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Describe Salient Features of Bhakti Schools of Vaishnavism and Saivism  
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**Student**

Shruti Satsangi

**Mentor**

Dr. Anubhooti Verma

# Describe Salient Features of Bhakti Schools of Vaishnavism and Shaivism

## Introduction

Based on the holy scriptures of Hinduism, varied schools of philosophy have arisen that interpret the main scriptures of Hinduism in different ways. In this paper, we explore the many Bhakti Schools that have arisen referencing the scriptures of Vedanta. These schools divide into two main categories – Vaishnavism and Shaivism.

All Bhakti schools of philosophy seek to find the relation between Jivatman (Soul) and Brahma. The basic tenets followed are similar, in that, Brahma is supreme and purest Consciousness, the source of all energy in the universe. Bhakti yoga is considered a superior path to liberation from Karma Yoga and Jnana Yoga but each differs in its devotional practices. The Atman or soul is subject to the cycle of birth and death, and deliverance from this cycle is true moksha.

The scriptures that are usually consulted in the development of these varied schools of philosophy are:

- 1) Vedanta – including Upanishads
- 2) Brahma Sutras
- 3) Bhagavad Gita

These are the scriptures that have been key to the development of the Bhakti Schools of Vaishnavism.

Shaivism's origins may be traced to the conception of Rudra in the RigVeda. The Shvetashvatara Upanishad of the Yajurveda is also a foundational text of the philosophy of Shaivism and mentions terms such as Rudra, Shiva and Maheshwaram. Shaivism also considers both the Vedas and the Agama texts as important sources of theology. Historically the Shiva Sutras and the ensuing school of Kashmir Shaivism are a Tantric or Agamic tradition. The Tantrics saw themselves as independent of the Vedic mainstream schools of thought and practice, and as beyond the rules that had been put in place by them.

In order to elucidate the salient features of all the bhakti schools in a clear way, I have compiled the information on each school of Vaishnavism and Shaivism across the categories of their philosophy, worship practices, and other key features, in the table on the following page.

	Vaishnavism						Shaivism	
philosophy	Advait	Vishisht Advait	Shuddha Advait	Dvait	Dvait Advait	Achintya Bheda Abheda	Kashmir Shaivism	Virsaivism
Scriptural Authority	1) Vedanta – including Upanishads 2) Brahma Sutras 3) Bhagavad Gita	1) Vedanta – including Upanishads 2) Brahma Sutras 3) Bhagavad Gita 4) Brahma Sutra Bhasya	1) Vedanta – including Upanishads 2) Brahma Sutras 3) Bhagavad Gita 4) Srimad Bhagvat purana	1) Vedanta – including Upanishads 2) Brahma Sutras 3) Bhagavad Gita	1) Vedanta – including Upanishads 2) Brahma Sutras 3) Bhagavad Gita	1) Vedanta – including Upanishads 2) Brahma Sutras 3) Bhagavad Gita	1) Vedas (esp. Rigveda) 2) Agamas 3) Shvestashvatara Upanishad (Yujurveda)Vedas 4) Shiva Sutras (Vasugupta)	1) Vedas (esp. Rigveda) 2) Agamas 3) Shvestashvatara Upanishad (Yujurveda) 4) Vachanas of Basavanna
Founder/Main Proponent	Adishankaracharya	Ramanujacharya	Vallabhacharya	Madhavacharya	Nimbarka	Chaitanya Mahaprabhu	Vasugupta	Basavanna
Nirgun/Sagun	Nirgun	Sagun	Sagun	Sagun	Sagun	Sagun	Nirgun	Sagun
Brahman	Brahma is the ultimate reality destitute of qualities (nirgun)	Brahma is the unified whole, but with ttributes (sagun) It is the only reality but qualified. So it is vishisht (qualified with attnbutes like gyana, plurality (matter and soul), sentient (ability to feel and sense) and insentient modes.	Brahma, his creation and Atman are same There is no dualism between a real Brahma and his world- therefore it is a “pure” non-dualism.	Brahma and Atman are both consciousness but two different entities. Knowledge is relative not absolute.	Brahma is highest reality and cause of creation (advait).	Brahma is simultaneously one with and different from his creation. Supreme is infinite and always above and beyond the material manifestation.	Brahma is the one Consciousness that underlies the Universe. God as the Absolute, beyond any specific form; the un-manifest (nirgun)	Brahma is the one Consciousness that underlies the Universe.
God/Supreme Deity	Vishnu	Vishnu	Vishnu	Vishnu	Vishnu	Vishnu	Shiva	Shiva
Samradayay		Shree	Rudra	Brahma	Sanakadik		Tantric/Agamic	
Monastic Life (only added No, where it is not recommended)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

	Vaishnavism						Shaivism	
Key Tenets and Salvation			<p>All possessions and relations are the Lord's. What happens is the Lord's Will.</p> <p>Meeting God is only through pushti-bhakti. Through pushti bhakti one can achieve siddha bhakti - a means and ends in itself.</p>			<p>In the <b>offensive</b> stage one may still desire all kinds of material happiness</p> <p>In the <b>clearing</b> stage one becomes clear of all material contamination.</p> <p>In the <b>transcendental</b> stage, one attains the most coveted position--the stage of loving God.</p>		<p>Acceptance of the shat-sthalas, a progressive six-stage path of devotion and surrender, as the best means of achieving union with Shiva.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Bhakta-sthala (devotion),</li> <li>2. Mahesa-sthala (selfless service),</li> <li>3. Prasadi-sthala (earnestly seeking Shiva's grace),</li> <li>4. Pranalingi-sthala (experience of all as Shiva), and</li> <li>5. Sarana-sthala (egoless refuge in Shiva), that culminates in</li> <li>6. Aikya-sthala (oneness with Shiva).</li> </ol>
World/Maya	<p>Maya is illusory, Asatya and Ignorance causes suffering.</p> <p>Knowing this gives liberation</p>	<p>The qualities of the world are also Brahma's (Ishwara) qualities.</p> <p>World (Achit) and Souls (Chit) make up the 'body' of Brahma.</p>	<p>World is of the essence of God and hence not separate from Brahman. Perception of difference is an illusion.</p>	<p>Knowledge is relative not absolute. Maya is transient.</p>	<p>Jagat or Achit is prkrit, aprakrit(celestial) and Kala. (Dwait)</p>		<p>Cit - consciousness - is the one reality. Matter is not separated from consciousness, but rather identical to it. There is no gap between God and the world. The world is not an illusion (as in Shuddha Advaita Vedanta), rather the perception of duality is the illusion.</p>	<p>During the process of creation, Siva remains immutable while his Shakti issues forth and manifests the phenomenal world. Shakti, also called, devi or mulaprakriti, is an inseparable aspect of Siva. During creation it undergoes transformation and evolution to manifest the will of Siva</p>

Soul/Jivatma/Atman	Atman and Brahma are same	Atman is the "body" with the "soul" being Brahma	Soul is in essence, the same as God	Brahma and Atman are both consciousness but two different entities.	Jiva or Chit- Individual soul has knowledge and is source of knowledge.	Atman is linked with Brahma but is NOT SAME. Atman doesn't share all qualities. Atman is only a separate part of Brahma. God and the individual soul are inconceivably and simultaneously one and different. This means that the Supreme and the jiva souls are the same in quality, being eternally spiritual, but always separate individually. The jivas are small and subject to being influenced by the material energy.	Human individual is nothing but God in a contracted (miniaturized) form. Man as an individual has all the qualities as the Absolute, though they are in a shrunken form and are ineffective. Humans have a limited degree of free will (svatantrya) based on their level of consciousness.	God and soul are inseparable, but their relationship becomes qualified by the activity of shakti. Lord Siva as the Supreme Lord and the self as its undistinguishable reality. Siva is linga and the individual jiva is anga. The relationship between the two is one of difference as well as no difference (bheda-abheda)
Path of Liberation	<p>Bhakti is keeping the mind steady in concentration at the feet of the Lord. It is gradually developed similar to the relationship of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ankola Seeds &amp; Tree</li> <li>• Magnet &amp; Needle</li> <li>• Chaste Woman &amp; Husband</li> <li>• Creeper &amp; Tree</li> <li>• River &amp; Ocean</li> </ul>	Surrender of soul by servitude to the Lord.	Strive for Grace of Thakurji	Bhakti is the route to salvation. Devotion with respect to God.	Prapatti is devotion and self surrender to Sri Krishna. This method contains elements of all the other means and is available to all men, women, classes and castes.	Bhakti, serving and devoting oneself single-mindedly to God, was the highest means to reach God	Differently described for the 4 different schools: Krama, Kula, Spanda, Pratyabhijna.	<p>Panchachara (The five fold conduct):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Daily worship of linga (lingachara)</li> <li>2. Performing ones vocational and familial duties (sadachara)</li> <li>3. Acknowledging Siva as the Supreme Lord and all the Jivas as equal and not different (Sivachara)</li> <li>4. Humility and respect for all creation (bhrityachara) and</li> <li>5. Serving the community with loyalty and responsibility (ganachara)</li> </ol>
God Worshipped As	panchayatana form of worship (simultaneous worship of Ganesh, Surya, Vishnu, Shiva, Devi)	Sriman Narayan	Srinathji, Thakurji	Vasudeva, Narayana, Bala-Gopal- Krishna as an avatar.	Sri Krishna, Shri Hari, Madhav, Gopal, Radha with Krishna	Krishna with Radha.	Shiva	Shiva

Devotional Practices			pushtibhakti Raag & Taal Bhog Vastra & Shringar		Five methods of attaining Salvation as i) karma ( ritual action) ii) vidya ( knowledge) iii) dhyana ( meditation) iv) prapatti ( surrender to Lord) v) gurupasatti ( surrender to Guru).	pure devotion with pure love to krishna is given more stress. Love & Service(Fifth Purushartha)	Krama, Kula, Spanda, pratyabhijna schools with different practices	1. Obedience to guru 2. Worship of linga 3. Reverence for the jangama 4. Smearing of the sacred ashes 5. Wearing the holy beads (rudraksha) 6. Drinking the water used in the cleaning of the linga or the feet of guru or jangama 7. Offering food to the deity, or guru or jangama 8. Recitation of the Siva mantra (om namah sivaya)
Mantra/Symbol			Brahma Sambandha		Revelation of Shabda (spiritual Name) is the direct communication of knowledge from the Absolute		trident (trishula), symbol of Shiva, represents the three energies viz. Para, Para-Apara and Apara Shakti	Om namah sivaya, Linga, Rudraksh, Isthalinga, Vibhuti
Initiation			Receive mantra and idol of Srinathji, child form of Sri Krishna					5 metal pots filled with water and betel leaves, linked together and tied to the main participants of the ritual by a thread. The pattadevaru Jangamas sit on a throne and wear gold, whereas the ascetic Jangamas sit on the skin of a wild tiger.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we can see that there are many common features and practices in the Bhakti schools of Vaishnavism and Shaivism.

Within Vaishnavism, the main point of difference is amongst the formulation of Brahma, Maya/World and Jivatma, while in Shaivism, the points of difference are around the devotional practices – Nirgun or Sagun Bhakti.

While the schools have differences, the common thread is their regard for the path of devotion or Bhakti Marg above all else.

These schools set the foundation for the emergence of the Sant Mat movement, starting with the advent of Kabir Sahab in 1440, which preached the highest form of devotion in the practice of Surat Shabd Yoga. The additional feature of a Guru or Master to guide spiritual progress was also emphasized in Sant Mat tradition.

Through the study of the Bhakti Schools of both Vaishnavism and Shaivism, we can see what could be the main features of a universal religious philosophy.

## References

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