
UNIT 39 DEVELOPMENTS IN RELIGION

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39.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this Unit is to briefly discuss the major features of Religious developments in the early medieval period with focus on the shape which **Bhakti** ideology and Tantrism took. After going through this Unit you should be able to :

- know about the origins of **Bhakti** in Brahmanical religious order,
- know the character and social context of the characteristic of later Brahmanism,
- know how the character and social context of **Bhakti** changed in the early medieval period,
- realise how royal support to **Bhakti** cults gave them wealthy institutional bases,
- know about the origin and role of Tantrism and its character in the early medieval period, and
- know how Tantrism penetrated into Buddhism and Jainism.

39.1 INTRODUCTION

You are by now familiar with certain broad stages of the religious history of early India. While archaeological material suggests that certain elements of Indian religions were present in the archaeological cultures dating prior to the **Vedas**, the hymns of the **Rig Veda** give us for the first time, an idea of how prayers were offered to deities to please them. However, the simple prayers of the **Rig Veda** gave place gradually to complex rituals dominated by Brahmanas and one can notice the growth of a close relationship between the Brahmanas and the rulers and warriors on this situation. Not only the wandering ascetics who moved away from the established society but also the Buddhist and the Jainas did not accept the dominance of the Brahmanas and the rigid social and moral order which the Brahmanas advocated. There thus grew the heterodox movements which received support not only from rulers and rich merchants but also from other sections of people. In the pre-Gupta period Buddhism reached the height of its glory, spread to countries outside India and Buddhist centres were constructed on a large scale. Meanwhile certain changes were taking place within Brahmanism as well as within heterodox sects. From the religious point of view the most important change was that the devotee was considered as being bound to the supreme god head by devotion (**bhakti**) and the god head was worshipped in the form of images. Vaishnavism and Saivism as parts of Brahmanical religion attracted many devotees; image worship became widespread among the Buddhists who worshipped not only the Buddha or

Bodhisatva but also a host of other deities, the Jains too worshipped the images of Tirthankaras, various minor deities, stone **ayagapatas** and other objects.

The Brahmanas used image worship to build up pantheons of deities by assimilating gods and goddesses from diverse sources. This is how many female deities (**sakti**) became prominent in Brahmanical religions from the Gupta period onward. In fact, there was no homogeneity in Brahmanical religions and religious practices and beliefs varied widely. Different sects of Saivism, such as the Pasupatas, the Kaula-Kapalikas and the Kalamukhas were opposed to the dominance of the Brahmanas. They had their own religious orders centred around **mathas** or monasteries and they received support from many royal families. At the same time, Brahmanas who cultivated the **Vedas** and continued to perform Vedic sacrifices received royal support and **agrahara** settlements of the Brahmanas came to be a major link in the spread of Brahmanical ideas and practices throughout the country. The temple also became an institution which drew people together and served effectively in the spread of ideas.

Although in the complex religious situation of early medieval India the Brahmanas were gaining ascendancy, one should keep in mind also the following terms:

- 1) The orthodox Brahmanical order continued to be challenged particularly by movements within Saivism, by poet saints and by those who practised tantric form of worship.
- 2) Most religions irrespective of whether it was Brahmanism, Buddhism or Saivism, developed institutional bases in the form of temples and monasteries.
- 3) Ruling powers and elite sections of society supported institutions and Brahmanas, monks, **acharyas** or religious heads and others by grants of land, wealth and by other means. By these acts of patronage, the ruling powers and elite sections of society strengthened their own social base.

These are the various aspects which have been taken up in this Unit.

39.2 EMERGENCE OF BHAKTI IN BRAHMANISM

Brahmanism had to accept the growing importance of new gods like Siva and Vishnu side by side with Vedic gods like Indra and Varuna. It also assimilated many other popular deities like Vasudeva, Skanda and so on. All these led to the growth of the **Bhakti** cult.

Around the fourth century B.C. the cult of Vasudeva was becoming popular. This is suggested by reference to it by classical authors like Megasthenes who came to the court of Chandragupta Maurya.

The worshippers of Vasudeva submitted to **Bhakti** as the proper religious approach and called themselves Bhagavatas. Several epigraphs of the early Christian era bear testimony to the prevalence of the Vasudeva cult in central India and the Deccan.

Simultaneously with the cult of Vasudeva arose the sect of Pasupatas, devotees of Pasupati or Siva, a fertility deity. This cult was kept alive in non-brahmanic circles from the days of the Harappan culture.

The popularity of these new gods increased during the Sunga and Kushana periods. Patanjali, who lived in the Sunga period, in his **Mahabhashya** refers to the exhibition and sale of the images of Siva, Skanda and Vishakha. These gods appear on the coins of the Kushana kings, especially Huvishka. An important characteristic of later Brahmanism was its capacity to adopt new trends. This became necessary to meet the challenge of the 'heretical sects' which were opposed to Brahmanism. Besides adopting new gods, Brahmanism gradually shifted its emphasis from Vedic ritual to **Bhakti**, which implied the cultivation and development of a personal relationship between God and the devotee. Thus a monotheistic concept of God, with either Siva or Vishnu as his manifestation and **Bhakti** (loyalty and devotion) to him was gaining strength. Soon **Bhakti** became the dynamic force of later Brahmanism also called Hinduism.

39.2.1 Syncretism of Deities

An important characteristic of the new Brahmanism was its genius to syncretise many local deities and to evolve a monotheistic great God. Syncretism in this context will mean that

deities worshipped at different places and by different people were recognised as identical and were worshipped as manifestation of the same supreme deity. Thus Vasudeva was identified with Vishnu, a minor Vedic god and Narayana, a god of obscure origin mentioned in the Brahmana literature. Then Vishnu was closely connected with the name of Krishna, who represented the fusion between martial hero and a flute-playing pastoral deity. Vishnu could assimilate many other cults — the cult of the 'divine boar' which prevailed among some of the tribes of Malwa, the cult of Parasurama, a Brahmana hero; and Rama, the great hero of the **Ramayana**. Then Vishnu rose to the status of the Universal God in the **Bhagavad Gita**.

Similarly, Siva came to be syncretised with the Vedic Rudra and Bhairava, a tribal god and was worshipped in the form of the phallic emblem or **linga**. With Siva were later associated certain other deities such as Skanda and the elephant-headed Ganesa.

These theistic cults stressed the merit of worship rather than the performance of Vedic sacrifice.

39.2.2 Adaptation of Tribal Rituals

Yet another important feature of later Brahmanism was its adaptation of the tribal rituals keeping the Vedic **Yajna** rites supreme only in theory. In course of time the merit derived out of these new rituals were equated with the merit of the Vedic **Yajna**. Further, the sacred spots of the tribals were included as new places of pilgrimage (**tirtha**) with suitable myths to make them respectable. The **Ithihasas** and **Puranas** are full of such material or stories which inspire **bhakti** (devotion) to a personal god.

39.2.3 Royal Support to Temples and Theism

The **Puranas** highlighted the merits acquired by visiting great cultcentres like Mathura and Varanasi which were major places of pilgrimage. This gave a stimulus to the institution of the temple. In fact, the **Puranas** and other texts of the period list numerous places of pilgrimage (**tirthas**) which drew devotees in large numbers because visiting **tirthas** would ensure merit. The temple which housed the deity, became a place of worship and thus drew devotees away from home to an institution which became a public centre. The Gupta age marked the beginning of temple construction. It laid the foundation of the typical styles of Indian temple architecture. Among the few Gupta temples which survive, the Dasavatara temple of Devagarh, the Vishnu temple at Tigawa, and the Siva temple at Bhumara are known for their beauty. The epic and Puranic stories relating to Rama and Krishna were represented in the temple sculptures. Excellent specimens of them are still found in the Devagarh temple. The Gupta emperors patronised both Saivism and Vaishnavism. However, the personal religion of most of the Gupta rulers was Vaishnavism which led to the creation of a number of important Vaishnava centres and Vaishnava sculptures in the Gupta period. The idea of the **awataras** or incarnations of Vishnu in which Vishnu is born on earth as a boar, a fish, or a human being for rescuing earth from a crisis, also seems to have been systematised in the Gupta period.

In the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. Saivism seems to have replaced Vaishnavism as recipient of royal patronage in northern India. Saivism counted among its followers supreme rulers, foreign as well as indigenous, such as Mihirakula, Yashodharman, Sasanka and Harsha. Pasupata or Saiva **acharyas** are frequently mentioned in contemporary records which include inscriptions, and many literary works like those of Varahamihira, Bana and Hiuen Tsang.

39.3 SPREAD OF BHAKTI TO THE SOUTH

All the major north Indian religions — Brahmanism, Jainism and Buddhism — travelled southwards. The Brahmanas brought with them the Vedic **Yajna** cult and the two theistic cults, Vaishnavism and Saivism. The kings were in favour of the Vedic rituals as they conferred ritual status on them. The theistic cults struck root among the people. However, eventually the devotional theistic cults were to prove stronger than any other religious force in the south, and this was recognized even by royal patrons who extended support to Vaishnavism, Saivism and their sects.

Among the early Chalukya kings of Vatapi some professed Bhagavatism and others, the Pasupata cult. The famous bas-reliefs of Badami testify to the popularity of the theistic cults in the Deccan in the sixth-seventh centuries A.D. Similarly, the Pallavas of Kanchi patronised the two theistic cults as shown by the monolithic **rathas** (chariots) at Mahabalipuram and many bas-reliefs on them.

Bhakti, centring around the worship of specific deities, began to spread fast in the south through the brahmana settlements and temple centres where the exposition of the **epics** and the **Puranas** was institutionalized by means of munificent landgrants. Thus **Bhakti** was popularised among the common people. It is to be noted that the way in which the Brahmanas transformed the earlier religious forms into temple-centred theistic culture in the north was repeated in the south also.

39.4 BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN SOUTH INDIA

The final form of theistic **Bhakti** was largely the result of the influence of the Tamil devotionalism. This devotionalism was a product of the fusion between ecstatic local tribal cults (e.g. **Velan Veriyadal**) and northern theistic schools. This cross fertilization started at Tiruppati and Kalahasti, which then constituted the northern door of the Tamil country. Then it developed around Kanchipuram, the Pallava capital and soon reached the region of Madurai, the Pandyan capital. The **Tiru Murugu Arruppada**i, a famous devotional work on Muruga, the local tribal god who was syncretised with Skanda in this work, is the earliest example of this cross fertilization.

Soon this Tamil devotionalism developed into a great movement when it was adapted to the two theistic cults, Saivism and Vaishnavism. Then Tamil **Bhakti** movement was characterized not only by intense ecstatic piety for the deity, but also an aggressive militancy against the heterodox cults which were growing in popularity among the people with royal support.

This movement was spearheaded in the sixth century A.D. by gifted poet-saints who traversed the country many times with great missionary zeal. All their way they sang their hymns, danced and debated with the heterodox cults. Among these hymnal poet-saints the Saiva saints are called Nayanmar and the Vaishnava saints as Alvars.

This great wave of religious enthusiasm attained its peak in the early seventh century and its triumph was largely achieved in the two centuries that followed. The hymns of the saints of this period are marked by an outspoken hatred against the Buddhists and the Jains. As a result, public debates, competition in the performance of miracles and tests of the truth of their doctrines by means of ordeal became the order of the day.

There were other reasons for the success and popularity of these hymnal saints. Unlike the Brahmanas who propagated Hinduism through esoteric theories and the use of Sanskrit, the hymnal saints sang in easily understood forms using only the popular language, Tamil. Their **Bhakti** was not a reverence for a transcendent deity, but ecstatic love for an imminent one. Being unable to stand before the force of this **Bhakti** wave which also attracted royal support, Jainism and Buddhism had to retreat from the South.

39.5 PROTEST AND REFORM IN THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT OF THE SOUTH AND LATER TRANSFORMATION OF THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

Whereas the Brahmanas were obsessed with caste regulations, the Bhakti movement not only ignored caste but also included men and women of all castes. Among the Nayanmar Karaikkal, Ammai was a woman and Nandanar was a member of the depressed class. Among the Alvars, Andal was a woman and Tiruppan was a hymnist from a "low caste". Thus the whole movement carried elements of protest and reform. However, it soon became part of the establishment, lost its early character and got engulfed by brahmanical orthodoxy.

The **Bhakti** movement ran parallel to the growth and consolidation of early medieval monarchies, first under the Pallavas and then under the cholas, Pandyas and the Cheras. Many rock temples were cut and structural temples were built for Siva and Vishnu throughout the Tamil land by almost all the reigning monarchs.

These temples were endowed with vast landed property, often tax-free. Extensive areas of land were donated to the Brahmanas as is evident from the thousands of donative inscriptions on the walls of the south Indian temples. A prince-priest axis soon emerged. The monarchs fervently welcomed the rich temple-centered **bhakti** (or unflinching loyalty) as it suited the monarchical ideology. The Brahmanas welcomed this as it enabled Brahmanism, with its institutional base in the temple-centred agrarian settlements, to emerge as the most dynamic force in south India.

Everywhere the local temple was the nucleus of religious life and a new social formation. In these temples the two arms of the brahmanical religion — the ritualistic Vedic cult and the theistic devotional cult — could meet. The temple-centred **Bhakti** enabled the all-embracing caste system to attract all the original tribes of south India within its fold and place them in the hierarchical caste order. This order fixed the ritual and social status of the tribes with the Brahmana as the fixed point of reference. The ideology of **Bhakti** could bring together kings, priests and the common people within a network of understandable social relations.

With the increasing patronage of kings and landed magnates, the **Bhakti** movement soon became part of the establishment. Thus all trances of dissent, protest and reform were obliterated in the tenth century A.D. The Alvars and the Nayanmars do not appear any more. Their place was taken by Vaishnava acharyas, all of whom were Brahmanas or the Saivite santanacharyas who all came from the rich landed Vellala caste.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Discuss in about five lines the reasons for royal support to temples.

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- 2) In what ways did the Bhakti Movement in the South differ from Brahmanism. Answer in about 10 lines.

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39.6 EMERGENCE OF TANTRISM

The religious practices which originated in the most primitive fertility rites of the non-Aryan tribal circles later came to be known as Tantrism. It not only infiltrated into the other 'civilized' cults (Jainism, Buddhism, Saivism, Vaishnavism etc.) but also emerged as a challenge and reaction to these cults as all of them had developed vested interests and had become parts of the establishment by the early medieval period. The established forms of religion modified tantrism and attempted to sublimate it through mystical interpretations and symbols. So, to the modern educated people, the core of Tantrism means essentially orgiastic rites involving the use of five **makaras** : **matsya** (fish) , **mamsa** (meat), **madya** (liquor), **maithuna** (sex) and **mudra** (physical gestures).

39.6.1 Some Main Features of Tantrism

There always existed a marginal population to whom sorcery, fertility rites and secret tribal cults seemed essential. People who felt dissatisfied with official 'civilized' religion continued to learn and adapt these secret rites through the ages.

In the Tantric practices of the early medieval period we can see three important features, all of them interconnected. They are: a higher status given to women, sexual rituals, and the presence of many female deities.

The causes for all these have to be traced to the tribal fertility rites. Women clearly enjoyed a higher status in all the tribal belts. Since in the Sanskrit texts they were bracketed with the sudras, it became necessary for them to raise their traditional ritual status by means of Tantric initiations.

Similarly, among the primitive people in India and outside, sexual rites formed an important part of their religious rites. It was believed by the tribals that such rites promoted the fertility of the earth.

The reason for the importance of female deities in Tantrism is that in all the tribal belts the cult of the mother goddesses was widely prevalent. These aboriginal goddesses entered into Brahmanism as Shakti, Buddhism as Tara and Jainism as many Yakshinis. The Gaudavah, a Prakrit text of the early medieval period associates Kali and Parvati with such tribals as the Kols and the Sabaras. Shakti is known as Matangi (a goddess of Matanga tribes and Candali a goddess of the Candalas). At the end of the Gupta period many tribal goddesses were absorbed into the higher cults, together with many magical rites, religious sexuality and a new form of animal sacrifice. All these increased in importance throughout the early medieval period. Tantrism emerged as a religious factor in the sixth century A.D. and became a strong force by the ninth century.

Despite the fact that Tantrism lost much of its original character by the early medieval period and that it received patronage from kings, officials and higher classes who Sanskritised it, Tantrism continued to be a challenge to organized and officially patronized major religions like Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism.

The priests of Tantrism challenged the exclusive initiatory rites of the brahmanas. If brahmanas claimed superiority due to their Vedic rituals, the tribal priests claimed magical powers through their esoteric rituals and sexo-yogic practices. Thus Tantrism served an important social purpose by generally providing for the initiation of lower castes and women, who were held to be of inferior status by the brahmanical system.

The Tantric priests claimed mastery over a number of rituals, occult practices and herbal remedies not only to cure snake bites, insect bites and so on, but also to ward off the evil effects caused by ghosts and planets. Thus the early medieval Tantric priest acted as a priest, physician, astrologer and shaman.

39.6.2 Tantrism and the Heterodox Religions

It was noted that the most primitive fertility rites reappeared sublimated in form, as Tantrism and penetrated Buddhism, Jainism and the Brahmana theology.

Makkhali Gosala, a contemporary of the Buddha and Mahavira, not only went naked but is said to have drunk and practiced orgiastic sexual rites, which doubtless originated in the primitive cults.

Early Buddhism and Jainism tried their best to check the infiltration of these Tantric practices into their cults. In the earliest phase of their history Buddhism and Jainism launched a systematic campaign against the cult of image worship, rituals and sacrifices as destructive of all morals. They stressed on the purification of soul for the attainment of **nirvana** or salvation.

Mahayanism, a major development of Buddhism adopted image worship during the Kushana period. Mahayanism is said to have developed into Mantrayanism or Vajrayanism in the Andhra region by adopting Tantric practices. Many Tantric texts emerged since the third century A.D. from Andhra and Kalinga and spread to Vanga and Magadha where Nalanda developed as a centre of Tantric study in the reign of the Palas. **Sri Guhyasamaja Tantra** was written probably in the 3rd century A.D. The Vajrayana Tantric literature is so vast that only a nominal catalogue of its works found in Tibetan language comprises three high volumes.

Idol worship and rituals appeared in Jainism in the early centuries of the Christian era. Samantabhadra (third century A.D.) in his **Paumacariya** glorified temple worship and rituals. Jaina, **Puranas** and other literature emphasised that the devotees of Adinatha could get victory over enemies and ward off diseases and evil spirits.

In the early medieval age Tantrism infiltrated into Jainism on a significant scale as it did into other religions. As a result, Jainism developed a pantheon of Yakshas and Yakshis (the attendant demi-gods and goddesses of the Tirthankaras) together with a number of **mantras** (magical formulae) to propitiate them. Many Jaina Tantric texts, which incorporated elements of magic and miracle, glorified the cult of Yakshis like Padmavati Ambika, Siddhayika and Jvalamalini. These Yakshis were believed to bestow superhuman powers on their devotees. The Yapaniya sect of the Jainas was the foremost in propagating Tantric mode of worship in early medieval Karnataka.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss the main features of Tantrism in about 10 lines.

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- 2) Discuss the relationship of Tantrism with other heterodox religions. Answer in 10 lines.

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39.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit you have seen how Brahmanism had to accept the growing importance of new gods and assimilated many other popular deities. The **Bhakti** cult emerged out of the various religious cults and became very strong in South India. It ignored caste regulations and women had a higher status in **Bhakti** movement when compared to Brahmanism. The numbers of female deities also increased – particularly in Tantrism. The practices of Tantrism infiltrated into other religions.

39.8 KEY WORDS

Alvars	:	the Vaishnava bhakti saints of early medieval Tamil Country (6th–9th century). Their tradi-number was 12.
Bhagavata	:	a devotee of Vasudeva–Krishna.
Brahmanism	:	a Syncretising religion under the brahmin leadership. Always holding the supremacy of the Vedic rituals in theory, it adapted bhakti, many tribal gods and tribal rituals in practices.
Heterodox Cults	:	Jainism, Buddhism and Ajivikism which first challenged Vedic rituals and then all Brahmanism.
Muruga	:	a tribal god of the early Tamils, syncretised around 3rd–4th centuries A.D. by Brahmanism with Skanda–Kartikaya.
Nayanmar	:	the Saiva bhakti saints of early medieval Tamil country, sixty-three in number. A few of the them were great hymnal poets.
Nirvana	:	liberation of the soul as conceived by the heterodox cults.
Pasupatas	:	the devotees of Siva or Pasupati. Their cult originated in the North and developed special features.
Saivism	:	a general term to denote any cult which conceived Siva as the greatest God. Saivism has many local varieties.
Tantrism	:	a religion originating in the primitive fertility rites of the non-Aryan tribal circles. Later adapted and mystified by the civilized cults.
Vaishnavism	:	a general term to denote any cult with Vishnu as the greatest God. It has many local varieties.
Velan Veriyadal	:	a primitive orgiastic-ecstatic cult of the ancient Tamil tribals centring on Muruga.
Yajna	:	the complex rituals, including expensive animal sacrifices, of the later Vedic times.

39.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sub-sec. 39.2.3
- 2) See Sections 39.3 and 39.4

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sub-sec. 39.6.1
- 2) See Sub-sec. 39.6.2

SOME USEFUL BOOKS FOR THIS BLOCK

R.S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*

Romila Thapar, *History of India V.I.*