

Intersection of Belief and Logic: A Study of Bhakti Philosophy in India with Special Reference to Kabir and Gurunanak

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ABSTRACT

In Indian History, secular ideology and Bhakti philosophy have developed in parallel. At times, secular thought emphasized humanism and the well-being of people in this life. It embraced a scientific outlook on life. Despite the growth of Jainism and Buddhism alongside Hinduism, there was more harmony than conflict among them. Ancient India was characterized by tolerance and mutual regard among these faiths. Following the different influences in India, a distinctive form of philosophy surfaced from the works and teachings of societal intellectuals. Their core focus revolved around promoting welfare and combating all forms of bias. The notable era is marked by a movement known as the Bhakti movement, which greatly contributed to confronting prejudices and advocating for societal transformation. The brave and resolute Bhakti thinkers actively opposed discrimination, serving as a source of inspiration for generations to come. Their role in promoting societal transformation is a testament to the power of philosophical thought. In this scenario, the 'Person' carried weight as the nation, religious group, and community did.

The Bhakti philosophical thinkers who aimed to strike an equilibrium among individuals' roles within society and sects confirm this philosophical tenant. The distinct character of this new philosophical thought was that it concentrated on the secular well-being of an individual. The paper examines the intertwined development of secular ideology and the Bhakti Philosophy by separating it into two eras. The initial phase could cover the period from the 4th century, the period of *Bhāgavad Gita* to the thirteenth century, broadly when Islam started spreading into the country's heartlands. The second era, spanning from the 13th to the 16th century, was a period of intellectual growth due to the interaction between Islam and Hinduism. Secularism emphasizes the coexistence of beliefs and perspectives within society. Bhakti Philosophy promotes devotion and spiritual connection through love and faith. Humanism prioritizes the value and dignity of all individuals. Universal love transcends boundaries and Embraces humanity as a whole. The study adopted an analytic methodology by analyzing primary and secondary sources. The study concludes by exploring the philosophical tenets of Kabir and Guru Nanak to understand, and assess their contribution to the development of Bhakti thought. By analyzing and evaluating the Bhakti Philosophical thinking that appeared at different periods in Indian History, the study reveals the intertwinement between Logic and Belief in Indian Philosophical thinking.

KEYWORDS: Secularism, Bhakti Philosophy, Humanism, Universal Love

INTRODUCTION:

In India's history and cultural development journey, the ideals of philosophy and humanistic thought have

progressed. Secular beliefs prioritize logic and fairness while steering clear of doctrines and dogmatic thinking. Bhakti, a term derived from the Sanskrit word '*bhaj*,' meaning 'to adore' or 'to worship,' is a concept that propagated and highlighted the importance of bonding with the divine by questioning entrenched norms such as the Caste system and traditional beliefs. To fully understand the essence of Bhakti philosophy in context, examining the landscape of that era that ultimately gave rise to a fresh wave of philosophical ideas is essential. The study suggests examining Bhakti Philosophy by categorizing it into two eras. It also proposes to study the structural conditions that initiated the shift in philosophical doctrine; it can be said that such a shift was a logical necessity of that period. The **first** was from the time of the Bhāgavad Gita (around 400 BC TO 400 AD) to the 13th century when Islam started entering the country's heartland. The **second** era, from the 13th to 16th century, was characterized by intellectual exploration sparked by the interaction between Islam and Hinduism.

In society today, we see a mix of beliefs and values encompassing secularism, Bhakti's philosophy, principles of humanism, and universal love. The introduction of Islam to India exposed the people of the Subcontinent to a civilization that was unfamiliar to them in every way despite the lack of parallels between the two faiths. The profound impact of Muslims on society was so noteworthy that the locals could not disregard it. The Islamic beliefs in brotherhood and equality among all humans shaped how their neighbors viewed things.¹

The existing religious landscape allowed for the integration of concepts into Indian traditions, which helped revive certain ancient Brahmanical practices after the decline of Buddhism. There has been discussion around the rivalry between Buddhism and Brahmanism for supremacy in India over the years; however, it is evident that Hinduism evolved as a belief system that aimed to reform Brahmanism yet retained elements of it. For almost a millennium before Muslims entered the scene, India saw Brahmanism reclaiming its position and prevailed over Buddhism.²

The Brahmins aimed to solidify their influence by blending elements of teachings and ancient pre-Aryan customs into their beliefs and practices then, just as they do now in Hinduism, which can be said to be a fusion of Vedic rituals from before the Buddha's time, with his ethical teachings and the diverse symbols and rituals of the pre-Aryan faiths that coexisted at that time. This multifaceted method of instruction enabled Brahmanism to appeal to both the public and those immersed in philosophical contemplation. Brahmanism offered a means to understand beliefs and symbols for worship to those who did not have time or opportunities for meditation practices. The *Tantras* contained rituals and formulas for those who found the abstract metaphysics of Brahmanism challenging to grasp. This belief system remained adaptable by emphasizing rituals and a belief in deities throughout social strata.³

Brahmanism was influenced by the known **Shankaracharya**, who played a role in interpreting the teachings of the *Upānishads*. He explained how the individual soul and *Brahman* are the same, the reality that forms the basis of all existence. He highlighted the deceptive nature of the physical world in his teachings on *Advaitic* philosophy, which is rooted in pantheistic beliefs. According to this thought, God is equated with the universe, and this thought continued to influence Hindu religious views significantly.⁴ During the conquest of India, society included followers of *Śaivism* and *Vaishnavism*, along with those who worshipped *Shākti* goddesses. The community was divided between those who practiced idol worship at home or in temples while following rituals and making offerings, and intellectuals who opposed the *Karmamārga* (path of action) and believed that true Salvation could be achieved through knowledge. The intellectual aspect of Brahmanism had evolved into a belief system that emphasized ideas at the expense

of ethical considerations. As a result, many individuals seeking a path that catered to their well-being and moral compass found it challenging to connect with such teachings.

The Bhakti movement arose in response to this situation, blending devotion to God with a people approach to spiritual growth. At its inception, Bhakti primarily focused on expression. The devotion to *Vasudeva* as the deity in the *Bhāgavad Gita* struck a chord with individuals who were unsatisfied and skeptical of the theoretical aspects of Upanishadic teachings. They strive for a connection with a personal god rather than the distant and detached deity depicted in pantheistic beliefs. In this context, Bhakti devotion emerged as a path that provided an emotionally resonant spiritual journey for those seeking a heartfelt connection with the divine. 5

The teachings of *Panchratra* and *Ekāntika* in the *Bhāgavad Gita* underscore the importance of devotion to God as a means to attain Salvation. It is worth noting that this context does not have a cut framework. The main obstacle is freeing the soul from desires, and Bhakti addresses this by fostering a connection with power, which turns worldly attachments into divine affection. 6

The teachings of the *Bhāgavad Gita* suggest that the authors were influenced by the traditions of the *Upānishads*. They emphasize respect for a God without aiming to set strict philosophical or theological rules but rather to encourage a harmonious blend of different Hindu philosophical schools by incorporating principles from the *Upānishads* and elements of *Yoga* into their teachings, wherein *Sankhya Yoga* acknowledges a singular deity. Compiling this information during that period was crucial as there were viewpoints on devotion (*Bhakti*) and illusion (*Māya*) concepts.

During its development around the 5th and 2nd centuries BCE, Bhakti Philosophical thinking primarily found expression on a level that originated from the belief in *Vasudeva* as the central deity highlighted in the *Bhāgavad Gita* text. This movement appealed to individuals unhappy with the philosophical teachings of the *Upānishads* as they yearned for an intimate connection with the divine presence. This contrasted with the impersonal nature of God typically associated with beliefs. Bhakti provided a relatable and emotionally fulfilling journey catering to those who desired completeness with a personal god. The teachings in the *Panchratra* and *Ekāntika* sections of the *Bhāgavad Gita* emphasize Bhakti as a means to attain Salvation through devotion to God without strictly adhering to monotheistic beliefs. This spiritual path focuses on nurturing and guiding the soul from desires toward enlightenment. The *Bhāgavad Gita* embodies a fusion of devotion to a deity while drawing from philosophies. It aims to unite perspectives within Hinduism rather than asserting a single doctrinal position. 7.

The *Bhāgavad Gita* draws inspiration from traditions. It incorporates *Yoga* philosophies to highlight the presence of a single divine being and aims to reconcile diverse philosophical viewpoints on devotion (*Bhakti*) and the concept of illusion (*Māya*). While it predominantly promotes a belief in one God entity, it also reflects tendencies by merging insights and doctrines from the *Upānishads* while infusing the emotional depth and moral guidance of Bhakti practices. Notably, in its exploration of devotion, the text does not directly challenge the authority of the Vedas. The *Bhāgavad Gita* recognizes the caste system. It portrays a mix of religious beliefs and worship practices followed by the public until the advent of Islam in India after the great epics concluded.

Around the 11th and 12th centuries, **Ramanuja** laid down Vaishnavism based on foundations that diverged from **Shankaracharya Advaita's** philosophy. His teachings countered Shankara's views through his interpretation of the *Brahmasūtras* by emphasizing a perspective that emerged devotion and spiritual elements in the *Bhakti* and *Vaishnava* philosophical framework. Ramanuja differed from Shankara by advocating for monism (*Vishistadvaita*), asserting that the supreme God has form and attributes to present

a yet personally connected concept of divine presence. Ramanuja is a monist, but contrary to Shankara and his school, he does not believe that the supreme God may be exempted from form and qualities—his doctrine of qualified monism or *Vishistadvaita* established the unity of God, possessing attributes. Ramanuja, an orthodox Hindu, performs all the rites and rituals and does not resemble certain reformers who came after him and were influenced by Islam. The important thing, according to him, was meditation on God. He attached much importance to the observance of religious rituals. The followers of Ramanuja very sincerely observed the rites of repast and rules of the Caste. Their official language was Sanskrit, and the teaching was strictly confined to the higher classes of Hindu society. The Sudras had no access to their order. Only the Brahmin could be initiated to the success of his teaching in India. Despite his conservatism, Ramanuja involuntarily prepared the way for the reformers who came after him.⁸

The Philosophy of Devotion

In Bhakti Marga, traditions are divided into four schools known as Sampradayas, which play a role in the practice of religious rituals: the *Shri Sampradaya* by Ramanuja, the *Brahma Sampradaya* by Madhava, the *Rudra Sampradaya* by Vishnu Swami, and the *Sanakdi Sampradaya* led by Nimbaditya. These schools present different viewpoints on Shankar Vedanta's philosophy yet share a common belief in a mix of monotheism and polytheism teachings.

One significant event in the History of India was when a new sect was established by **Ramananda**, who learned under Ramanujas guidance back then. Ramananda probably noticed the rising influence of Islam in India during the Tughlaq dynasty period. Aspirations for progress drove the people in conversion to Islam to adapt and adjust to the pressures arising from political and economic conditions. In response to this trend, Ramananda set up his sect, which moved away from the Hindu rituals. His followers, referred to as *Avadhutas*, believed in detachment from social practices. For Ramananda and his followers, language was a means to spread the concept of Bhakti thought, which played a substantial role in their achievements. Their lessons led to the emergence of two fractions within Hinduism. The first fraction, known as **saguna Bhaktas**, contributed to enriching Hinduism with devotion while upholding the authority of the Vedas. Nabhadasa and Tulsidasa were figures representing this group. Nabhadasa is recognized as the writer of **Bhaktimala** while Tulsidasa emerged as a poet who revered Rama in his works. The faction that revered Rama as an embodiment of God contributed to the ethical framework of Hinduism.

At the same time, the second fraction, the **Nirguna Bhaktas**, led by Kabir, advocated for a monotheistic belief system and rejected the caste hierarchy in favor of universalism and unity among all religions. Kabir's teachings fueled a Bhakti movement that flourished during the 16th century beyond Benaras to inspire movements nationwide. Other significant figures in this movement included Nanak, Dadu, Raidas, Dhana, Sena, and Namadeo. During that era, Hindus and Muslims had to learn to live peacefully due to the teachings of medieval Bhaktas promoting universal values and religious harmony. This ideology helped instill a sense of peace and order for governance and social harmony. The movement significantly improved relations between the two communities by encouraging them to adhere to standards and work together towards shared goals. A desire for change within the caste system in response to economic and bureaucratic changes following the formation of the Turkish State fueled the growing excitement surrounding the Bhakti movement in the 16th century. ⁹

Advancements in technology and craftsmanship during the 13th and 14th centuries impacted productivity levels. This led to increased centralization of administration and stability in trade practices. These developments created opportunities for individuals from castes to enhance their status and social standing

by collectively challenging traditional caste hierarchies. Historical figures like Nanak strived for a society without caste distinctions but encountered opposition when trying to abolish the caste system. This resistance resulted in its reformation instead of total elimination. In particular, the proponents of the Bhakti movement typically came from this origin, such as Kabir, a weaver, and Nanak, a merchant and Dadua cotton carder. Their writings convey the challenges faced by communities. However, though they expressed disapproval of the caste system, their complaints about exploitation were aimed at the levels of authority, like village leaders and officials, instead of tackling the larger systemic injustices caused by rulers or the revered figures of divinity. This demonstrates an understanding of dynamics as widespread involvement in the movement, which existed alongside an acknowledgment of established power hierarchies.¹⁰

Heading to the New Era in Indian Philosophy,

The Bhakti movement initiated by the Nirguna Bhaktas introduced a philosophy to society, focusing on liberating individuals from the constraints of Caste-based oppression alone. This era could be characterized as embracing a philosophy where human welfare was centered on elevation alongside spiritual aspirations. All reformers criticized the concept of Caste. Rejected polytheism and idol worship in favor of a way of life that emphasized unity among communities and the importance of kindness and practicality over rituals. They questioned the authority of Brahmins and Mullahs while upholding principles and encouraging regional literature development. They emphasized the unity of God across religions and cultures and held Bhakti as a path to spiritual redemption. **Kabir** and **Nanak** are renowned figures Among the thinkers in the Nirguna Bhakti cult group of beliefs and practices in India. Kabir is recognized for leading the Nirguna Bhakti movement during the 16th century, at its peak of expression. Although the concept of promoting Nirguna ideology had been developing before Kabir's time through the Nath Pantha in the 12th century, it was Kabir who shaped it into what we now recognize as the medieval school of Nirguna Bhakti. Following Kabir's footsteps, despite the diverse followings of figures like Nanak, Dadu, and Raidas, further solidified the foundation of Bhakti Philosophy, which connected them with a common ideology. They typically supported a humanistic philosophy, viewing individuals as beings defined by their humanity rather than by Caste or religion. In the following sections, we will explore the human-centered and secular concepts present in the teachings of Kabir and Nanak—two prominent figures in the Bhakti movement.

Secular Philosophy of Kabir

Kabir likely shared his teachings orally before they were later written down in works such as the **Bijak** and **Adi Granth**.

The primary goal of Kabir's teachings was to establish harmony among castes and faiths in Northern India by eliminating the caste system and countering the superstitions promoted by a select few for their benefit. He intended to create religious groups in Northern India that would transcend caste distinctions and religious conflicts fueled by irrational beliefs and the manipulation of ignorance for personal gain. Kabir sought to foster unity among people of different religions who lived together but were divided by their beliefs. In his Bijak writings, he emphasized the importance of introspection in seeking a connection with God and questioned the significance placed on the ancient texts of both Muslims and Hindus.

According to Kabir's philosophical thoughts, a being realizes God's presence by delving into their thoughts and emotions. These inner experiences are expressed through words crafted from letters that hold meaning,

conveying knowledge of the divine realm as sacred and inert. What may otherwise appear diverse and complex can eventually reveal a unity that transcends all boundaries. The language of innermost emotion can converge into an essence that bridges the gap between humanity and divinity. The unveiling of God is considered the most straightforward and pure of all revelations; however, according to Kabir's philosophy, the complete unity of truth remains elusive. Although humans cannot fully comprehend God through their abilities, those who have truly grasped the essence of truth may receive revelations. He further says that not everyone possesses the same level of understanding and may have to rely on the guidance of those who have personally connected with God to find their way in life. People often trust individuals who outwardly demonstrate devotion but lead lives marked by arrogance and self-gratification, ultimately hindering progress. So, according to Kabir, those who exclusively focus on rituals and practices without understanding their purpose often lose sight of the goal, mistaking the journey for the destination. Thus, those who cannot save themselves from death are incapable of sharing the blessings of life with others.¹⁴

He described God as formless and contended that worship is not necessary; God exists within oneself rather than in temples or mosques or through rituals. Kabir strongly condemned leaders and clerics for their focus on rituals and lack of understanding of true spirituality. The Bijak vehemently rejects divisions and societal prejudices, advocating for the equality of all individuals and the importance of brotherhood. Kabir emphasizes the value of self-discovery in finding the truth, promoting introspection and mindfulness over solely relying on religious rituals or practices for spiritual fulfillment. The Bijak also highlights the significance of devotion (Bhakti) and the mystical connection with the divine while disregarding intermediaries or clergy.

Kabir encourages individuals to analyze ideas, challenge established institutions, and embrace their truths despite societal pressures. His teachings had a rational approach, offering a perspective on belief systems and religious rigidity; Kabir visualized an inclusive society founded on compassion and equality while rejecting dogmas and societal divisions based on Caste structure. His writings on devotion introduced a style in literature characterized by clarity in thinking, which brought in an intensity previously unseen in India's literary landscape. Kabir showed equal respect for other philosophical thoughts.

Kabir's teachings do not favor either Hindus or Muslims; instead, he admires all that is divine within both faiths and condemns all that is dogmatic. The era in which Kabir lived was marked by tremendous social and political unrest, and the prolonged contact with Islam brought a new orientation to Indian thought.

Key tenets of Kabir's philosophy reveal his views on spirituality and the nature of the divine. He proclaimed God to be formless, asserting that worship is not confined to specific rituals or religious institutions; instead, he advocated for the understanding that God resides in each individual. Kabir strongly criticized religious practices and asked people to look inside for the taste of true spirituality. His Bijak fervently rejected social divisions and prejudices, firmly believing that all human beings are equal and advocating for the importance of brotherhood among diverse communities. Kabir propagated the need for self-discovery in the quest for truth, encouraging deep introspection and mindfulness as preferable to mere dependence on established religious customs for spiritual fulfillment. The Bijak highlights the value of devotion (Bhakti) and emphasizes a direct, mystical connection with the divine, free from the constraints of religious leaders.

Thus, Kabir urges individuals to examine belief systems critically, challenge established institutions, and embrace personal truths despite societal pressures. He infused his teachings with rationality and courage, advocating for a perspective transcending dogmatic beliefs and rigid religious structures. Kabir envisioned

an inclusive society rooted in compassion and equality while rejecting the doctrine of the caste system. His philosophy on devotion offered a fresh view marked by clarity and spontaneity, which introduced an unprecedented intensity to India's literary landscape. His philosophy demonstrated equal respect for all parallel thinking that existed in India around that period.

Notably, Kabir's teachings do not favor Hinduism or Islam; instead, he recognizes and appreciates the divine essence within both faiths while vehemently condemning dogmatism. The era during which Kabir lived was marked by profound social and political unrest; the lasting impacts of prolonged interactions with Islam significantly influenced Indian thought and spiritual discourse, offering new horizons for contemplation and understanding. Kabir's secular philosophy thus was a logical response to the divergent social needs of the hour.

Humanistic Thinking Of Guru Nanak

According to Guru Gobind Singh's teachings, Kabir philosophy has dramatically influenced the Khalsa community over time. Guru Nanak's Hindu background primarily cultivated his teachings. Nanak held a perspective whereby he often interacted with Muslim saints to gain insights and wisdom. The **Janam Sakhi** documents instances of his interactions with Sufi mystics. Like Kabir's influence on him, Nanak drew inspiration from their guidance. His philosophy connects individual souls and God through love and devotion rather than mere knowledge or rituals. He attached importance to the concepts of unity in the divine and the bond among all people as brothers and sisters. He stated that the fundamental purpose of life is to show love toward each other and to connect with God through devotion. He stressed that every individual is created by a supreme being who oversees humanity and upholds principles in the workplace. He disapproved of rituals, considering them devoid of meaning. One significant social impact of Bhakti was its opposition to the caste system, a cause that Nanak supported wholeheartedly.¹⁵

His belief in a god can be explained like this: 'God represents the truth, is seen as a benevolent creator free from fear or animosity, and exists beyond beginning or end while also providing wisdom through His kindness. God's core nature is complete in itself, along with His identity. The creative process is a reflection of God's benevolent nature. He also creates and nurtures human intellectual capabilities. God's commands reflect His kindness and serve as a symbol of approval. Many beings throughout time have called upon this ancient truth. All powers and energies stem from this foundational reality. It is important to show the appreciation and respect for God.'¹⁶

According to Janam Sakhi, those who worship this everlasting truth are genuine, whereas those who prioritize the temporary nature of things are ultimately deceptive. Following the path set by Kabir, Nanak opposed the traditional rituals of his time and became part of a movement for change. He supported the unity of God and worked towards bringing the differences between Hinduism and Islam by using a language that ordinary people could understand well; this had a tremendous social impact.¹⁷

From Kabir and Nanak, a galaxy of reformers preached their ardent faith in a personal God and a Moral Law that rules the world. This characterizes them all in their faith in Bhakti and their critical attitude towards orthodoxy. They all preached against the rigidity and iniquity of the caste system and proclaimed the equality of all men in the eyes of God. They popularised the basic principles of Bhakti in the different parts of India. **Dadu, Chaitanya, Mrabai, Tukaram, and Surdas** to name a few.

Thus, the reformation of Hinduism in the Middle Ages delivered a new social message about the worth of every human being in God's sight. It also urged a reconstruction of variant Hindu thought to make it an efficient vehicle of new social and spiritual ideas by pursuing Bhakti.

It is generally conceded by historians that religious developments reflect or accompany fundamental changes in social processes; the same holds for the Bhakti movement. It preached human equality and openly condemned ritual and CasteCaste. It was radically new, different from old traditions and ideas of religious authority. It sought to refashion the collective life on a new basis, envisaging a society in which there would be Justice and Equality for all and in which men of all creeds would be able to develop their whole Moral and spiritual nature.

Conclusion:

This reformation of Hinduism in the Middle Ages brought a new social message: the worthiness of every human being in the sight of God. It urged a reconstruction of variant Hindu thought, aiming to make it an effective vehicle for new social and spiritual ideas by pursuing Bhakti. However, it must be admitted that Islam influenced Hindu society but did not fundamentally alter its structure, which retains the elements of exclusion and untouchability even up to our times.

Thus, the Bhakti movement was characterized by a radically new approach, basically different from old traditions and the denial of religion's authority. It sought to refashion collective life on a new basis, envisioning a society in which there would be justice and equality for all, and men of all creeds would be able to develop their whole moral and spiritual nature.

In the Bhakti movement, faith and reason merged to give rise to a new humanistic philosophy that treated individuals as unique, not as products of society. We can say that, given the prevailing social conditions, it was a logical and rational necessity to reform our old philosophical thinking. They tried to preach a philosophy centered on man's well-being by setting a thought that transcended the narrow, codified, ritualistic work of religion. They advocated a way of life that upheld man as a being of this world. The importance was given to righteous human conduct rather than metaphysical quibbling. Moreover, it is by using this that man can attain Salvation. What can finally be said is that humankind's spiritual wellbeing is directly linked with his mortal wellbeing. These Bhakti thinkers rationalized the path of spiritual well-being through moral growth.

Thus, Bhakti philosophy is rational and contextually rooted in the sociocultural crisis of its time. Emerging in periods marked by social fragmentation, rigid orthodoxy, and moral uncertainty, Bhakti offered a path to spiritual liberation and a framework for mundane well-being and ethical living. The Bhakti Philosophy advocated acts of devotion, compassion, and universal love, leading to a renewed sense of purpose and inner power to revisit and handle the complexities of worldly existence. By advocating moral conduct and egalitarian principles, Bhakti Philosophy reoriented religious life and distanced it from ritualistic practices towards a more humanistic behavioral pattern. Thus, new thought could cater to the spiritual as well as the social needs of man. Keeping with its dignity and inner peace.

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11. The research presented here builds on the author's PhD thesis, "Secularism Welfarism and Utopia," submitted to the University of Delhi in 2003. Portions of Chapter 4 have been adapted. All analyses and interpretations here have been further developed for this manuscript.