July 15, 2024

Encountering the Bhakt: Transformation in Religious Thought

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Two examples from mediaeval Odisha's bhakti tradition show how debates and differences about the sacred were part of devotional practice, and not forced onto us after the institutionalisation of modern, secular, and democratic visions.

Over the last decade or so the idea of religion has been made to go through quick mutations, much more rapidly than in other times. One of those is consciously muting the relationship between historical events and the rise of religious thoughts and praxis. The complex and often dynamic traffic between socio-political events alongside which beliefs, faiths, as well practices of ritual orders in a religion grew, shifted, and renewed themselves have been thwarted.

Instead, religion is presented as an unchanging and ossified category which is 'sacred' without any historical, social, or even political foundations. This process has been carried out equally in the political, popular, and academic discourses, and has given rise to lethal consequences for our diverse and plural country: communal tensions and polarisation of ideas in the masses.

> The bhakti tradition, which made the discourse of religion more personal, varied, popular and dialogic by instilling dissent, has now created ground for misrepresentations and ahistorical readings.

The most fertile ground to undertake this ahistorical discourse around religion is prepared is by misreading texts that emerged out of the bhakti traditions and imposing those views anachronistically. The bhakti tradition, which made the discourse of religion more personal, varied, popular, and dialogic by instilling dissent, has now, ironically, created ground for misrepresentations in the hands of fundamentalist and colonialist ideologues. Whatever the case, it is important to grasp the full and comprehensive essence of that religion in general, and *bhakti* as a theme, to free it from the clutches of misappropriations.

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The primordial trait of the bhakti period in Indian historical continuum is best understood as an assimilation of the knowledges of liberation practices produced in the elite Sanskrit dictions with *desi* traditions – the language of the people, ones that would later emerge as modern Indian languages: Odia, Bangla, Gujarati, and so on. This assimilation took shape in two specific ways: a stance against religious orthodoxy coupled with a refusal to the cordoning of religious knowledge, and sometimes, popularising the ideology of those Sanskrit texts as most desirable. The bhakti tradition rendered the hitherto difficult to access knowledge of attaining *moksha*, liberation, to a large section of the populace who were outside the domain of its purview.

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With this being its broad progressive stance, the bhakti tradition was a connected yet distinct set of practices that emerged from the southern fringes of the subcontinent and travelled all the way up to the north of India and kept itself alive until the 18th century, bringing with it a new kind of interest in religion for the common masses. Although much interest and scholarship has projected bhakti practices to be a sort of coherent 'movement', they defied any unitary method of articulating their ideas and remained in a liminal space of being enigmatically personal and at the same time overtly political in their context.

The bhakti poets were essentially regional. They consciously chose to limit their audience to one specific language, although most of them were well versed in the cosmopolitan language of Sanskrit. In that, they were not supporting anything like the 'sub-nationalism' of modern times. Instead, each bhakt's quest toward his own self, or own language, was a gesture to a universal appeal. In this quest, they developed a certain moral philosophy, akin to Immanuel Kant's "categorical imperative," which states that humans must work "that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." So too it was for the bhakt, an attempt to not act at all for oneself, but to carve out a space where individual action would undoubtedly be linked to the greater good of every being. This contradictory gesture to the Self was inevitably posited in a view of the Other.

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The intellectual preconditions for bhakti, it was argued by the saint-poets, were laid out much earlier with mentions in Vedas and even the Upanishads. Yet, bhakti was seen in those texts as not the most ideal thing to hone; the attainment of moksha, remained the main goal. It was in the *Bhagavata Purana*, composed sometime between 800 CE and 1000 CE, that the most remarkable and distinct evaluation of this theme of bhakti emerged. where its potentials were explored to the farthest stretches. The *Bhagavata Purana*— a text that celebrated the oncoming of Krishna and his life – in time, came to be regarded as the beginning of a new mode of relating to the divine – one where the joy of devotionality trumped the desire for liberation, and exultation for the divine was fundamental to a good life. Gaudiya Vaishnavas like Rupa Gosvami (1489–1564) redefined bhakti as a category definitively separate from *jnana*, knowledge, and made it a higher goal than moksha.

In this binary division, *jnana* represented the touch of Vedic rites and Vedantic gnosis. Bhakti meant the opposite, a reverent action in the service of Krishna without any intruding sense of action, or knowledge. The transition from moksha to bhakti represents the dynamic nature of Indian philosophical traditions that move away from the strict clutches of Vedic knowledge into more integrative Puranic Hinduism which not only provided space for new kinds of characters and stories but also made those narratives accessible to a larger scale of masses. It was this large corpus of oral and intellectual history that our well-known icons of Bhakti poetry inherited.

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This background will serve us to undertake a little journey into one such context in Odia to tell us more about the bhakt, their experience, and more importantly their mental world.

Following the larger trend of the literary endeavours across many regions in India, Odisha too saw a widespread literary efflorescence through the 15th century. Identified with the emergence of *Pancasakhas* – the five bhakti saints – this period is generally known to be the time of immense vibrancy for the linguistic development and the stability of identity for the people. The theme of love for Krishna and his life was, mainly, the subject of these saint-poets' poetic expression.

Yet, these bhakts, were not subscribing to one unilateral worldview from the sources of their reference. Two widely known bhakts, Balarama Dasa and Jagannatha Dasa, will illustrate this matter with some clarity.

Balarama Dasa – eldest of the *Panchasakhas* and self-identified as a Shudra – is most acclaimed for his *Lakshmi Purana*, a long poem that is sung in the holy month of Margashira in the Odia calendar ((November-December in the Gregorian). Composed in the simplest, yet poetically charged *dandi* meter, this text, in first appearance fulfils all criteria for being categorised as an orthodox religious text: it is didactic, it steers towards some form ritual practice and underlines the ways in which the deity is powerful and thus must be obeyed.

However, a close glance will shed these assumptions quite easily.

> For Balarama Dasa, the purana offers two moves at once: the encoding of the folk into a register of a more 'serious' domain, and at the same time, using the genre to subvert the Vedic hegemony.

The Laksmi Purana's narrative is centered around the relationship between Lakshmi – the goddess of wealth and the consort of Jagannath, an avatar of Vishnu – and her devotee. On her usual rounds of the town during Margashira, Lakshmi finds that a house is clean and pristine and follows all procedures duly to welcome her. It is the humble dwelling of a poor outcaste woman, Sriya, in the outskirts of the city. Lakshmi enters the house and rewards her devotee with gifts and wealth. However, on return to the abode, Jagannath and his elder brother Balabhadra stop her on the insistence of the latter, for she has 'lost' her caste status by mingling with an outcaste.

Lakshmi teaches a lesson to Jagannatha by making it a point that the caste identity of her devotee is not relevant if due diligence is shown, as Sriya does. She abandons her consort and makes him starve until he accepts that it is Lakshmi's right to take sojourns to places that she wills, that her benevolence cannot be limited to anyone, and that the outcaste and the Brahmin must be treated in equal ways.

Insofar as this text is concerned, it is a radical reworking of the orthodox paradigms of religion. Balarama Dasa's quest here is to utilise the existing hegemony of Jagannatha and Lakshmi in the Hindu/Vaishnava order of things to subvert the Vedic hegemony into which they were being pushed into, specifically by attempting to make a case about their accessibility to the 'lower caste' woman. In addition to this, Lakshmi Purana is also a *brata katha* – a text sung by women to celebrate and feel the ecstasy of Lakshmi's presence – that borrows heavily from the largely agrarian lives of people and has no clear model in Sanskrit from where it is reworked. For Balarama Dasa, the purana offers two moves at once: the encoding of the folk into a register of a more 'serious' domain, and at the same time, using the genre to subvert the Vedic hegemony.

These choices go into the heart of the purana genre. The puranas can be taken as one of the three levels of expression seen in Sanskrit literature, where the other two are Vedic and folk. The puranic functions as a method of depicting the folk in a form that encodes the existing Vedic as well as the folk into a different time/space continuum that is entrenched in the varna system of Brahminical ideology. However, it is the same puranic tradition that was used to instill a deep change in its form and content, starting with *Bhagavata Purana*, to create a justification for bhakti from within the puranic order.

In stark contrast to Balarama Dasa stands Jagannatha Dasa, the saint-poet who composed the iconic Odia *Bhagabata*, a rendition from the *Bhagavata Purana* in Sanskrit.

The *Bhagabata* is essentially a retelling of the Sanskrit text in so far as that it elucidates the complex philosophical tenets of the original into simple Odia. But it also aimed at creating a proper narrative for making the text palatable to the audience. For example, the terse, supernatural, and often heavenly image of Krishna's birth that one endures in the *Bhagavata Purana* is presented in the *Bhagabata* as more or less as a familial, or even conjugal drama, in where the parents Basudev and Devaki are in conversation. The *Bhagabata* presents the audience – a largely peasant and agrarian people – the right passage of entry into bhakti for the divine by making it an event in their experience of life.

> Puranic Hinduism – or the purana as a genre – interacts with the socio-political situations of its time to remould the existing Vedic ideas of Hinduism and integrates a new kind of parlance into it.

This difference between how the purana text in Sanskrit and Oriya are dealt with lays before the reader how the translator operates with careful recognition of his context, as well as his role in working as a commentator who takes into account the audience and accordingly adjusts the complexity of expression only to reach its final aim: convey, as it were, the rasa of the *Bhagavata Purana*.

However, Jagannatha Dasa promotes a regimental, and much stricter adherence to the scriptures in terms of his depiction of the order of gender and caste. His way of bhakti lies primarily in preparing the folk for the austerities of the devotionality, which is perhaps limited to a certain powerful section of society. Additionally, the social codes of the upper-caste moralities are kept intact. Although Jagannatha Dasa deviates into familial drama to describe Krishna's birth, he remains faithful to the ideological impetus that conceives Krishna as a *dwija,* twice-born, demonstrating his intentions to perpetuate the Brahmanical order. (It is important to remember that Jagannatha Dasa was born to a Brahmin family in Puri and had strong training in the scriptures from his father.)

In underlining these two situations in some length, I have indicated the way Puranic Hinduism – or the purana as a genre – interacts with the socio-political situations of its time to remould the existing Vedic ideas of Hinduism and integrates a new kind of parlance into it. In one instance (of Balarama Dasa), it is a directly subversive text that refutes Brahmanical hegemony. In the other (Jagannatha Dasa), Brahmanical ideology is perpetuated as aspirational and recruits more people into it. In both these cases, though they rework the question of accessibility to knowledge and revamp the ideological project of Vedic Brahmanism through puranas composed in the vernacular.

My suggestion here is to read the bhakt not as some ecstatic, purely emotional being whose love for the divine is all consuming. It is not a site of joy without sentient thought, nor is it a place of complete surrender in so far as that it leaves no space for intellectual diversity. Rather, as these two cases show us, the bhakt uses the tropes of devotionality, considers the social stance he is expounding, and more importantly, the kind of audience he is speaking to.

> Voices of dissent, denial and reformulation of ideas took place within what is designated to be a space of 'sacred' and kept out of historical scrutiny in the current moment.

These factors are crucial in determining the ways in which the multiplicity of ideas emerge and flourish under the larger umbrella of what is commonly known as bhakti. The bhakt uses pre-existing codes of the public space available to them and moulds into their ideological standpoint. In this, bhakti is not an ossified category of devotional practice; instead it is a dynamic space. The bhakt, much like the citizen in Habermas' public sphere, participates to enable the creation of not only their private truths, but also settle public debates very much like our institutional practice in modern life.

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What is the relevance of underlining the principles of debates and the presence of a public sphere in the early modern times? How does it at all contribute to the present political debates of our time?

The plural space of reworking the stories of Vedic order into Puranic genres and narratives demonstrate to us the ways in which stories can be neutral organisms which might then be used in specific circumstances to gain ideological results of a specific kind. These examples from mediaeval Odisha put in perspective the ways in which the voices of dissent, denial and reformulation of ideas took place within what is designated to be a space of 'sacred' and kept out of historical scrutiny in the current moment. By looking at the ways in which the individual spiritual voice of the saint-poet engages with the larger context of polity, social landscape as well structures of patronage and economy, we can assimilate a more coherent idea about the ways in which debates and differences were not simply lofty philosophical ideas, nor were they forced onto us after the institutionalisation of modern, secular and democratic visions.

Instead, by valuing and evaluating the modern framework of citizenship rights as well democratic statutes to free expression and speech, in the light of our 'own' heritage that valued these qualities in the best of our minds, we are presented a scope to create a bridge between the ever-increasing chasm between the 'nativist' and 'modernist' visions.

This faux binary between the two, where disagreement with tradition is seen as a transgression of 'Indian' cultural values, is severely limited and often wrong. 'Secular' values of debates and rights can and must be seen in sync with the pre-modern values, not as some sort of idealised or glorified past, but as a larger trajectory where those ideas evolve and crystallise over time to empower more and more people from the fringes of our society.

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