



The different types of bhakti in Hinduism

Bhakti is one of the four margas (or yogas), each of which offers a different path for reaching moksha. Bhakti means 'loving devotion', therefore, Bhaktimarga is the way of loving devotion. This means that bhaktas offer all their worship and service to a specific deity (or deities). In doing this Hindus focus on God as personal, rather than the impersonal, transcendent reality of Brahman. For a Hindu following the Bhakti path, all actions should be done in remembrance of Istadevata, or the personal or cherished God, known by the term Ishvara. The term Ishvara has been given very many different translations, one of which is simply 'God' or 'Lord'. However, the etymology of the word and analysis of its use in Sanskrit has brought out its fullest meaning as trying to convey 'the very best of oneself', or 'the very best there is'. Within bhakti this has been given the understanding of the divine essence as love and as bringing out the purest loving relationship between the divine and devotee.

Loving devotion, therefore, is central to the understanding of Bhaktimarga. This is not only one-way; the deity loves the devotee and the devotee should try as hard as possible to love the deity in return. There are different types of bhakti relationships between the deity and devotee; for example, the devotee may love the deity as a friend, or as a child to a parent, or as a parent to a child, or even as a lover. These are known as bhavas (loving essences) and according to traditional Hinduism they are:

- santa, a placid love for God;
- dasya, the attitude of a servant;
- sakhya, the attitude of a friend;
- vatsalya, the attitude of a mother towards her child;
- madhura, the attitude of a woman towards her lover.

In following the Bhaktimarga, the hope is that the deity may remove the devotee's karmic weight and grant them mukti or moksha. Mukti or moksha is not something that can be earned through good behaviour; within Bhaktimarga it is the result of divine grace given out of love.

There are a number of different types of practices and ways of living for devotees to develop a loving relationship with God. Bhakti is popular in both Vaishnavism and Shaivism. Vaisnavism is usually focused on an understanding of either Rama or Krishna as Bhagavan (another word for deity). In Shaivism, according



to the Vidyeshvara Samhita of the Shiva Purana, practices specifically include wearing a small lingam around the neck, wearing the tilak and mantra meditation. Both traditions can also explore the different types of bhakti through different practices. These include: an austere code of behaviour; engaging with sacred texts; listening to the teaching of a guru as often as possible; and daily puja involving detailed care and attention for murtis and a focus on the divine glimpse (Darshan). Yoga and meditation, usually combined with karmamarga and jnanamarga meditations, are sometimes part of Bhaktimarga with a specific focus on bhakti for loving union. In addition, a common practice among all types of bhakti is that of yatra or pilgrimage. The focus here, again, is on receiving darshan.

Answer:

Bhakti is one of four paths to liberation. Its fullest meaning beyond personal devotion to a specific deity is best summarised in the term 'devotion to Ishvara', a phrase used of a deity that is the 'very best there is' and which in turn brings out 'the very best of oneself'. The relationship between deity and devotee is explored through the imagery of different relationship-types (bhavas), including social, familial, erotic and the divine. These relationships are the focus for Vaishnavas and Shaivites for example, when they perform religious acts such as austerity, reading religious texts, yatras and daily puja with the immediate expectation of darshan and the ultimate aim of moksha.

The origin of and background to the bhakti movement

The Hindu Bhakti movement started in the 9th century A.D. by Shankaracharya and continued up to 16th century A.D. developed by a number of Hindu devotees, preachers and religious reformers. Bhakti means devotion to God. The Bhakti movement started in the South in response to the conquest of northern India by Muslim rulers. The propounders of the Bhakti movement made Bhakti their principal theme and gave a call to the people to worship with the simplest possible way of devotion and love. The concept of Bhakti was not a new one in the Indian tradition; it is as old as Hinduism itself. However, the Bhakti movement deals with the Indian response to new social and historical challenges.



(1) Moral and religious corruption in society

During the time of Muslim rule in India, Hinduism and Hindu society was full of many social inconsistencies such as the rigidity of the caste system and irrelevant rituals and religious practices. The society also suffered from segregation due to casteism and severe economic disparity. The religion itself was monopolised by the Brahmins who themselves led a degenerated and corrupt life. Therefore, a general feeling of dissatisfaction with the existing socioreligious corruption was a major catalyst in the emergence of the Bhakti movement.

(2) Alternative religions

In the ancient period Hinduism had to face challenges from new religions like Buddhism and Jainism. Some prominent rulers of India became ardent followers and extended whole-hearted support to the spread of these religions. Although Jainism and Buddhism lost popularity in time, Islam had more success. By the beginning of the 13th century AD Muslims began to rule and exert its own individual characteristics like universal brotherhood, equality of all in the society, absence of any caste system or untouchability, opposition to idol worship and above all, practice of monotheism or oneness of God. Among all these, absolute monotheism or equality of all men greatly appealed to the Hindus, especially the Sudras who were the worst sufferers and had no religious freedom. After living together for generations and continuous interaction between the people of two communities there grew a feeling of mutual respect amongst the Hindus and Muslims. Both directly and indirectly, the ideals of Islam produced a positive effect upon the minds of a section of Hindus and fostered the growth of a liberal attitude.

(3) Sufism's influence

Sufism is an old religious sect of Islam. It is a reform movement within the Islamic religion which started in Persia. It came to India towards the beginning of the 13th century A.D. and with the rise of the Muslim power Sufism became more popular. The term Sufi has come from the word Safa meaning pure which implies purity of thought and action. In the words of Sheikh- al-Islam Zakariyah Ansari, 'Sufism teaches how to purify one's self, improve one's morals and build up one's inner and outer life in order to attain perpetual bliss.' The Hindu saints of India were influenced by the practical spirituality of Sufism.



(4) A more practical path

Indeed, the philosophy of the Vedas and Upanishads was very complicated for the common people. People wanted a simple way of worship, simple religious practices and simple social customs. The paths of Jnanamarga and Karmamarga were difficult for them to practice in day to day life. Bhaktimarga introduced a simple way of devotion to get salvation from worldly life.

(5) A 'Hindu' response to the social and religious influences of Islam

Religious leaders felt the urgent necessity of making the dormant Hinduism more active and a living force among the common masses. Put differently, Bhakti movement was a reply to Islam's monotheism and social equality by way of a new interpretation of Hinduism. As K.M. Panikkar observes,

'The medieval period witnessed many revivalist movements in Hinduism under different sages and saints. They were based on Bhakti which was the outcome of the feeling of escapism which dominated the Hindu mind as a result of the conquest of its sacred places in Islam.'