

CRITIQUE OF THE INDIAN BHAKTI MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The pieces in this collection offer a sense of what such a readiness entails, even if, in terms of my personal preoccupations, some show more willingness to listen than to suspect, and others to suspect than to listen. In contrast, most Indian intellectuals and their Western counterparts have, by and large, lost any capacity to listen. Where they offer any opposite signal, it is only by separating the small tradition from the Great. To the Indian people, on the other hand, that little tradition with which bhakti is linked is a way of life. It is a continuing tradition. They simply listen to it while the intelligentsia just suspect it. I hope that this critical introduction and the articles from which it draws its argument will be regarded as a beginning towards bridging that gap. If a genuine, conscious rising towards the achievement of community goals is to include the people, it is unlikely to emerge through the transplanting of symbols of foreign or dead traditions. Symbols of freedom will have to be found from inside, by people who will bear the weight of revolutionary activity. These symbols, although similar to both sterilised intellectual abstractions and ritualised daily behaviour, cannot be rediscovered in any of these isolated contexts. That has always been the message of bhakti and therein lies its modernity.

KEYWORDS: *Bhakti, Intellectuals, Indian, Social, Tradition.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The article has two aims: to comprehend the contemporary significance of bhakti literature and to evaluate the present relevance of bhakti practice. These goals arise out of a larger concern about the future and relevance of tradition in a world undergoing rapid change, particularly the countries of the Third World. Specifically, the authors are at least tacitly concerned with the role of bhakti in the process of modernization (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Bhakti Saints Shared Many Ideas And Practices In Common. Their Fundamental Conviction Was At The Moment Of Need To Connect With God. They Placed Emphasis On Love Or Devotion As The Foundation Of The Connection With God.

The viewpoint of modernity and of tradition which emerges from these works is substantially different from those common in both the East and the West. In the Western literature on the subject, the two words tradition and modernity are regarded as a contradiction or a continuum. A more realistic observer may try to identify some particular features of a certain culture as modern proposing thus that they could be put to use to reduce and remove the other components which are seen as obstacles. These ideas derive from the experience of the West with its unique tradition. The rise of capitalism and scientific technology saw the whole of the old order come down. Elements of tradition, or world concepts and beliefs, were reinterpreted and transformed into a new system with which also developed a new institutional framework. Thinkers who saw and understood this fundamental break from the past were overwhelmed by it. Modern sociology has inherited these. It has gone further and universalized them as abstract concepts applicable to all civilizations, like in the case of Talcott Parsons Pattern Variables. Men like Max Weber have to view the break from tradition as a distinct and particular process, as a rationalization of the past inside an artificially bisected concept of reason. Struck by its inevitability, they anticipated its development with grave misgivings. With the subsequent prevalence of intentional rationality and of a technocratic awareness, the sorrow of passing has been forgotten. With the fall of the colonial powers, interest in the modernization of Third World cultures has grown. For most Western academics it simply means a complete plan for a break from tradition similar to that experienced by the West. The most prevalent Western viewpoint nowadays advocates an instrumental exploitation of tradition for its own destruction. Technocratic plans include such issues in policies and attempt to use tradition to push people towards modernity. In India, for example, the West-oriented intellectuals share this desire for modernization. At the same time, they also have a somewhat different view on their tradition[1].

Western academics, many of them missionaries or colonial officials had begun studies of Indian culture long before the post-colonial technocratic viewpoint had emerged. They were intrigued by the intellectual abstractions of Hinduism and appalled by the social reality. They rejected the practice of rituals, superstition and social order and could not understand its relation to the philosophy they studied. These ideas, as well as those of post-colonial social science, had a particular impact on Indian intellectuals. First, as workers of the raj, they had to act as mediators of a foreign authority and explain it to the people and to themselves. Since the government was

determined to bring about major changes in the social order, to make it compatible with the interests of the metropolis, the subaltern intellectuals had to provide explanations for them, to explain and justify them.

To accomplish this and to suit the ruler's viewpoint on their tradition, they developed a theory of history. It depicted the social life of Vedic Aryans as pure, innocent and joyful and claimed for it a tolerant, all-inclusive, universalistic world-view. Such a world-view was provided as the cause of the subsequent widespread absorption of barbaric conduct which was attributed to the tribal people that were kidnapped and enslaved by the roaming Aryans. These practices included, human sacrifice, statecraft, icon worship and magic. The defeated tribes, it was said, were not murdered nor enslaved, but were humanely absorbed as lower castes. This concept allowed the subaltern intellectuals to be proud of their history and to propose major societal reforms at the same time. In the subsequent struggle for national independence and in the formation of the post-independence political system, this concept proved equally helpful[2].

These perspectives on tradition have had an impact on the understanding of bhakti movements. Indian and Western scholars have for a long time ignored bhakti. To them it is not a fundamental concept of Indian philosophy. They see bhakti as a form of devotion, especially intended and perfectly suited for practice by the lower classes. Only an elite capable of comprehending the complexities of Vedic philosophy can see the universalism of its message. That message, that the world is an illusion and that truth lies in the oneness of the particular or the individual (atman) with the totality of all things is worthy of attention. It is debated, contested and evaluated in intellectually dry discussions. It refuses to identify any link with devotion, with the worship of humanized god[3].

Ironically, bhakti was explicitly a revolt against this dualistic viewpoint which had perpetuated the duality of existence of those involved in debating empty abstractions and others doing mindless rituals. Unaware of this, current intellectuals are prone to dismiss it as an aspect of the latter, just as some of them declare the irrelevance of abstract Indian philosophy as well for the goals of modernization. No longer stuck in the middle of foreign rulers and their own people, contemporary intellectuals in India may be proud or contemptuous of their history at whim and still claim the right to stand above the masses, to control them and to try to change what is to the average man still a living tradition[4].

Their goal is to demonstrate that Basavanna's critical revolutionary impulse should not be viewed as an accidental, isolated eruption of an extraordinary critical skill. It was, in reality, a unique moment in the ongoing dynamics of Indian culture. Only as an isolated event can it be compared to bhakti. The claims that they have a similar desire may be rejected and thus it alone can be shown to qualify as a revolutionary movement. Ishwaran focuses on its organized practice and on its concept of society. He believes that such structure alone generates significant advantages. It leads to lasting changes in the social order. From this he makes the conclusion that bhakti movements merely preserved the old system and made it acceptable while Basava's organized revolt established a permanent paradigm for worldwide replication. This is a great, functionalist argument. It travels from a result to the source and discovers it on criteria specified by the outcome itself.

It generates questions which are unanswerable within the limits of such a framework; questions of which I gave an example in the previous paragraph. As Nemade argues in his article, the

choice of organization and its effectiveness in a social revolt may itself be conditioned by the prior social position of the participants. Ishwaran does not tell us what impact the prior socioeconomic position of the adherents of Lingayatism had on its practice. Perhaps we could find some proof of this in the later revival of Lingayatism. James Manor writes, for example, that by 1945, Lingayats-the biggest landed group in Bombay Karnataka-had ousted the numerically and economically weak Brahmans from virtually all positions in the Congress which was the only major political organization there. If this is accurate, then the revival of Lingayatism would seem to fit the pattern of a nation-wide reassertion of hegemony by historically strong rural middle classes on the brink of independence[5].

The creative, critical impulse underpinning Virasaivism is not in dispute. Its functionalist isolation as a model of modernization presents problems. To try to seek direct practical direction from Basavanna or Nanak for contemporary revolutionary action would be as fruitless as the unthinking copying of the quietist retreat and political apathy of the Warkaris. Ishwaran's insight into the universal principles advocated by Basavanna is, for us, a crucial starting point-provided we are willing to set aside externally imposed, empiricist classificatory frameworks of social movements. Instead, we should attempt a rational reconstruction of the dynamics of these values in the Indian tradition as a whole. Their specific theoretical and practical manifestations should be placed in that context. Some recent scholarship may be helpful. It examines the origin of the ideas of bhagavan, bhakta and bhakti in the material basis of the communal, tribal life. Such life predated and coexisted with the ancient civilizations and with the later Vedic-Aryan transition. In the transition from communal-tribal life to kingdoms and civilizations arose the first real authority and hierarchy in society. The shift from bhagavan as the custodian-owner of a community's wealth and bhakta as his co-producer, sharer and consumer, to bhagavan as the divine universality, as god, and bhakta as his supplicant devotee, was likewise a similar metamorphosis. During this transition, probably, there arose not only the legal kingships, but also a class of conductors of a community's symbolic sacrifices and their defenders. The logic and dynamics of the integration of Vedic intellectual abstractions and of associated and emerging hierarchical social practice was not disrupted during this transition. It shattered only later, and supplied the basis for the legitimation of a repressive social system. The institution of yajna, apparently, sits at the cross-roads of the transition from a classless, naturalistic tribal group to a class society[6].

These and similar theoretical theories about the origin of bhakti should not be viewed as an exercise in romanticism. The fundamental constraints of the tribal society were so overwhelming that the subsequent journey through a continuous and brutal intra-communal killing for dynasties, property and racial dominance, seems to have been essential for the survival of that same group. The paradox of human development begins with this primal state. The human civilization moved away from natural repression only by replacing it with social repression. This in itself was a creative act. Social repression and hierarchy were, in the first phase, necessary and thus acceptable. At the same time, the creative, productive activity of man within this altered society must have rendered the specific forms of repression more unnecessary. Those who were to benefit from continuing repression sought to legitimate it and had to do so in the name of that community. No longer the legitimate leaders of the society, they became its rulers. I speak of this paradox in my article on Jnanesvar as the tension between projected and actual community.

To me, the notion of the development of Indian tradition as a naturalistic, continuous process, absorbing and amalgamating any and all practices and beliefs, does not make sense. It fails to address certain basic problems about the relationship between theory and practice. I see tradition as emerging out of a struggle between the creative potential of man in his nascent society and its sometimes necessary repressive denial in everyday social life. In that very social life which is artistically productive even under a counterfactual community, the potential for actualizing such a society is inevitably encouraged. This occurs in social work as man's constructive social activity in relation to nature. As the action of that body-mind unity of human social beings, it is also a reflexive activity. Through it, man in society creates commodities and meanings at the same time. In this activity of active producers, oppression is reflected upon continuously as a contradictory living experience[7].

Gadamer relies largely on the concepts of Romantic hermeneuticists such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and the work of subsequent hermeneuticists such as Wilhelm Dilthey. He dismisses as unattainable the aim of objectivity, and instead argues that meaning is produced via intersubjective dialogue. Gadamer's philosophical goal, as stated in *Truth and Method*, was to expand on the idea of philosophical hermeneutics, which Heidegger in his *Being and Time* began but never dealt with at length. Gadamer's aim was to discover the essence of human knowledge. In the book Gadamer claimed that "truth" and "technique" were at conflict with one another. He was critical of two approaches to the human sciences. On the one hand, he was sceptical of contemporary approaches to humanities that based themselves on the natural sciences and therefore on rigorous scientific procedures.

On the other hand, he took issue with the traditional German approach to the humanities, exemplified for instance by Dilthey and Schleiermacher, which thought that properly understanding a book required retrieving the original purpose of the person who authored it. In contrast to both of these views, Gadamer claimed that individuals have a historically affected consciousness and that they are entrenched in the specific history and culture that created them. Thus understanding a text requires a fusion of perspectives where the researcher discovers the ways that the book's past articulates with their own background. *Truth and Technique* is not intended to be a systematic declaration about a new hermeneutic method of reading texts. Gadamer wanted *Truth and Method* to be a description of what we constantly do when we interpret things even if we do not realize it: My main interest was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what occurs to us above and beyond our desiring and doing[8].

2. DISCUSSION

The criteria for such reflexion is that same premise on which the legitimization of tyranny also depends. The values of reason, freedom and equality are fundamental in the notion of a future community. They emerge in an unmediated way in the essentially social and natural condition of the human species. The way to comprehend the dynamics of tradition is to unravel the paradoxical unity of its symbolic forms. What appear as contradictions of theory and practice, of the sacred and the profane, of this world and the other world, all contain the basic paradox of potentiality. Man's logical knowledge for what is generally possible-but cannot be-in the particularity of a certain situation-specific life practice (actuality), expresses itself through his symbolic ordering of the world. His desire for the potential is rational rather than Utopian

because it derives from a knowing, an awareness, of the rootedness of his unique particularity in the universal human predicament. Hospital sees this in his article as a conflict between the limitedness of human imagination and the particularity of human existence. This contradiction at times congeals into-and at other times explodes out of-the same symbolic universe. These are the dominant and liberating moments of tradition[9].

Valued symbols, myths, beliefs and rituals of a tradition embody in them, as meanings, the actuality of everyday experience and the imaginative or creative potentiality of its transition. Symbols have various meanings which allow an understanding of particular individual experience, as well as its re-interpretation within the universality of a living tradition. This universality is, at another level, a conflict of freedom and hegemonic appropriation, of the legitimacy of a social order and its legitimation, of the periods of necessary and needless tyranny. In this perspective of tradition, the classificatory dichotomies of revolutionary and reformist movements, of radical and system supportive sampradaya, and of traditional and modern civilizations, are brought into doubt. Polar concepts capture the basic contradiction of symbolic existence only statically. In fact, they are dialectical moments in the ongoing progressive logic of tradition[10].

3. CONCLUSION

The works in this collection give a sense of what such a preparedness implies, even though, in terms of my own preoccupations, some show more willingness to listen than to suspect, and others to suspect than to listen. In contrast, most Indian intellectuals and their Western counterparts have, by and large, lost any ability to listen. Where they provide any contrary signal, it is only through dividing the little tradition from the Great. To the Indian people, on the other hand, that small tradition with which bhakti is connected is a way of life. It is an ongoing tradition. They just listen to it whereas the intellectuals only suspect it. I hope that this critical introduction and the articles from which it derives its argument will be seen as a beginning towards bridging that gap. If a real, conscious rising towards the accomplishment of communal objectives is to encompass the people, it is unlikely to develop via the transplanting of symbols of foreign or defunct traditions. Symbols of liberation will have to be found from within, by individuals who will carry the weight of revolutionary action. These symbols, while identical to both sterilised intellectual abstractions and ritualised everyday activity, cannot be rediscovered in either of these isolated settings. That has always been the message of bhakti and therein is its modernity.

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