

Socio-Religious Conditions of Rajasthan from Earliest Times to the Beginning of Bhakti Movement: An Analysis

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E-Mail: raahultripathi@gmail.com, rtripathi1@jpr.amity.edu**Abstract**

Rajasthan is culturally rich and has artistic and cultural traditions which reflect the ancient Indian way of life. There is rich and varied folk culture from villages which is often depicted symbolic of the state. Highly cultivated classical music and dance with its own distinct style is part of the cultural tradition of Rajasthan. The paper throws light on the socio-religious conditions of Rajasthan so as to analyse the contemporary situation.

Keywords: Folk, bhakti, religion, cult.

Introduction: Concept and Origin of Bhakti in Indian Tradition

The Hindu tradition has generally been divided into a number of important historical and religious periods through its long development. "Hinduism values the true spiritual life more highly than any dogma or doctrine."¹ Religion has been defined in many and conflicting fashions, but one description of it embodies what is certainly a feature that is practically universal in all the various modes of its expression. It has been described as the "highest form of man's consciousness of himself in his relation to all other things and beings."²

Socio-Religious Condition of Rajasthan

The Society in Rajasthan has been based on religion since earliest times. Various inscriptions and historical sources support the fact that religion was the basis of society and culture. During the early medieval period Muslim invasions not only conquered the geographical regions but also invaded the religion and religious philosophy of Rajasthan.

Muslim army was not only invading Rajasthan only to attain political powers but also to expand and propagate Islam. While the Hindu religious thinking emphasised worshipping of human incarnations of god in the form of idol worshipping, the Islam opposed idol worshipping, the Islam philosophised that anybody worshipping other than Allah is a kafir and killing such so called kafir was appreciated. This led to increase in hatred among the members of two religions.

The transition period of mixing of different ideologies and cultures promoted various philosophical thoughts in Hindu religion. This phase was also as Bhakti Movement.

One of the most unique aspects of religion in Indian as well as in Rajasthan history is that it is dotted with constant integrating of new philosophies. In fact, it is regarded as one of the most invaded and plundered regions. And in spite of this, the people always welcomed new cultures, making it the most diverse nation.

Bhakti movement may be defined as the devotional transformation of Medieval Hinduism. It was not that Hinduism and Islam were altogether different. There were some similarities also that supported the amalgamation of the religious philosophies.

The concept of Monotheism emphasising one omniscient and omnipresent God influenced the lower and the exploited peoples. Also in many regions, the monarch's support was secular enough to maintain harmony and create a glorious religious culture. In case of Islam, the Sufis saints played a vital role in maintaining harmony. The Bhakti movement reached its zenith from 15th to 17th century A.D. Since times immemorial, Rajasthan has been synonymous with spiritual knowledge and wisdom and people have been drawn to her sacred land. Earnest in their spiritual quest, many from the West have acknowledged the metaphysical loftiness and nobility of Hindu thought.

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Bhakti cults seem to have existed from the earliest times in Rajasthan, but they gained strength in the first millennium A.D.¹² The first full statement of liberation and spiritual fulfillment through devotion to a personal god is found in the Bhagavad-Gita. The Puranas (from the 1st cent. A.D.) further elaborated theistic ideas. Devotion to Shiva and Vishnu and to the latter's avatars (incarnations), Rama and Krishna, continues to be practiced throughout India.

Intense love for God and surrender to Him, reliance on His grace rather than on rituals, learning, or austerities, and the continuous repetition of His name are the means to the goal of His constant presence.

The political instability during the medieval period particularly from 8th to 15th century led to the disintegration of nation in various small units. This was also the main cause of introduction of feudalism in Rajasthan. The Rajput period was an era of gallantry and feudalism but they weakened each other by constant fighting. This allowed the foreigners (Turks) to go on board on victorious campaigns using deception and sham wherever military strength failed against Rajputs.

The location of Rajasthan was considerably safer from military point of view. The internal conflict within the Rajputs for imperial supremacy resulted into weakening of their unity, which foreign powers took advantage of. In the medieval era, during 1200 AD, portions of Rajasthan were already under the hegemony of the Delhi Sultanate.

Though Rajputs valiantly resisted the imperial ambitions of the Delhi Sultanate rulers, but their war skills and discipline were no match for their bravery, and thus eventually, many Rajput kingdoms accepted the imperial dominance of Delhi.

At the time of advent of Islam, the society in Rajasthan was broadly divided in two classes, the Royals and the Untouchables. Since most of the peoples were illiterate, they were dependent on their fate only for any political or social dominance. The society was on the verge of losing the traditional glory and was heading towards various blind faiths and social demerits.

During the medieval period, varna system reached the heights of discrimination. The lower class was divided into many sub castes or jatis and were not only exploited but also harassed. It can be said that Bhakti movement was just outcome of Islam in India. The contemporary Hindu society was too rigid and complicated in terms of laws and norms.

The saints who emerged as pioneers of the social reforms tried to simplify the religion so as to maintain harmony among the peoples. Also, the people who were suffering from the social bondages easily adopted the simpler path based on simple views and principles rather than the orthodox philosophy.

It is also worth mentioning that in Rajasthan, both the views of Bhakti i.e saguna as well as nirguna flourished simultaneously. The saints who propagated bhakti through the saguna view insisted on the traditional concept of idol worshipping while on the contrary the saints of the other view denied this concept and propagated another philosophical view of the existence of omnipresent and omniscient God. They also supported moral values and self discipline in society.

The contemporary hindu religion had to face not only the political attacks but also its own self complexity. The castes were divided into various sub castes and each had its own views and traditions. The lower class faced the worst condition. Even though performing the most inferior yet important tasks, they were considered untouchables and outside the brackets of society. The social demerits like sati pratha, polygamy etc. further deteriorated the position of women. It can be said that foreign invasions as well as the complexity of Hindu religion triggered the Bhakti movement.

To understand the many fascinating aspects of Socio-religious aspect of Rajasthan, it is necessary to understand the role of devotion in India. Devotion is perhaps the only thing that binds the people of India, superseding such barriers as languages, caste of birth, religious beliefs, and racial diversity. Earliest references of worshipping deities like Indra, Surya, Varun etc. along with the prevalence of performing yajnas have been found in Rig Ved.

Apart from this, Siva, Vishnu, Ganesh also formed the basis of religious concept. Temples of Eklingeshwar, Achaleshwar, Samidheshwar show the prevalence of Saivism in Rajasthan. The followers of Pashupat and Kapalik branches of Saivism still exist in interior regions of some villages in Rajasthan. The worshipping of Shakti was also prevalent in Rajasthan. Mother Goddess in the form of Bhawani, Durga etc. existed since earliest times. The temples of Tripursundari, Kailadevi and Siladevi support the fact that worship of mother Goddess was an important part of the religious thinking in Rajasthan.

The Vaishnavism reached its peak during the 5th century A.D and Vishnu along with his human incarnations deities Ram and Krishna was started worshipping.

The Lok devta of the folk deities also contributed to the development of society and religion. Few rulers who dedicated their life for the sake of welfare of society were later termed as lok devtas.¹³ The worship of folk deities is based on the faith and beliefs of simple folk, which in turn depend on oral traditions and anecdotes for their supernatural element.¹⁴

In Rajasthan, Jainism and Buddhism also prevailed since earliest times. The edict of Viratnagar indicates the prevalence of Buddhism during the Mauryan period in Rajasthan. The origin and growth of Jainism and Buddhism and their opposition by the contemporary Brahmin philosophies is also proved by many historical sources. Both the religion became popular in Rajasthan and a larger number accepted Jainism.¹⁵ This also led to freedom from religious bonding to some extent.

Islam too merged its philosophies in medieval India. It entered in about 12th century A.D. All this led to a new religious movement in India that emphasized the devotion to God, as sole means of salvation. Collectively known as the Bhakti Movement, it left a very profound impact on the life and culture of Indians in the subsequent centuries. Starting from Ajmer, it spreaded to Jalore, Nagaur and later Chittor.

Thus, it can be said that Rajasthan which has been renowned for its socio-religious glorious culture has also been a hub for the glory of warriors as well as of philosophers who simplified the religious philosophies. It can also be inferred that in Rajasthan, religious awareness has been a major component of the society since pre-historic times.¹⁶

Though the bhakti movements had profound impact on the religion, some historians has inferred that Bhakti Movement was a sole result of Islamic invasion referring the ideology of contemporary saints.¹⁷ But historically, function of Bhakti movement appears to have been to reinforce the existing order by channelling discontent into a negative form, rather than bring about a structural change. The introduction of bhakti influenced a democratization and reformation of Hinduism in Rajasthan.

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