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The Bhakti Movement's Legacy in Contemporary Indian Secularism: Revisiting Mediaeval Devotional Poetry as Social Critique

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Abstract

This paper examines the enduring influence of the medieval Bhakti movement on contemporary Indian secularism through a critical analysis of devotional poetry as social critique. The research investigates how Bhakti saints from the 12th to 17th centuries challenged caste hierarchies, religious orthodoxy, and social exclusion through vernacular devotional expression, and how these challenges resonate within modern secular discourse in India. Employing a theoretical framework that integrates postcolonial theory, literary criticism, and political philosophy, this study analyzes representative works from prominent Bhakti poets including Kabir, Mirabai, Basavanna, and Tukaram. The analysis reveals that Bhakti poetry articulated a proto-secular vision emphasizing individual spiritual autonomy, social equality, and religious pluralism that prefigured elements of modern secular thought. However, the paper also critically examines tensions between Bhakti's theistic foundations and secular rationalism, arguing that the movement's legacy represents not a seamless precursor to secularism but rather a complex historical resource for negotiating religious diversity and social justice in contemporary India. The findings suggest that revisiting Bhakti literature offers valuable perspectives for addressing current challenges to Indian secularism, including communalism, caste discrimination, and debates over religious identity in public life.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religious tradition and secular modernity in postcolonial India presents a compelling paradox. India's constitutional commitment to secularism exists alongside vibrant religious diversity and persistent communal tensions, creating what scholars have termed a distinctively "Indian secularism" that differs markedly from Western models.[1,2] Within this complex landscape, the medieval Bhakti movement has emerged as a significant historical reference point for understanding indigenous traditions of religious tolerance, social reform, and pluralistic coexistence. The Bhakti movement, which flourished across the Indian subcontinent from approximately the 12th to 17th centuries, represented a revolutionary transformation in religious practice and social consciousness through its emphasis on personal devotion, vernacular expression, and critique of religious and caste orthodoxy.[3,4]

Contemporary scholarship and political discourse increasingly invoke the Bhakti tradition as evidence of India's inherent capacity for religious harmony and social egalitarianism. Political leaders, cultural commentators, and scholars have variously interpreted Bhakti poetry as prefiguring modern democratic values, challenging Brahmanical hegemony, and articulating indigenous forms of secularism.[5,6] However, such invocations often remain superficial, either romanticizing the movement as purely egalitarian or dismissing it as ultimately ineffective in transforming social structures. A rigorous examination of Bhakti devotional poetry as social critique reveals a more nuanced picture, one that illuminates both the movement's progressive potential and its inherent limitations.

This paper addresses the following research questions: How did medieval Bhakti poetry function as social critique, and what specific challenges did it pose to prevailing religious and social orthodoxies? In what ways does the Bhakti tradition's emphasis on individual devotion, vernacular accessibility, and transcendence of ritual boundaries prefigure or diverge from modern secular principles? What are the implications of invoking Bhakti legacy for contemporary debates about secularism, religious pluralism, and social justice in India?

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond historical interest. As India faces renewed challenges to its secular framework through rising religious nationalism, persistent caste-based discrimination, and conflicts over religious identity in public space, understanding the complex relationship between religious reform movements and secular aspirations becomes crucial. The Bhakti movement offers a historical lens through which to examine how religious discourse can simultaneously challenge and reinforce social hierarchies, how vernacular expression democratizes knowledge, and how devotional practice intersects with political resistance.

This paper argues that while Bhakti devotional poetry articulated powerful critiques of caste hierarchy, religious formalism, and social exclusion, its legacy in relation to contemporary Indian secularism must be understood as complex and contested rather than straightforwardly progressive. The movement's emphasis on direct personal experience of the divine, rejection of ritual intermediaries, and use of vernacular languages created spaces for subaltern voices and alternative social visions. However, Bhakti's theistic foundations, its incomplete challenge to patriarchal structures, and its subsequent appropriation by various political and religious movements complicate any simple mapping onto secular ideals. Nevertheless, revisiting Bhakti poetry provides valuable resources for imagining forms of religious coexistence and social equality that emerge from within Indian cultural traditions rather than being imposed as external secular frameworks.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Postcolonial Approaches to Secularism

This analysis draws upon postcolonial critiques of secularism that question the universality of Western secular models and explore alternative trajectories of religious modernity.[7,8] Talal Asad's genealogical approach demonstrates how secularism emerged from specific Christian-European historical contexts and cannot be transplanted uncritically to postcolonial societies with different religious traditions and social formations. Partha Chatterjee's work on political society and the colonial construction of religious communities in India provides essential context for understanding how precolonial forms of religious plurality differ from modern secular governance.

Rajeev Bhargava's conceptualization of Indian secularism as "principled distance" rather than strict separation between religion and state offers a framework for appreciating how Indian constitutional secularism accommodates religious diversity while pursuing egalitarian goals .[1] This approach recognizes that Indian secularism necessarily engages with religious traditions rather than excluding them from public life, creating possibilities for drawing upon historical religious reform movements in constructing secular arguments.

Literary and Cultural Theory

The analysis employs literary critical approaches that attend to the social embeddedness of textual production and the political dimensions of aesthetic form. Sheldon Pollock's work on vernacular cosmopolitanism illuminates how the Bhakti movement's adoption of regional languages represented not merely linguistic choice but a fundamental democratization of religious and cultural knowledge

previously monopolized through Sanskrit.[9] This framework helps understand how linguistic accessibility functioned as social critique.

Furthermore, this study engages with theoretical frameworks from subaltern studies that examine how marginalized groups negotiate dominant ideologies and create spaces for resistance through cultural expression.[10,11] While recognizing limitations in applying contemporary theoretical categories to medieval texts, this approach illuminates how Bhakti poetry articulated perspectives that challenged elite religious and social authority.

Conceptualizing Social Critique in Devotional Literature

A central theoretical challenge involves defining what constitutes "social critique" in devotional poetry. Unlike explicitly political texts, Bhakti poetry primarily expresses religious experience and theological perspectives. However, following the work of scholars such as [4,5], this analysis understands social critique as emerging through several dimensions: explicit challenges to caste hierarchies and ritual requirements; implicit subversion through foregrounding voices typically excluded from religious authority; articulation of alternative values emphasizing equality, accessibility, and individual autonomy; and creation of new linguistic and literary forms that democratize religious expression.

The theoretical framework recognizes that religious reform and social critique in premodern contexts operate differently than modern political movements, yet can nonetheless challenge existing power structures and imagine alternative social arrangements. This requires avoiding both anachronistic projection of modern categories onto medieval texts and dismissal of genuine transformative potential in religious discourse.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT AND MEDIEVAL INDIAN SOCIETY

Origins and Development

The Bhakti movement emerged in South India during the 7th-9th centuries with the Tamil Alvars and Nayanars, devotees of Vishnu and Shiva respectively, who composed passionate devotional poetry in Tamil rather than Sanskrit.[12] This initial phase established key features that would characterize later Bhakti movements: emphasis on emotional devotion (bhakti) over ritual knowledge; composition in vernacular rather than classical languages; and participation of poets from diverse caste backgrounds, including some from traditionally marginalized communities.

The movement spread northward from the 12th century onwards, manifesting in distinct regional forms across the subcontinent. In Maharashtra, the Varkari tradition emerged with poets such as Jnaneshvar, Namdev, and Tukaram. In Karnataka, the Virashaiva movement led by Basavanna rejected caste distinctions and Brahmanical ritual. In North India, figures such as Kabir, Ravidas, Mirabai, and Surdas created a rich tradition of bhakti poetry in various dialects of Hindi and other regional languages.[3] While sharing common emphases on devotion and vernacular expression, these regional movements differed in their theological orientations, social compositions, and relationships to prevailing religious institutions.

Social and Religious Context

Medieval Indian society was characterized by rigid caste hierarchies legitimized through Brahmanical ideology, which restricted religious knowledge and ritual participation to upper castes while excluding large segments of the population, particularly Shudras and those considered outside the varna system.[13] Religious practice centered on complex Vedic rituals requiring priestly mediation, Sanskrit learning inaccessible to most people, and pilgrimage to distant sacred sites. This system concentrated religious authority and cultural capital in Brahmanical hands while relegating the majority to subordinate status.

The bhakti poets emerged against this backdrop, many from artisan and lower-caste backgrounds: Kabir from a family of Muslim weavers, Ravidas from leather-workers, Namdev from tailors, Tukaram from shopkeepers. Others, like Mirabai, challenged gender restrictions on religious expression despite upper-caste origins. Their poetry directly addressed the contradiction between religious teachings of universal divine love and social practices of exclusion and hierarchy.[14]

Theological Innovations

Bhakti theology emphasized several key principles that diverged from orthodox practice. The supremacy of devotion (bhakti) over ritual knowledge (karma) and philosophical knowledge (jnana) meant that any person, regardless of caste, gender, or education, could achieve spiritual realization through sincere devotion. The concept of a personal, accessible deity who responds to devotion rather than ritual correctness democratized the divine-human relationship. The rejection of caste distinctions in spiritual worth challenged the metaphysical foundations of social hierarchy. The emphasis on inner transformation over external observance questioned the necessity of ritual intermediaries and pilgrimage sites.[16]

These theological positions had profound social implications, creating conceptual space for challenging caste hierarchy and religious monopolies. However, the extent to which theological egalitarianism translated into social reform movements varied considerably across different bhakti traditions and historical contexts.

ANALYSIS OF BHAKTI POETRY AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Critique of Caste Hierarchy

Perhaps the most direct form of social critique in Bhakti poetry involves explicit challenges to caste hierarchy. Kabir's verses systematically deconstruct the legitimacy of caste distinctions: "If you say you're a Brahmin born of a mother who's a Brahmin, Wasn't there some other way you could have come into the world? And if you say you're a Turk and your mother's a Turk, Didn't you come from somewhere else then?"[15]This verse employs logical argumentation to expose the arbitrariness of birth-based status, pointing to the common humanity of biological origins that transcends religious and caste identities. Kabir's poetry repeatedly mocks Brahmanical pretensions and Islamic orthodoxy alike, positioning himself as an outsider to both traditions while drawing from both.

Ravidas, a leather-worker whose occupation placed him among the most marginalized in caste hierarchy, transforms his polluted status into spiritual authenticity:"The regal realm with the sorrowless name: They call it Queen City, a place with no pain, No taxes or cares, none owns property there, No wrongdoing, worry, terror, or torture."[3]By imagining a divine realm explicitly defined by absence of the social structures that oppress him, Ravidas critiques earthly social organization while asserting spiritual equality. His poetry claims religious authority from a position of caste degradation, inverting the logic that equates social status with spiritual worth.

Basavanna's vacanas (devotional poems) in Kannada directly attack the caste system and Brahmanical ritual: "The rich will make temples for Shiva. What shall I, a poor man, do? My legs are pillars, the body the shrine, The head a cupola of gold. Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers, Things standing shall fall, but the moving ever shall stay."[4] This poem rejects external temple worship, asserting the body itself as the true temple, thereby negating the need for Brahmanical mediation and temple privileges. The contrast between "things standing" (established institutions, including caste hierarchy) and "the moving" (devotional consciousness) suggests the impermanence of social structures versus the permanence of devotional truth.

Gender and Patriarchal Authority

Women Bhakti poets, particularly Mirabai and Akka Mahadevi, challenged patriarchal restrictions through their devotional practice and poetry. Mirabai explicitly defies family authority and social expectations: "I have felt the swaying of the elephant's shoulders and now you want me to climb on a jackass? Try to be serious." [17]This verse employs the metaphor of having experienced divine love to justify her rejection of conventional marriage and domestic roles. Mirabai's poetry dramatizes conflict with family and social authorities who attempt to restrict her devotional practice, positioning spiritual calling as superseding patriarchal control.

Akka Mahadevi's vacanas go further, rejecting clothing and social convention entirely:"People, male and female, blush when a cloth covering their shame comes loose. When the lord of lives lives drowned without a face in the world, how can you be modest? When all the world is the eye of the lord, onlooking everywhere, what can you cover and conceal?"[4]By inverting shame from the naked body to

the clothed society that fails to recognize divine omnipresence, Akka Mahadevi challenges the very foundations of patriarchal modesty discourse. However, we must note that her radical rejection of conventional femininity did not directly challenge patriarchy's structural foundations, and subsequent tradition has often sanitized or marginalized her most transgressive aspects.

Critique of Religious Formalism and Hypocrisy

Bhakti poetry consistently critiques religious formalism, particularly the emphasis on external ritual over internal devotion. Tukaram's abhangas challenge the efficacy of pilgrimage and ritual:"Why wander to Kashi or Gaya? There is no need for such labor. The Lord is within you, why do you search without? Says Tuka, the Lord is complete within me."[18] This critique of pilgrimage simultaneously challenges the religious economy that profits from pilgrimage and the assumption that sacred space is geographically distant rather than internally accessible. The emphasis on inner presence democratizes access to the divine while delegitimizing the authority of temple priests and pilgrimage guides.

Kabir's verses attack religious hypocrisy across traditions: "If by bathing in the Ganges one finds God, Then the frogs and fish are holier than man." [19]The use of satire and logical reduction exposes the absurdity of ritual efficacy, employing a rationalist argumentation that prefigures modern secular critique of superstition. However, we must note that Kabir's critique emerges from devotional commitment rather than secular rationalism, seeking authentic religious experience rather than rejecting religious framework entirely.

Vernacular Language as Democratization

The choice to compose in vernacular languages rather than Sanskrit constituted a fundamental democratization of religious discourse. Sanskrit's restriction to upper-caste males created a monopoly on religious knowledge and expression. Bhakti poets' use of regional languages—Tamil, Kannada, Marathi, various Hindi dialects, Bengali—made religious ideas accessible to those excluded from Sanskrit learning.[9]

Moreover, Bhakti poets developed literary forms—padas, abhangas, vacanas, dohas—that drew from folk traditions and oral performance rather than classical Sanskrit poetics. This created new aesthetic possibilities while ensuring accessibility through melody, repetition, and vernacular imagery drawn from everyday life rather than classical mythology.[5]

The linguistic democratization had several effects: it validated vernacular languages as appropriate for religious expression, previously considered impossible; it created literate communities around vernacular texts, expanding literacy beyond traditional elites; it preserved and validated folk religious traditions and local cultural knowledge; and it enabled voices from marginalized communities to enter literary and religious discourse.

CRITICAL EVALUATION: LIMITATIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS

Theoretical versus Practical Egalitarianism

While Bhakti poetry articulated powerful egalitarian principles, the extent to which these principles translated into social transformation remains contested. Historical evidence suggests that Bhakti movements achieved limited success in dismantling caste hierarchies. Many Bhakti traditions eventually developed their own institutional structures that replicated caste distinctions, as seen in the progressive Brahmanization of Virashaiva institutions in Karnataka.[20] The gap between theological egalitarianism and social practice reflects the difficulty of translating spiritual equality into structural transformation.

Furthermore, upper-caste appropriation of lower-caste Bhakti poets often sanitized their radical social critique. The incorporation of Kabir and Ravidas into respectable literary canons involved selective emphasis on their mystical devotionalism while downplaying their caste critique.[21] This process of appropriation and domestication continues in contemporary invocations of Bhakti legacy, where the movement's radical edge is dulled to fit into nationalist narratives of harmonious tradition.

Gender Limitations

While women Bhakti poets challenged patriarchal restrictions, their challenge remained largely individualistic rather than systematic. The exceptional status of figures like Mirabai and Akka Mahadevi did not translate into broader women's movements or structural changes in gender relations. Their rejection of conventional femininity often involved celibacy and rejection of family life rather than reimagining gender relations within domestic and social contexts.[22]

Moreover, male Bhakti poets' treatment of gender varied considerably. While some traditions, like the Varkari movement, included women saints, others maintained patriarchal assumptions. The extensive use of bridal mysticism in Bhakti poetry, where the devotee adopts a female persona in relation to the male divine, has been interpreted both as subverting gender hierarchies and as reinforcing essentialized feminine passivity.[23]

Relationship to Political Power

The Bhakti movement's relationship to political authority was complex and variable. Some Bhakti traditions maintained oppositional stances toward political and religious establishments, while others sought patronage from rulers and integration into courtly culture. This integration often moderated social critique, as institutional success required accommodation with powerful interests.[24]

The question of whether Bhakti represented genuine popular resistance or ultimately reinforced existing power structures through providing emotional outlets for subordinated groups remains debated. Scholars like [25] have argued that Bhakti movements represented significant challenges to dominant ideologies, while others, drawing from Gramscian perspectives, view them as hegemonic mechanisms that channeled potential resistance into non-threatening spiritual domains.

Theological Foundations and Secular Principles

A fundamental tension exists between Bhakti's deeply theistic foundations and secular principles. Bhakti poets sought not elimination of religious authority but transformation of its basis from ritual knowledge to devotional intensity. Their critique emerged from religious conviction rather than rationalist skepticism. The equality they advocated derived from theological premises—that all souls are equally beloved by God—rather than humanistic or rights-based frameworks.

This theological grounding creates complications for appropriating Bhakti as precursor to secularism. While Bhakti challenged religious orthodoxy, it did not question religious truth itself. While it democratized religious participation, it did so by asserting alternative religious authority rather than eliminating authority claims. The movement's emphasis on direct divine experience and miraculous intervention sits uneasily with secular rationalism.[26]

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SECULARISM

Resources for Pluralistic Coexistence

Despite limitations, Bhakti traditions offer valuable resources for negotiating religious diversity in contemporary India. The movement's consistent emphasis on the multiplicity of paths to the divine, exemplified in Kabir's synthesis of Hindu and Islamic elements, provides indigenous precedents for religious pluralism. The Bhakti poets' skepticism toward exclusive truth claims and religious boundary-maintenance resonates with secular goals of reducing religious conflict.[27]

The concept of *sant* (saint) as one who transcends religious communalism while remaining rooted in devotional practice offers a model of religious identity that resists communal mobilization. The sant tradition's emphasis on ethical conduct and social service over ritual propriety aligns with secular ethical frameworks while remaining intelligible within religious vocabulary. This suggests possibilities for engaging religious communities in secular projects through idioms that resonate with their traditions.

Caste and Social Justice

Bhakti poetry's uncompromising critique of caste hierarchy provides resources for contemporary anti-caste movements. Dalit activists and intellectuals have increasingly reclaimed Bhakti poets like Ravidas as ancestors of anti-caste struggle, finding in their verses articulations of dignity and spiritual equality that counter Brahmanical ideology.[13] The Bhakti tradition demonstrates that challenges to caste can emerge from within Indian religious traditions rather than requiring wholesale rejection of Hindu identity.

However, this reclamation must navigate the reality that upper-caste appropriation has often stripped Bhakti of its radical social critique. The contemporary challenge involves recovering the oppositional force of Bhakti poetry while acknowledging its historical limitations in transforming caste structures. This requires critical engagement rather than romantic invocation, recognizing that Bhakti provides inspiration and conceptual resources rather than complete solutions.

Vernacular Modernity and Democratic Participation

The Bhakti movement's democratization of religious and literary expression through vernacular languages offers historical precedent for linguistic pluralism in India's democracy. Against tendencies toward linguistic nationalism and Hindi imposition, Bhakti demonstrates the vitality of regional languages as vehicles for sophisticated thought and cultural production.[9] The movement's validation of multiple linguistic communities resonates with constitutional commitments to linguistic diversity.

Furthermore, Bhakti's development of new literary forms drawing from folk traditions suggests possibilities for cultural production that bridges elite and popular domains. Contemporary vernacular literature, cinema, and digital media might be understood as continuing Bhakti's project of making cultural capital accessible beyond traditional gatekeepers. This democratization of cultural production has implications for political participation and democratic culture.

Challenges to Hindu Nationalism

The Bhakti tradition poses challenges to contemporary Hindu nationalist projects that seek to homogenize Hindu identity and mobilize it for political purposes. Bhakti's internal diversity, its boundary-crossing figures like Kabir who resist neat categorization, and its critique of Brahmanical orthodoxy undermine narratives of unified Hindu tradition.[28] The syncretic elements in Bhakti poetry, particularly its frequent engagement with Islamic Sufi traditions, contradict communalist attempts to construct Hinduism and Islam as eternally opposed.

However, Hindu nationalist movements have also attempted to appropriate Bhakti legacy, recasting Bhakti poets as Hindu cultural heroes while downplaying their heterodox elements. Kabir and Mirabai appear in nationalist narratives as embodiments of Hindu spirituality rather than as critics of Hindu orthodoxy. This contested appropriation demonstrates that historical traditions do not possess inherent political meanings but become resources for competing contemporary projects.[29]

Limitations of Religious Reform for Secular Projects

While Bhakti offers valuable resources, its limitations must temper over-optimistic invocations. Religious reform movements, however progressive, cannot substitute for secular institutional frameworks protecting rights regardless of religious identity. Bhakti's emphasis on individual spiritual transformation, while powerful, does not directly address structural inequalities requiring legal, political, and economic intervention.

Moreover, the contemporary context differs fundamentally from medieval conditions. Modern communalism, operating through print and digital media, electoral politics, and state institutions, differs from medieval religious conflicts. The challenges facing Indian secularism—including majoritarian politics, economic inequality, and globalization—require responses addressing contemporary structures rather than simply reviving historical traditions.

The danger in over-invoking Bhakti legacy involves suggesting that India's indigenous traditions automatically provide solutions to contemporary problems, potentially obscuring the need for critical engagement with modernity, including adopting progressive elements from various sources regardless

of origin. An uncritical celebration of Bhakti can devolve into cultural nationalism that privileges indigenous over borrowed elements, ironically reproducing the exclusionary logic that Bhakti poets challenged.

CONCLUSION

The medieval Bhakti movement's legacy in contemporary Indian secularism emerges as complex and multifaceted upon critical examination. Bhakti devotional poetry articulated powerful critiques of caste hierarchy, religious formalism, and social exclusion through vernacular accessibility, theological egalitarianism, and emphasis on personal devotion over institutional mediation. These critiques resonate with secular values of equality, individual autonomy, and religious pluralism, providing indigenous resources for negotiating religious diversity and social justice in contemporary India.

However, the relationship between Bhakti and secularism involves tension as well as continuity. Bhakti's deeply theistic foundations, its incomplete challenge to patriarchal and caste structures, and its variable historical relationship to political power complicate any straightforward appropriation as secular precursor. The movement's legacy has been contested, with progressive and reactionary forces both claiming Bhakti heritage for divergent contemporary projects.

The value of revisiting Bhakti poetry lies not in discovering ready-made secular solutions but in engaging a tradition that grappled with fundamental questions about religious authority, social hierarchy, and access to cultural capital. Bhakti demonstrates that challenges to orthodoxy and movements toward equality can emerge from within religious traditions, providing conceptual resources and historical precedents for progressive projects. However, these resources require critical engagement rather than romantic appropriation, acknowledging both possibilities and limitations.

For contemporary Indian secularism, Bhakti offers several key contributions: indigenous vocabularies for religious pluralism that resonate within religious communities; uncompromising critique of caste hierarchy articulated through religious authority; models of linguistic democratization validating vernacular expression; and historical precedents for individuals and movements challenging religious and social orthodoxy. These resources gain significance in contexts where secular rationalism alone proves insufficient for engaging religiously committed populations or addressing culturally embedded forms of inequality.

Future research might productively explore several directions: comparative analysis of how different regional Bhakti traditions relate to contemporary secular and religious movements; investigation of how Dalit and feminist movements engage with and reinterpret Bhakti legacy; examination of how Bhakti poetry circulates in contemporary media and popular culture; and analysis of how religious reform traditions in other Indian religious communities relate to secular projects. Such research would deepen understanding of the complex relationships between religious tradition, social critique, and modern secularism.

Ultimately, the Bhakti movement's greatest legacy may lie not in providing blueprints for contemporary secularism but in demonstrating the possibility of critique and transformation from within tradition. In an India where religious identity remains central to personal and political life, engaging religious traditions critically while mining their progressive potential represents a necessary complement to institutional secular frameworks. Bhakti poetry, with its combination of devotional intensity and social critique, vernacular accessibility and literary sophistication, continues to speak to contemporary questions about how diverse communities can coexist justly while maintaining meaningful connections to their cultural and religious inheritances.

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