1. INTRODUCTION

The Bhakti Movement that can be traced in Medieval India since 800AD is a panorama of the ways in which one can worship their hope of living i.e. their idea of God. These ways formed many rites and rituals in various religions like Hindu, Islam, and Sikhs. The word Bhakti means to serve, honor, love and adore. Bhakti therefore is an attachment and never ending devotion to God. Bhakti originated in India at many places simultaneously. It spread through North and South India over the period of time of 800 AD to 1700 AD. Followers of Islam followed it as Sufi and followers of Hinduism followed it as Vaishnava Bhakti and Shaiva Bhakti. In case of these Bhaktis the Human incarnations of Vishnu and Shiva were given to Bhaktas as the direct objects of their devotion. Therefore at the early phase of Bhakti cult formation can be found where there are mainly two types of followers of God, i.e. followers of Vishnu and followers of Shiva. But irrespective of any divisions in it, this construct was impermeable to lower strata of society consisting of Shudras and untouchables as well as to the women. For them the path of bhakti was only attainable through unquestioned self surrender.

Towards twelfth-thirteenth century Bhakti came to surface as a movement because of its distinct literature and a steady revolution brought to front a radical form of Bhakti which we today know as Bhakti Movement. It declared 'Spiritual love' as the way to worship bhakta's personal God. Personal God here was neither Vishnu nor Shiva but one and only God of universe who was at once transcendent -Nirguna and immanent -Saguna. The quest of knowing who God is? took a halt here and the concept of everyone’s own God took existence. Celibacy was no more required for a devotee; instead complete participation in life with the spirit of detachment was appreciated.

Bhakti as a vedic concept has other connotations. According to it the 'Moksha', means freedom from rebirth can be achieved only by following Jnyana (Knowledge about world and role of our existence in it), Karma (performing duties of the Varna in which one is born) and Bhakti (passionate love for devine). Among these the only way left for shudras and untouchables was Bhakti due to their lack of knowing Sanskrit which was the dominant language used for writing Vedic texts required for Jnyana and Karma. As personal devotion was central to the relation between bhakta and God, the ritual observance advocated by Brahmin priesthood was considered
unnecessary and the traditional system of society with Brahmins at its head was criticized and subverted. Many Saint-poets of this movement are from supposedly low caste lineage who encouraged masses of people to actively form their own tradition of Bhakti. This caused a revolution in literary forms of Bhakti. A variety of Bhakti poets from all over India gave birth to various new forms of commoner's literature in commoner's languages. This literature consists of Abhangas, Ovi, Dohas, Vakyas etc. Because of this literal creation the hierarchy in religious ideologies was turned upside down.

One more distinct feature of Bhakti movement is that the movement is dominated by Women unlike other movements where men are seen to be in leading position. Infact Bhakti movement is known for women's contribution in it. Women and shudras both situated at the bottom of traditional hierarchical Varna system were looked at as truly humiliated devotees of the divine. Along with the socio religious hierarchy, it also reversed the normal gender roles of men and women in the society. In contradiction to other major societal revolutions, Bhakti movement empowered women with freedom to express their thoughts through religious as well as day to day life imagery in their own language. Nonetheless women had to struggle their way through earlier phase of movement that was dominated by males. To get accepted into bhakti stream as equal to their contemporaries they had to prove their utter spiritual devotion as well as their unique and outstanding poetic style. Even after proving their capabilities women bhaktas were reluctantlty accepted in the ranks of Bhakti. The imagery of bhakti poetry written by women is expressed in a very simple and superfluous language. Their imagery is easy to understand for commoners and it is occupied with images from day to day life. It depicts the women's situation during that time as a socially oppressed element. They express the worries faced by them at home, their household, relations with in-laws, unconcerned husbands, their status as married women etc. through their poems. Many examples are found of women bhaktas rejecting traditional role of women and societal restrictions by altogether leaving their families behind and wandering with cults of saint-poets. A few of them like Meera Bai formed their own communities. After abandoning house their major focus used to be the devotion and worship of their beloved spiritual husband (God).

Even male bhaktas took on female voice to express their love towards the divine and this female voice calls her beloved God to rescue her soul from societal structures. Such male poets were
perceived as spokesperson for the whole Bhakti movement. On the other hand there were saint-poets who by staying within the confines of household focused on the development of their souls. These poets gave a critical edge to traditions followed in Bhakti movement by constantly searching for the ultimate truth. Akkamahadevi, a southern bhakta and devotee of Shiva, Meera Bai, a Rajput princess and devotee of Lord Krishna left their houses in search of their Gods. Their thirst of divine knowledge and intellect led to revolutions in various areas they went through at small scale. On the other side, saints like Janabai and Bahinabai, devotees of Lord Vithoba, remained inside the confines of their household and contributed in the enlightening literature of Bhakti. Their verses consist of description of women’s duties towards house and husband.

They depict how god helps them in their daily chores stating that their devotion is the source of their energy. Akkamahadevi in her poetry experiments with the strength of her intellect and measures the depth to which her mind can go near divine source. She comes to the conclusion that the most humanistic approach to find the God lies in pure and selfless love instead of knowledged and disciplined search of divine.

There is a unique characteristic of Bhakti literature that highlights the patriarchal constraint on male bhaktas and their way of expressing devotion to Gods/Godesses. While worshiping Lord Krishna Meera Bai says:

\[
\text{I am mad with love}
\]
\[
\text{And no one understands my plight.}
\]
\[
\text{Only the wounded}
\]
\[
\text{Understand the agonies of the wounded,}
\]
\[
\text{When the fire rages in the heart.}
\]
\[
\text{Only the jeweler knows the value of the jewel,}
\]
\[
\text{Not the one who lets it go.}
\]
\[
\text{In pain I wander from door to door,}
\]
\[
\text{But could not find a doctor.}
\]
\[
\text{Says Mira: Harken, my Master,}
\]
\[
\text{Mira’s pain will subside}
\]
\[
\text{When Shyam comes as the doctor.}
\]
Whereas while describing Vitthala Saint Dnyaneshwara says:

Awachita parimalu, Zulkala alumalu
Me hru Gopalu aala ge maye
Chacharati chacharati baher nighale
Thakachi me thele kay karu
Bodhuni thele mana tawa jale aan
Sokoni ghetale prana maze ga maye

Baap Rakhumadevi varu Vitthala sukhacha
Tene kaya mana wacha vedhiyele 16

Here one comes across one contradiction about portrayal of Gods and Goddesses in the poems of saguna saints. Female bhaktas portrayed Gods as their lovers or husbands whereas male bhaktas portray Gods/Goddesses as their mothers. Mirabai calls Krishna her husband whereas saint Dnyeneshwar calls Vitthala as Vithu Mauli (Vitthala, my mother) or Maye (mother). Similar portrayal of Vitthala is found in the compositions of Saint Tukaram 17. These and many such portrayals show influence of dominance of patriarchal norms on the society which is subconsciously expressed through Bhakti literature.

Bhakti movement that started during the time of Delhi Sultanate flourished in early 12th century under observation of Ramanujacharya 18 who was then persecuted by Chola King for his efforts of eradicating verna distinction and giving brahminical knowledge to Shudras. Despite this the saint poets like Nimbarka 19, Chaitanya 20, Kabir 21 came to existence. As the objective of Bhakti movement was reformation of Hinduism in lower elements of society, along with this, it aimed at bridging the gap between Hinduism and Islam i.e. Hindus and Muslims.

At the highest peak of Bhakti and Sufism 22, Guru Nanak 23 ignited the force of social change in Punjab through his simple, intense and guided messages that formed the structure of Sikhism 24. He injected in it a socio-religious structure based on universal brotherhood, social justice and
humanity. His thoughts on this structure resemble a lot to the concept of Dharma given in Vedic texts.

Other saint poets differed from Nanak on the basis of individuality of their verses. Compared to the verses of women bhaktas, men saint poets focused on the society. While women’s poetry focused on their God as husband or lover, men’s poetry was constructing ideology that can develop societal structures. Saint Ramdas’ verses evoke youngsters of Maharashtra to increase their physical strength through exercise and volunteer themselves in armed forces to protect citizens from Islamic invasions. His ‘Manache Shlok’ meaning Verses of Mind contain 205 verses to train mind for all-round development of human being. Poems of saint Tukaram advice commoners about the behavior to be maintained in the family and society. St. Dnyaneshwar who wrote Dnyaneshwary at the age of 14 years wrote in it about Karmayoga \(^{25}\) i.e. importance of devotion towards one’s duties and its contribution in building a healthy society. Dnyaneshwary is the compilation of verses of ‘Bhagwad Gita’ \(^{26}\) in Prakrit Marathi Language.

Saint Namdev, Raidas, Tulsidas, Dhanna, Surdas and many such saint poets through their verses created awareness in society about duties of individuals as citizens, rulers, housemen-women and as human beings. One important figure of this movement, Saint Kabir, who through his own existence blurred the boundaries between Hinduism and Islam. He tried to impose the unity of all Gods through his verses as well as his behavior and speech. It becomes evident in his poetry that the God, creator of everything is one entity and is worshipped in every religion in different forms. His verses also give instructions to common masses on how to behave in society and how to react to other’s actions. The instructions given in the poetry by male saints are relevant in today’s society also. They forcefully put forth the concept of (NIRGUNA) almighty, who created the world and who does not have any form, structure or physical entity but is present in various religions under various guises. They emphasized on the primary and all inclusive principles of unity, dutifulness and peace mentioned in majority of religious texts. Kabir proclaims that “Allah and Ram were names of one and the same God who is found neither in temple nor in Mosque, neither in Banaras nor in Mecca, but only in the heart of its true devotee.

\[\text{Jaya Manala Dev To Pujitahe}\]

\[\text{Pari Dev Shodhuni Koni Na Pahe}\]
In this verse saint Ramdas highlights the universal appeal of Bhakti. He says that one should worship their personal God because the defined concept of God can never be found in reality. As there are innumerable Gods in the world, the important one is the one whom the bhakta trusts.

This verse highlights the importance of cognitive thinking for the welfare of society as a whole. It says that a good humans mind must follow Bhakti in order to gain blessings of Almighty. And to do that one must forfeit all the thoughts and actions that are harmful for society and accept all that is good for society.

As the Bhakti movement initiated due to the rejection of lower caste in the institutionalized religious practices the language of the verses and other new forms of literature were also different from that of institutionalized religious literature. As this writing expressed the devotion of lower caste bhaktas, it was written in the regional language instead of complicatedly written Vedas in Sanskrit language, they used their day to day life imagery in the writings in their mother tongue. Akkamahadevi and Basava wrote in Kannada language where as Meerabai wrote in Brij. Tulsidas wrote in Hindi and Tukaram, Ramdas, Janabai, Namdev and Dnyaneshwar used Marathi language to express their devotion.

Along with the use of regional languages the development in forms of writing took place. In Maharashtra formation of Abhanga, Ovi, shlokas, kirtana, bharud took place where as Southern Indian literature developed literary forms like Wacanas, Wakyas. North Indian literature created Doha, Chaupai etc. A few of these like kirtana were used for revolutionizing common masses and educating them about important issues like major political movements, important issues in royal courts, to explain scientific reasons behind any tradition, to
induce moral value education etc. These forms of literature have united peoples against many anti-social movements.

Initially the preaching in Bhakti movement took place through hymns and traditional way of story-telling by southerner saints usually called acharyas. Shankaracharya, Madhvacharya and Ramanujacharya, great scholars of Sanskrit wrote their works in Sanskrit but preached the commoners in their common tongues. Saint Ramanand Paramhans carried the movement to North and preached his principles in Hindi further the concept was divided in two conditions, Nirguna and Saguna. Nirguna saints who believe in God without any physical form consists of Kabir, Nanak, Dadu, Raidas and Sagana saints for whom there god was having definite form comprised of Vallabhacharya, Tulasidas, Mirabai, Surdas. Saguna Saints mainly believed in two forms of God. The one who believed in Lord Shiva were called Shaivas and one who believed in Lord Vishnu were known as Vaishnavas. Mirabai is a vaishnav poet whereas Akkamahadevi is Shaivait. Nirguna bhakti saints who believes in oneness of God across the boundaries of religion, region, language and gender have firm faith in unity of God, Immortal, non-destructible, omnipresent entity whereas Kabir preached people to perform continuous enchantment of Ram naam. He believed that enchanting name of God saves devotees from the cycle of birth and death and other worldly difficulties.

Due to generations of tortured living in the shadows of brahmin Supremity, when Islamic Invaders started building the empire in India, the shudras (lower caste) found an option other than traditional Verna system. They were drawn to the principle of equality in Islamic conduct of living. Because of Shudra population getting converted to Islam, Hinduism was threatened in the aspect of population. Bhakti movement was the response of threatened Hinduism to the monolithic Islam. In Bhakti movement, the lower caste became heroes of masses through saint tradition. Humiliation was considered as the merit for Bhakti movement as the most humiliated was considered to be closer to the God than others. This gave a higher place to shudras in societal system dominated by other castes. Therefore Bhakti movement can be called an alternate way of living for shudras in the political fight of Hindu kings and Islamic invaders. Formation of mythical stories around the cult structure helped Hinduism to hold on to unity of Hindu masses under Islamic and Mughal attacks.
This trend continues even today. Throughout the history of rules of Turki, Afgani, Islamic, Mughal and then British invaders, Bhakti and Religion have tied whole nation together irrespective of diversity within them. Tradition of Sarvajanik Ganeshotsav was initiated by Tilak to unite common masses against the British rulers. It still continues to do the same in todays age of advanced technology and telecommunication. The traditions like Ganeshotsav, Raas, Navratrotsav that helped unite masses for rebellion against invaders do the same in contemporary times too.

After a few decades of Independence of India started emergence of trends of Human Bhaktas who declare themselves as incarnations of Almighty and Bhaktas who claim to have direct connections or communication to Gods being their supreme devotees. These self-proclaimed Gods built their cults under bhakti tradition and encouraged masses to put faith in them. Cults like Asharam Bapu, Radhe Ma, ISKON, Prajapita Bramhakumari, Patanjali, Wamanrao Pai, Aniruddha Bapu, Narendra Maharaj and many more are formed which promise commoners the guidance in their lives to face difficulties and achieve liberation and preaches them about ways to lead good life. A few of them work on genuine principles whereas other few which were genuine at the initial stages have recently developed commercial attitude towards whole Bhakta and God relationship. The contribution of social media in this issue is remarkable in various ways. The inputs given by media have revealed the falsities of a few cults and the malpractices taking place in the systems formed by them.

Under the Bhakti tradition there is a variety of cultures which developed from time to time and eloped with time. It started form simple concept of belief, travelled through various social, political, psychological, philosophical and linguistic buildups and is still continued in the era of advancement of science, adapting various connotations and practices while removing outdated and falsified practices. It still runs its threads through daily lives of commoners as well as of forming forces of its current systems.

Bhati movement that started as a movement with the intention of eradicating the differences and bringing to the front humanity in various religions and their followers also carries with it hidden strand of women liberation and empowerment. It not only removes bitterness between followers of religions but also from the domestic situations of the women. A tradition of female bhakta was formed and those bhaktas were treated with same rather more courtesy and respect as male
bhaktas. The literature formed during this movement has come from daily lives of commoners. The metaphors and examples given in the poetry of bhaktas belonged to the non-dominant language. They wrote their hearts out as individuals not as the social emancipators. Patriarchal dominance in social as well as domestic lives of women was challenged by poets like Mirabai, Bahinabai, the way lingual dominance of Sanskrit language was challenged by regional languages. In fact the aesthetic beauty of female voice in Bhakti literature was such that male bhaktas often took on female voice to express their devotion to God. Being very simple in the form and expression, masculinity and scholarship were seen as obstacles to bhakti.

By tracing the deep down rooted system and practices of Bhakti even today, one can come to the conclusion that, Bhakti has not only emerged in late eighth century and eloped in seventeenth century. It has much more widened periphery to it which merges with modern life psychology, sociology and politics. Bhakti tradition had been there before it was traced in eighth century and is still going on in commoner's lives today. With all its positive aspects like liberation of mind, enrichment of knowledge, self realization the concept of Bhakti is a force that binds human being to his/her karma to achieve the ultimate state of moksha in literal as well as other senses.