

Bhakti-Sufi Traditions Changes in Religious Beliefs and Devotional Texts

NCERT TEXTBOOK QUESTIONS SOLVED

I.Explain with examples what historians mean by the integration of cults.

Ans. During the period of the 10th Century to the 17th Century, an important trend noticed in the religious life in India is the worship of God in many forms. Many God and Goddesses appear in the sculptures and texts but they are various forms of the original deities only. These original deities are Vishnu, Shiva, and Goddesses Durga, Lakshmi and Parvati.

Historians have noticed the two marked trends in the socio-religious life of those days. The first was dissemination of the Brahminical ideas. The Brahminical texts were reproduced in simple Sanskrit. They were now made available to women and shudras, who did not have access to Brahminical literature by and large. The second was the Brahmins who were working on the beliefs and practices. It was a process of evolution, wherein traditional classical traditions were getting new shapes continuously as they were being impacted by the traditions of common people throughout the land.

Now let us look at the two of the following examples.

1.A very good example of the above description is the temple of Jagannatha at Puri in Orissa. The temple is of Lord Jagannatha who is another form of Vishnu only. The word Jagannatha means one who owns the world.

2.There were many local gods; their statues were often created by wood and stones by tribals. Even families began to have Kul Devata. The Goddesses were also created in wood and stone. They all were in various forms only often of Vishnu.

2.To what extent do you think the architecture of mosques in the subcontinent reflects a combination of universal ideals and local traditions?

Ans. With the arrival of Islam in the Medieval ages, the architecture of Islam also came to India. However, the Arab-cum-Islamic architecture got impacted by the local traditions and rites too.

Hence, we see a fusion of the two. This can be further elaborated by the examples of architecture mainly the constructions of the mosques of those days.

Some features of the architecture of mosques are universal. All mosques have orientation towards Mecca. This is manifested in the placement of Mehrab and Minar within a mosque. But at the same time we have influences that can be described only as local influences. A 13th Century mosque in Kerala has a shikhar like roof unlike a normal mosque where it is dome. The Shah Hamdan Mosque in Kashmir is made of Kashmiri woods and its facade is like that of a temple. The Atia Mosque in Bangladesh is made of bricks, though its roof is round. Thus, we can see that the architecture of Mosques is that of fusion.

3.What were the similarities and differences between the be-shari'a and ba-shari'a sufi traditions?

Ans. Shari'a is the Islamic law that is applied in a truly Islamic country. The Shari'a law owes its origin to the Holy book of Quran, Hadis (Law book of Islam) and teachings of Prophet Muhammad. In the medieval ages the Islamic world witnessed a big social and religious movement called Sufi movement. Sufi movement was the people-centric and not God-centric. It believed serving people was the real form of worship. Sufi movement has had many branches too. One group of Sufi preachers took very radical path. They were mystics who renounced material world took to the life of asceticism. Further they also rejected the supremacy of the Shari'a laws. Such sufis were called be-shari'a.

On the other hand, there were Sufi saints who criticised the extravagant lifestyle of monarchs and Khaliphates but did not reject Shari'a laws. For them Shari'a laws were sacrosanct. These Sufi saints have been called be-shari'a.

4. Discuss the ways in which the Alvars, Nayanars and Virashaivas expressed critiques of the caste system.

Ans. The early Bhakti Movement was led by Alvars and Nayanars. It was the period of the 6th Century. Alvars are those who were disciples of Vishnu and Nayanars were those who claimed themselves the followers of Lord Shiva. They travelled place to place and would sing devotional songs in Tamil in the name of Shiva or Vishnu as the case may be. Apart from being a religious movement it was a social movement too. Many historians are of the view that Alvars and Nayanars gave a blow to the caste system and Brahminism. This is corroborated by the fact that the movement was open to people from diverse background. The Bhaktas came from the castes of Brahmin to artisans to even those that were considered untouchables.

Virashaivas was a movement of the 12th Century that took place in Karnataka. The movement was led by a Brahmin named Basavanna (1106-68), who was a minister in the court of Chalukya king. The followers of Basavanna are called Virashaivas and they worshipped Shiv. They were also called and perhaps more often Lingayats, which literally means wearer of Lingas. They challenged the caste system and they challenged the idea of any caste being pollutant. This helped them grow support among marginalised sections of the society. Virashaivas also attacked some evil practices supposedly not approved by Shastras, such as post puberty marriage and remarriage of widows. Further they also questioned the theory of rebirth.

5. Describe the major teachings of either Kabir or Guru Nanak and the way they have been transmitted. (or)

Explain the teachings of Guru Nanak. Did he want to establish a new religion?

Ans. Kabir is a great poet-cum-saint of Indian society. He has had appeal among Hindus and Muslims alike as it is believed that he was born as Hindu but was brought up by a Muslim couple. He wrote poems that exhorted both communities to take to social reforms.

The major teachings of Kabir were as follows:

1. Kabir described God as nirankar (having no shape). He used the terms drawn from Islamic tradition like Allah, Khuda, Hajrat and Peer but also used words of Vedic traditions like Alakh (the unseen) and nirakar (the formless). Thus, he freely took to both traditions viz. Islamic and Vedantic.
2. He repudiated idol worship and polytheism.
3. He emphasised on the oneness of God though there can be many names of His.
4. He criticised religious rituals of Hindus and Muslims alike.
5. He also preached against caste discrimination.
6. He combined the Sufi traditions of love of God with the Hindi tradition of remembrance of God.
7. He also emphasised the dignity of labour.

Thus, the essence of the teachings of Kabir was simple living based on love and respect all. He wrote in simple language to be understood by common man of the country.

Guru Nanak and his teachings

Guru Nanak was born in a Hindu family in 1469 at Nankana Sahib on the bank of the river Ravi. His birth place is now in Pakistan. He learnt Persian, Arabic, Hindi and Mathematics. He spent time in the company of Sufi saints and Bhaktas of various socio-religious movements.

The major teachings of Guru Nanak are as follows:

1. He rejected the religious texts of both Hindus and Muslims.
2. He preached God is Nirakar viz. without any shape.
3. He criticised the religious practices like ceremonial bath, sacrifices, idol worship and emphasised

simplicity.

4. He called upon his followers to connect to divine by remembering and repeating the divine name. Guru Nanak expressed himself in Punjabi, the language of the local people in a lyrical form called Shabad. Shabad can be recited in various ragas.

6. Discuss the major beliefs and practices that characterised Sufism.

Ans. After the advent of Islam in the early, middle ages, it saw a new movement in later part. The movement has had great impact and reach in the Indian subcontinent. It is called Sufi movement. The Sufi saints were mystics. Their preachings included:

1. Sufi saints did not subscribe to the theological and rigid interpretations of religious scriptures of Islam. They believed that the interpretation have to be based on individual experiences. This way the theological interpretations became flexible. Further the control of the orthodox religious leaders got weakened. This was a people centric move.
2. They rejected the high sounding rituals. They also emphasised on simplicity in religious traditions and rites.
3. Sufi saints prescribed devotion to Almighty as path to salvation. They even approved of singing and dancing as part of devotion. It is notable that classical Islam has forbidden singing, dancing and any music.
4. The most important theme of Sufi philosophy was that serving people is the true religion. With the objective of serving the poor people they also held Langar. Today also one can go to Ajmer and can partake in the Langar organised on the tomb of Nijammudin Auliya, the great Sufi saint.
5. Sufi saints also emphasised on the equality among people and oneness among all.

7. Examine how and why rulers tried to establish connections with the traditions of the Nayanars and the sufis.

Ans. Nayanars were the worshippers of Lord Shiva. It gained a shape of powerful Bhakti movement in South India in 6th Century onwards. Apart from being popular with the people, the movement got support and patronage of the rulers of the time. This is manifested by the following facts:

1. A major part of South India was ruled by Chola Kings during the period 9th to 13th Century. They gave great patronage to the Bhakti movement saints including Nayanars. Thus, they did by making grants of land and constructing temples of Shiva and Vishnu for the saints of Bhakti movement.
2. The most beautiful temples of Shiva of South India, namely, at Chidambaram, Tanjavur and Gangaikondacholpuram were constructed under the patronage of Chola rulers.
3. During the same period some of the most spectacular representation of Shiva in bronze sculpture were produced. All this was possible because the rulers patronised the Nayanars.
4. Nayanars had considerable following among farmers.

The rulers tried to establish connections with the Nayanars and this is explained by the aforesaid description. The reason why they did is not far to seek. One reason could be to bring sanctity to the their rule. By giving alms to the temple and the preachers of Nayanar sect the rulers also announced their wealth and might. Next such acts might have endeared the rulers to the masses.

Sufi Tradition and the rulers of Delhi Sultnate and Mughals:

In the 12th Century, Delhi and a considerable part of India fell to the rule of Muslim rulers. This rule is known as the period of Delhi Sultanate. The rulers of Delhi Sultanate claimed themselves under Khalifate of Kabul and tried to legitimize their rule. The next step could have been establishing the rule of Shari'a laws. However, the rulers realised for the very beginning that it was impractical. Under the Delhi Sultanate most of the people were not Muslim. Shari'a laws were not feasible also because lacked flexibility which a ruler needed to govern. The rulers of Delhi Sultanate wanted to take a practical path of governance without renouncing Islam. Sufi tradition gave them this opportunity.

The same idea prevailed during the rule of the great Mughals too. Hence the rulers of Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal empire adopted the tradition of sufism.

8. Analyses, illustrations, why bhakti and sufi thinkers adopted a variety of languages in which to express their opinions.

Ans. In medieval India, though Sanskrit and Persian may be the language of the educated people or at the court, the vast number of people living in villages conversed in the local languages. It was, therefore, needed that the Bhakti and Sufi saints preached in the languages of the common people. This was in fact essential in order to make these movement truly popular.

This is manifested in the following examples:

1. The traditional Bhakti saints composed the hymns in Sanskrit. Such hymns were sung on special occasions often within temples.
 2. The Nayanars and the Alvars were wandering saints. They travelled far and wide, often walking on foot. They met people in different villages. These saints would sing the verses in praise of God all in the language of the local people only. The language was Tamil only. These travelling saints established temples where prayers took place in Tamil and the devotional songs were composed by the Bhakti Saints.
 3. In North India the language was different. Here too the saints took to the language of the common people. Guru Nanak created Shabad all in Punjabi. Baba Farid and Swami Raidas (Ravidas) all composed in Punjabi and Hindustani.
 4. Kabirdas who lived in Benaras, wrote in local language which was closer to Hindustani. He used words there part of local dialect.
 5. The Sufi tradition of singing on tombs carried on in the language of the local people only. The shrines were the place of Sama sung in Hindustani or Hindavi. Another Sufi Saint Baba Farid composed in Punjabi too that even became part of Guru Granth Sahib.
 6. Some other saints wrote in Kannada, Tamil and other languages too.
- Thus, we are inclined to agree with the view that the Saints of Bhakti and Sufi Movement composed in many languages and the languages of the common people to connect with them.

9. Read any five of the sources included in this chapter and discuss the social and religious ideas that are expressed in them.

Ans. The period of the Bhakti Movement and Sufi Movement also has many sources that contribute to the history of those days. Some of the major social and religious ideas expressed in the various sources of history are as follows:

1. The first is the architecture. The different types of stupas, temple, monasteries all symbolise different types of religious belief system and practices. Some of them exist as it is and enable us to look into the annals of history of those days. Some of them are in the form of ruins but they also throw light on the, religion and society of those days alike.
2. The next important source of history is the composition of the saints both Bhakti and Sufi. In terms of content they are religious but they are not the divine textbooks of religion that are sacrosanct. The compilation throws light on the life of common men and village lifestyle. They also impact the music and art of those days.
3. Another very important source of the history of those days is the biographies of the Saints. The biographies include the description of the society and prevalent beliefs and practices. It is notable that such biographies may not be in the written form still they can give insight into the life of those days. It is the story prevalent that when Kabirdas died, both Hindus and Muslims fought for his dead body later on his body turned into flowers. Some were taken by Muslims and others by Hindus. This represents that there conflict and collaboration between both Hindus and Muslims of those days.

4. This was also the period of rise of religious leaders who were intermediaries between common men and God. Earlier it was only the Brahmins who got this role. Now many people from other background also joined in. To some extent it acted as the the force that idolised equality and fraternity.

5. The other source is the folklore. They are described in our art forms. It may be dance, paintings, and sculpture and so on. They all talk about the universal brotherhood of mankind and love for one and all.

10. On an outline map of India, plot three major sufi shrines and three places associated with temples (one each of a form of Vishnu, Shiva and the goddess.)

Ans.



11. Choose any two of the religious teachers/thinkers/saints mentioned in this chapter, and find out more about their lives and teachings. Prepare a report about the area and the times in which they lived, their major ideas, how do we know about them, and why you think they are important?

Ans. Following are the two saints of the Bhakti movement who are described as follows:

Guru Nanak:

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism and the first of the ten Gurus of the Sikhs, was born in the village of Talwandi on 15th April, 1469. The village now is known as Nankana Sahib. He belonged to a Khatri caste. Before Guru Nanak departed for his heavenly abode on 22nd Sept., 1539, his name had travelled not only throughout India's north, south, east and west, but also far beyond into Arabia, Mesopotamia (Iraq), Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Afghanistan, Turkey, Burma and Tibet.

His teachings included:

Equality of humans: Guru Nanak preached against discrimination and prejudices due to race, caste, status, etc. He said: "See the brotherhood of all mankind as the highest order of Yogis; conquer your own mind, and conquer the world."

Universal message for all people: Normally preachers confined their preachings to the men of their own religion. But Nanak reached out. He spoke to hindus and muslims both and said to all "To take what rightfully belongs to another is like a muslim eating pork, or a hindu eating beef."

Equality of women: Nanak promoted women's rights and equality—a first for the 15th century! He asked:

"From woman, man is born; within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married. Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come. When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound. So should why we call her bad?"

Namdeo

Saint Namdeo was born in the year 1270 in the village of Narasi-Bamani, now located in the Hingoli District in Maharashtra. He is a great Saint Poet of Maharashtra. He was one of the earliest writers who wrote in the Marathi language. He is the foremost proponent of the Bhagwad-Dharma who reached beyond Maharashtra, right into Punjab. He also wrote some hymns in Hindi and Punjabi, Namdev travelled through many parts of India, reciting his religious poems. In difficult times, he played the difficult role of uniting the pendle of Maharashtra spiritually, He is said to have lived for more than twenty years in the village of Ghuman in the Gurdaspur district of Punjab. The Sikh brethren in Punjab consider him one.