

BHAKTI LITERATURE – THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE THROUGH POEMS OF NARSINH MEHTA AND VIDYAPATI THAKUR

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The term "Bhakti" denotes a transformation that brought mystic ideas into the realm of the common experience of love. The writings of various poets during the bhakti movement spanning from the 9th to 16th century, emphasized the unity of different religious traditions, challenged social divisions, and developed new literary forms.

The highest form of connection between any two souls is love. It is a universal emotion amongst all living beings where every being feels the need to sense and experience it. The bhakti poets understood this pulse of human beings and spread the message through *madhura bhāva* which has all the qualities of love i.e. *prem lakṣaṇa bhakti*. *Madhura bhāva bhakti* is a form of *bhakti* wherein the *bhakt* sees God as his lover. Krishna Bhakti is a popular form of this bhakti due to His sportiveness with the *gopis* which can be termed as '*gopi bhāva*' or '*rādhā bhāva*' that led to the innumerable jewels in bhakti poetry.

Notably, the movement's key figures from the North Indian poets like Vidyapati, Narsinh Mehta, and many others articulated its principles and majorly streamlined the *madhura bhāva* aspect through vernacular languages, promoting a direct and personal connection with the divine.

The objective behind this research is the need to create content in the Bharata Natyam format; in a language with which the researcher has an affinity. It will also help understand and select those poems that are of *śṛṅgāra pradhāna* and at the same time have deep philosophical content; thus expanding one's indological perspective.

The analytical, literary, and practical review of the research will also throw light on the fact that dance cannot be studied in isolation and has to have a parallel study with other allied arts.

Key Words: *bhakti* movement, *bhakti* poets, *madhura bhāva bhakti*, *prema lakṣaṇa*, *Narsinh Mehta*, *Vidyapati*

The term Bhakti is derived from the root '*bhaj*' which means knowledge. Gaining or giving knowledge through the ideas and activities that emerge out of this term by ritual worship, idol worship or any form of personal worship is bhakti. It is a human being's inner need to latch on to a stronger and higher force than themselves. It gives them a direction or a clear-cut vision to cross the hurdles and difficulties of life. For some it is their religion, for some it is Guru Bhakti, for some it is certain superstitions that they believe in, for some, their spiritual path and for most it is a matter of Faith.

The concept of nava vidha bhakti or nine ways of connecting with God is a concept that came into being from the Puranic times. The Shrimad Bhagavatam has given nine ways in which we can connect with God –

- 1). Hearing about God (Shravana)
- 2). Chanting His Name and Glory (Kirtana)
- 3). Remembering Him (Smarana)
- 4). Serving His Lotus Feet (Pada Sevana)
- 5). Worshipping Him as per the Scriptures (Archana)
- 6). Prostrating before Him (Vandana)
- 7). Being His Servant (Dasya)
- 8). Befriending Him (Sakhya)
- 9). Offering Oneself to Him (Atma Nivedana)

Bhakti Movement

The ancient Indian culture and civilization had a strong ability to absorb different groups like the Greeks, Sakas, and Hunas into its population. However, the Turk-Afghan invaders maintained their distinct identity and didn't assimilate easily. Despite the long association between these groups and the demand for peace and security, there was limited interaction and synthesis. This interaction was interesting, as it didn't lead to significant changes in their beliefs. The Bhakti movement played a crucial role in bridging the gap between the two religions by fostering a space where their respective followers could come together.

There was turmoil and rigidity during the pre-bhakti movement and to undo this stringency of the caste hierarchy and social injustice, poets from the length and breadth of the country and every communal structure of the society, wrote some of the most prolific words which touched the right chord of the common man. It made them realize that to feel close to God and experience the Supreme, they did not need to go through the severe dictum of the blind faith practices.

The highest form of connection between any two souls is love. It is a universal emotion amongst all living beings where every being feels the need to sense and experience it. The bhakti poets understood this pulse of human beings and spread the message through *madhura bhāva* which have all the qualities of love i.e. *prem lakṣaṇa bhakti*.

Through its emphasis on devotion and love for the divine, the movement promoted an inclusive approach that transcended religious boundaries. The Bhakti Movement marked a transformative period in Indian culture, fostering a pan-Indian cultural uprising against feudalism. Around the 11th and 12th centuries, this movement accelerated the growth of regional languages and works of literature, liberating them from classical constraints. Bhakti poetry, reflecting popular sentiments, rebelled against social injustices and feudal norms, emphasizing human emotions and cultural awareness. It bridged the gap between literary and colloquial language, fostering a new kind of creative potential. While Bhakti poetry reflected the rebellion against the feudal order, it also embraced the beauty of folk/local culture and envisioned a democratic society, transcending caste and creed. The movement was not limited to any particular class, with farmers, traders, and artisans actively participating in it; they were not mere philosophers or theoretical reformers; rather, they emerged from the lower strata of society and were actively involved in various professions. Raidas worked as a cobbler, Dharna belonged to the untouchable Jat peasant community, Kabir was a weaver from a low caste background, Dadu was a spinner from a similar social stratum, Nanak engaged in small-scale trading, Namdev was a tailor, and Tukaram was a trader from a low caste. These individuals conveyed their philosophical ideas through the use of local dialects, expressing their beliefs in the form of lyrical compositions that differed from the conventional literary traditions of Sanskrit, thus aiming to communicate their spiritual messages directly to the masses, facilitating a deeper connection with the common people.

The poetry highlighted the importance of humanity, love, and equality, defying religious extremism. It significantly contributed to the shaping of contemporary Indian culture, leaving a lasting impression on literature, language, and social traditions.

The Bhakti movement, treated mostly as a literary and ideological phenomenon, was rooted in religious inspiration but lacked a focus on social history and socio-economic factors. This movement arose from the socio-political changes occurring in society, including the decline of powerful states, economic transformations, and social oppression. The Bhakti saints, worked for the betterment of the oppressed, emphasizing equality and love and their writings gave emphasis to the unity of different religious traditions and challenged social divisions. The movement's impact extended to the development of new literary forms such as *vachana* and *pada*, which rejected conventional practices and rituals.

Various religious schools like Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and the Sikh faith influenced the Bhakti Movement. Figures such as Ramanuja and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu played significant roles in systematizing and disseminating Bhakti philosophy, leading to the formation of distinct sects. Through the inclusive and democratic ideology of devotion, the Bhakti movement facilitated the dissolution of caste and gender barriers, leaving an imprint on Indian society and culture.

Bhakti Movement in North India

'The *Bhakti* Movement in the northern region of India came during the 15th and 16th centuries which continued to advance in the various parts of India – producing innumerable sects and a mass of devotional poetry in several languages of the people, but it had practically exhausted itself by the middle of the 18th century. Historically, after the death of Sri Ramanujacharya, the *Vaiṣṇava Bhakti* Movement of the southern region turned towards the northern region initiated by Swami Ramananda. Thus, the cults were essentially *Vaiṣṇava*-based, but instead of being focused on *Viṣṇu*, they chose to focus on the incarnations, *Rāma* and *Kṛṣṇa*. Poets like Tulsīdās wrote songs in praise of *Rāma* and Mīrābāī wrote devotional songs in praise of *Kṛṣṇa*. The devotees believed in devoting everything to the God whom they love the most in that period.' (Samuel Laldinsanga)

Madhura Bhāva Bhakti

Madhura bhāva bhakti is a form of bhakti wherein the bhakt sees God as his lover. It can also be termed as kānta bhāva. In the Hindu *avatara* theory, Ram and Krishna are the two *purushottama-s* where Ram is *Maryada Purushottama*, known for laying down '*maryada*' or the limits of human conduct whereas Krishna is *Leela Purushottama* i.e. the sportive God. His closeness and affinity with the *gopis* with whom he plays, teases, makes love, and also sometimes chides them and harasses them and in turn, the *gopis* forget all their household chores and worldly bondages and love Him without any apprehensions. It is this '*gopi bhava*' or '*radha bhava*' that led to the innumerable jewels in bhakti poetry.

Notably, the movement's key figures like Vidyapati, Narsinh Mehta, and many others articulated its principles and majorly streamlined the *madhura bhāva* aspect through vernacular languages, promoting a direct and personal connection with the divine.

Narsinh Mehta (1414-1481)

Narsinh Mehta, venerated as the *adikavi* of Gujarat was a face of the 15th-century Bhakti movement, and stands tall at the forefront of Gujarati literature. His poetic genius intertwines spirituality, deep insight, and an intimate communion with the divine. 'Narsinh Mehta was a *nagar* by birth, Brahmin by *samskara*, and a saint through his penance. He was a true *Vaiṣṇava* and his blood was coloured red with *Krishna Bhakti*.' (Dr. Uma Anantani)

Narsinh's verses beautifully merge the '*nirguna*' and '*saguna*' aspects of God, transcending conventional boundaries. He effortlessly unites the formless essence of divinity with its manifold manifestations, blending wisdom ('*jnāna*') and devotion ('bhakti') into a seamless spiritual tapestry.

In Narsinh's poems, there's a strong sense of connection, that everything in the world is linked together in a grand dance. His words create vivid images—a bright sun rising, a sky painted in gold—revealing the wonders

of the divine world. Yet, his poetry is also deeply personal. It expresses immense joy in being close to the divine, but also an intense sadness when that closeness fades. His longing to hear from the divine speaks volumes about how deeply connected he feels to God.

Dr. Kanaiyalal M. Munshi applauds Mehta's pioneering spirit, celebrating his deviation from literary norms. Mehta breathed life into Gujarati poetry by infusing the *prabhatiyā* metre, traditionally reserved for morning prayers, with raw emotions. This departure from the ordinary transformed poetry into an emotive canvas that inspired a flame in the generations to come.

His work embodies the timeless pursuit of spiritual connection and the steep beauty of devotion woven into literature. Through his words, he immortalizes the everlasting quest of the soul for divine communion, a testament to the transformative power of poetry. 'His love poems have simplicity, lucidity, and beauty since he loves his Lord as a *gopi*.' (Dr. Uma Anantani) A beautiful example of a couplet taken from the work based on Dr. Shivalal Jesalpura's research and edited work, 'Narsinha Mehta ni Kavya Krutio' published in 1989 by Girish Jesalpura; where the *gopi* can be seen as a *svādhinabhtrukā nāyika* with Krishna under her conquest –

āvdo śo āsango bāi, tāre sāmaliyā nī sāthe

Te to kāi akśat mukya mantra bhaṇi ne the re...

Ko velā vahālo māthu oḷave lāmbi veni gūthāve re

sethā māhe sindura bharāvi nil vat ṭilaḍi sohāve re

ko velā enā khoḷā mā mastak muki ne podhe re

pehryu pitāmbara enu lai ne te ura upar odhe re

"O dear friend, how much close you have been with *Shyam*? (I wonder)

That you have mesmerized him with magic and mantras?

Oh, at times, he combs your hair and entwines a flowery garland!

Applies vermilion where (your) parts and adorns (you) with a stunning *tilak* on the forehead!

Oh, at times (you) place (your) head on his lap and sleep!

And cover yourself with his *pitāmbar* (Krishna's garment)! (433.p.250)

Most male bhakti poets see themselves as females and write with a *gopi bhava* because they see themselves in union with the Lord. It means to say that in their trance, they forgot his manhood and wanted to be one with Krishna and be married to Him.

Vidyapati Thakur (1350-1460)

Vidyapati Thakur, fondly called 'Maithil Kokil,' spent nearly 36 years in Shiv Singha's court after a brief stint in Kirti Singha's realm, where he penned his first work, *Kirtilata*, praising the king's triumph. Shiv Singha, known for his appreciation of poetry and women (he had six wives), ruled Tirhut from 1368 to 1406, offering Vidyapati both a respected place and generous support, including grants for Vidyapati's hometown.

Vidyapati's Sanskrit works included '*Bhuparikrama*' and '*Purush Pariksha*,' while his Maithili masterpiece, '*Padavali*,' focuses on love, often referencing Lord Krishna and the *gopis*. Notably, his use of Maithili over Sanskrit drew both criticism and praise, showcasing his versatility in appealing to diverse audiences.

His Maithili collection, '*Padavali*,' boasts around 945 songs (about 800 verified), characterized by their sweet expressions, rhythmic melodies, and vivid yet simple imagery. A significant chunk of these songs revolves around love, capturing diverse emotions, situations, and aspects of romantic love, often intertwining with references to Lord Krishna and the *gopis*. These songs became embedded in social functions and have been cherished by Mithila women for generations, establishing '*Padavali*' as Vidyapati's magnum opus in Hindi poetry. '*Padavali*' notable contribution to Hindi and Bengali lies in its unmatched lyrical quality.

Writing mainly for Mithila's women and the common folk, Vidyapati chose Maithili over Sanskrit. Critics accused him of being unsophisticated and narrow-minded, but he defended his language ardently, likening it to a young moon that captivates poetry enthusiasts. He adapted his language, using scholarly words for the court and everyday speech for the common folks and women.

Vidyapati's sensual poetry celebrated both union and separation, spanning three primary categories: love songs of ordinary folks, Radha-Krishna tales, and the Shiva-Parvati narrative. Unlike Jayadeva's celestial figures, Vidyapati portrayed these characters as regular lovers from his Mithila world. He earned praise for balancing sound and meaning, earning the moniker 'Nav Jayadeva' or the New Jayadeva.

Though Vidyapati vividly depicted the physicality of the female form, he also explored women's psychology, skilfully capturing their emotions, thoughts, and struggles. Even when describing nature and seasons, it was the essence of women that remained the focal point of his verses. These innate portrayals explain why Vidyapati's songs continue to echo through every home in Mithila even today.

Conclusion

The poetic literature of India has had a deep impact on Indian dance. It has helped to transform it into visual poetry by altering the verbal motifs into movement. The use of poetry in regional languages other than Sanskrit and to convert such poetry into dance with the help of suitable musical composition helps the viewer understand the pulse and the socio-cultural background of that particular province. The technique and form might remain the same but the use of varied content can help broaden the understanding of the dancer as well as the spectator and reaffirms the richness and strength of our classical art forms.

In the current socio-political climate, the essence of Bhakti poetry remains relevant, offering a means to connect with the masses and uphold the true values of *sanātana dharma* and cultural diversity through Indian dance and music.

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