishers, 2012
8. Krishna Sharma, The Bhakti and Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2003
9. Alastair McGlashan, The History of the Holy Servants of the Lord Siva: A Translation of the Periya Puranam of Cekkizhar, Trafford Publishing, 2006