

Bhakti: The Perspective of Historiography and the Science of Religion

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Modern thought is scientific or positivistic which finds explanation in terms of observable factors. The utility of the study of ancient Indian religious texts in the perspective cannot be evaluated unless we analyze the historiography of religion and *bhakti* and seek the relationship of religious life to social forces. The *bhakti* movement has had a profound influence on the contemporary social conditions. The deep spiritual feeling inspired by *bhakti* especially in the *Puranas* transformed the social attitudes. But still we see that there is a strong trend of social determinism in the recent historiography of religion.

Modern sociological theory has emerged as part of positivistic philosophy. Thus Comte the founder of Sociology formulated his law of three stages, declaring that primitive thought was mythological and it tried to explain all phenomenon in terms of Gods. In the second stage everything was explained by metaphysical principles which virtually replaced the Gods. The third stage reached in modern thought is scientific or positivistic which finds explanation in terms of observable actors.¹ Earlier societies understood man

1 Auguste Comte, *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (Trans Martino *The Positive Philosophy* – London) of M. Zeitlin – *Ideology and the Development of Sociological Theory*, p. 59.

were derived. Now modern Sociology is thus a positive replacement of theology or theology based morality. It regards man and society as objects of positive laws of society and human nature man is free to devise and create laws and pursue the ideal of humanity. The religion of man thus substitutes traditional religion.

Durkheim declared that man pictures god in the images of society.² Society is the basic reality which provides man with norms, guidance and laws.

Marx goes a step further. All religions and philosophy are for him super structural entities which are determined by a substructure of the forces of production, that is to say, by the means of production and the relations of production.³ Thus religion is not merely a false ideology but also a strategy calculated to help the ruling class in exploiting the common people.

All these views agree that religion is a species of illusion and that its basic purpose is to represent social facts and relations under some garb. Marxism adds that the purpose of religion is socially repressive.

2 Bogardus, *The Development of Social Thought*, pp 418 ff.

3 Karl Marx, *Critique of Political Economy, Preface to the 2nd Edition*.

While many ancient Indian historians who are Marxists are clear about their own theoretical stand points many others tend to be eclectic and seem to believe that religion being a social phenomenon should have a social explanation.

Whatever social data about social relations, is found in texts expounding *Bhakti* is thus taken to a reflection of social conditions on religious ideas and practices. However, if the positivistic hypothesis is accepted the super human or supernatural origin of such a religion would be automatically rejected. Some historians, however, feel that the historian need not make a choice between positivism and spiritualism. He is simply guided by what comes to his notice, from historical records and records from the observation of living tradition.⁴ Thus, the historian notices diverse beliefs and customs, sentiments, attitudes and thus symbolic expression which comprise practical evidence. Whether the beliefs, sentiments and symbols have any real transcendent reference or not the historian cannot decide, he can only describe what he notices i.e. form of social behaviors esp. symbolic behavior. The account of social fact belonging to secular activity and those relating to religious activity cannot be radically distinguished. Similar social facts are labelled religious when they are stamped with some supposed transcendent

4 Since Bauer argued that the miraculous elements in the synoptic gospels could not be regarded as historical evidence, controversy raged on the issue and even Bradley wrote his famous critical pre suppositions of History. Collingwood, *Idea of History.*, p. 135.

reference. In this situation the historian cannot avoid treating secular and religious social institutions as vitally interconnected. The influence of religion in society would reflect the influence of belief of a particular kind on social behavior. The origin of this belief appear to lie as a long social tradition. So the historical account of religion even without assuming a positivistic philosophy would appear to be naturally subsumable within ordinary social history.

We have thus three distinct points of view about the relationship of religious life to social forces. The traditional historian's liberal point of view tends to be agnostic, rational and objective, describes religion in its own terms as a social tradition of beliefs and practices with a pronounced symbolic intention. The second point of view of Sociology in general is positivistic and seeks to reduce the elements of religious life into more basic social explanation of primitive religion. Myths, rituals and beliefs are shown to arise out of given social and environmental conditions in accordance with certain basic primitive modes of thought. The third approach is the Marxist approach. It not only stresses social determinism and reductionism but it also introduces reductionism of a particular kind. It reduces religious ideologies to means used in the process of social exploitation. Religion thus becomes not only a false ideology but also an active expression of a vested social interest.

Much of the recent social historiography of India has tended to follow this approach since Kosambi wrote his work. Kosambi explains Vedic religion as the religion of a nomadic pastoral and tribal society of invading Aryans. Dange had earlier already explained Yajna as the process of

production in a primitive commune. The rise of Buddhism and Jainism is explained by Kosambi as due to the growth of an agrarian economy which made animal sacrifices unprofitable and the breakdown of tribes.

The breakdown of tribes led to caste system. It was manifested by the priests with the help of rulers. The idea of re-birth or transmigration was invented to make away the stint of social justice and reconcile the people.⁵

Kosambi explains the Gita as product of confusion and contradictions⁶ to reconcile people to the social suffering of this world by devotion to God. It could be argued that statements as “Having come to this impermanent world of suffering practice love to me”. *Anityam asukham lokam imam praphy bhajasva mama*, could be taken to offer solace to suffering. Thus, *bhakti* was intended to reconcile the downtrodden with sheer lot. That is why the realm of *bhakti* was extended to Sudra and others. With the opiate of *bhakti* they could easily forget their suffering so that their potential for social revolutions would perish.

5 D.D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality*, p. 27

6 D.D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical outline*, p. 207

R.S. Sharma has connected *bhakti* with the feudal systems. The idea of loyalty and towards ones social superior was sanctified by a religious overtone. When Mira says *mane cakara rakho ji*, she uses a typically feudal word *cakara*. The medieval development of *bhakti* in terms of elaborate time consuming rituals provided full time occupation to upper class devotees.

However, the social explanation of *Bhakti* has been proposed in a different manner also. The development of *Bhakti* in the lower classes and castes is treated as a progressive phenomenon. The role of medieval satins especially of Nirguna *Bhakti* like Kabir, Nanak, Dadu or ealier of the south Indian saints thus break away from the social conservatism and rigidity of the ealier religions. *Bhakti* movement acquires a distinct dimension of reform and social radicalism. This can be seen most clearly in the 19th cent. movements of religious reform.

Let us consider these approaches. As far as Positivistic sociological approach is concerned it pre-supposes a certain philosophy. It assumes that man and society are to be studied in the manner in which the natural world has to be studied. It assumes that the external world is the model of reality and that sense experience is the primary mode of its expressions. It sees man as a natural creature to be understood by the observation of his behavior. It assumes that the truth of the belief must be ultimately determined by an appeal to empirical verifications. It need hardly be said that all these beliefs are of the nature of presuppositions. The distinction between human and natural reality has been clearly shown by the existentialists as distinctions between being in itself (*en soi*) and being for itself (*pour soi*). Human

consciousness is characterized by being for itself. For the identity of the conscious human being to be determined by the observations of his behavior

for the other people must always lead to false identity. If a person accepts that identity he would live an inauthentic existence.

If Positivism is effectively disproved by the existentialist insight the Marxist reductions of the life of consciousness to the class struggle, is a gross simplification. Man is not simply an economic being and he is not simply a species being. He is essentially a free consciousness, a self-conscious existence whose creativity produces culture.

Marxism regards technology to substructure but technology arises from sciences and science itself rests on what Collingwood called absolute presuppositions. White head would have called these foundational ideas cosmological. In other words, the distinctions between the substratum, superstratum cannot be very sharp.

If religion has truth it would not be distinguishable from the general weltanschauung which is presuppositions by science that is to say religious beliefs are not ideological but veridical and scientific. It is of course, possible to mix up genuine religious insight with social prejudices. But that kind of distortion is possible then with the social applications of science.

The particular explanation offered by Marxist historians of Indian religious life are too speculative to be acceptable to particular history. Thus, the connections between pastoral nomadism and Vedic religion is farfetched and marginal. The connection between the Buddhist protest against the animal

sacrifices and the needs of agriculture is entirely speculative. Buddhism nowhere shows an interest in developing agriculture. On the other hand, it advises the renunciation of the world. There is no documentary would show that animal sacrifices were regarded as prejudicial to agricultural interest or that the Buddhist ever made this plea. Some scholars see a wide gulf between the Vedic religion of sacrifice and the *Bhakti* religion of love. This perception is misguided both in regarding sacrifice as mere action and *Bhakti* as the mere feeling of love. In fact the *Brahmana's*, *Aranyakas*, and the *Upanishads* are frequently at pains to explain the symbolic meaning of sacrifice and this process can be as an example. The original sacrifice is the sacrifice of the *purusha* himself i.e. it is nothing but self-sacrifice. The essential Yajna is *antarayaga* or *atmayajna* which is implied by statements like *havirvaidiksitah*.

As for *bhakti* and feudalism there is no doubt that some of the saints wrote within a feudal atmosphere which was to a certain extent reflected in their social assumptions but this is the least significant part of *Bhakti* literature and practice. It is considered as the love of God. The saints did not seek material gains for themselves. They showed how the love of God can give supreme happiness irrespective of one's social position. They showed that the practice of *Bhakti* did not depend on one's social conditions. What they seek to express is an autonomous spiritual life which could transfigure social life without requiring any radical economic transformation. The transfigured social psyche could of course create further social change on its own. Just as a recalcitrant social psyche could hinder the spread of *Bhakti* e.g. Sikhism was a new devotional movement. It infused a new zeal and courage in its followers and helped the creation of the new community which could be war

like as well as economically productive. On the other hand, the force of social conservatism resisted the spread of *Bhakti* movements. Even in the nineteenth century thus *Brahma Samaja* and *Arya Samaja* faced opposition.

Another trend in the modern historiography of ancient Indian religions is the ethnocentric tendency. This can be seen in the many modern researches on *Puranas*. The ethnocentric tendency makes a break between the “higher religions” and tribal religions or between “sanskritic culture” or “mainstream culture” and “peripheral culture” or between brahmanical and traditional culture” and preliterate belief systems. The view considers these as separate cultural traditions. The various myths, rituals, fast and pilgrimages are interpreted in the light of the process of “acculturation”. The myths or legend of various gods are interpreted as transformation of tribal deities into the Puranic fold. The doctrine of *avatara* is seen as the incorporation of totem symbols and beliefs belonging to various animistic cults. The growth of Vaishnava a pantheon is understood as the result of the incorporation of pastoral and agricultural local sects. The legend of *Vamana* is seen as a mythical expression of land grabbing process which was a common phenomenon in the period. The major *tirthas* are said to betray regional or tribal association, the various demigods are seen as the representation of various tribes.

Bhakti is seen to show two distinct phase of growth and development. In the first stage it is interpreted as an effective ideological weapon in the hands of the “mainstream ideologies seeking to indoctrinate the marginalized social segments and in the second stage it was sized by the marginalized segments to fight and subvert inequities perpetrated by the feudal social

order.⁷ But the above view forgets that the ancient culture was related to the tribal culture but this relation was based on wisdom and the strands of the two were inter twined in such a way that both seem to reflect the same fundamental values or imponderable vision, the eternal dharma or the basic patterns of spiritual ideals having mysterious supranational nature. Sometimes the ethos of cultural consciousness was transformed in a changed cultural context e.g. *Siva linga* is seen as representing fertility cult but it also came to be regarded as a pillar of light i.e. consciousness that pervades the microcosm and macrocosm.

Joachim Wach opines that to derive the origin of the religious ideas from historical facts is as misleading as to consider the religious facts as totally independent of external events.⁸ We can trace the development of *Bhakti* and the logical maturity of the ideas of *bhakti* from the Vedic times only. Religious history and myths represent the perennial values and ideas of a society. Hence they have objectivity in so far as they appear in the context of social facts. But on the other hand they go beyond this, as their experience assumes a universal dimension. Though religious and philosophical ideas appear in a certain point of time they are really timeless.

7 Vijaya Nath – *Puranas and Acculturation – A Historio Anthropological Perspective*, p. 176

8 Joachim Wach, *Sociology of Religion*, p. 54

Hence, to connect these ideas with specific social institutions like feudalism does not seem right. Such views rest more on social theory than on social history.

Turning to the liberal agnostic explanation it can be seen that it is really insufficient and half-baked in the understanding of religion. Merely summarizing the religious beliefs and practices in their own terms without attempting to go deep in their meaning and value can only prove frustrating and barren. It is not really possible to study the claim of truth and value without seeking to judge them. Agnostic historians tend by application to condemn religion as Gibbon has done.

Another recent trend in the historiography of *Bhakti* is the anti-essentialist historiography. This view regards *Bhakti* as a social and cultural phenomenon in which certain psychological attitudes, beliefs, images and modes of behavior are invested with value. As a particular complex of images, sentiments and beliefs what goes under the name of *Bhakti* is highly variable not only in its details but in its socio-historical causation. Since this variability effects cultural as well as social phenomenon, Max Weber⁹ had long ago suggested the study of ideal of ideal types to enable the understanding of such phenomenon. Wittgenstein in his search for the nature of language and meaning had suggested that the various meanings of a word may often simply show a family resemblance.¹⁰ As an example, brothers and

9 For Max Weber see Raymond Aron, *Main currents in sociological thought*, p. 65.

10 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, For religious beliefs *Lectures and conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, p. 71

cousins of a family may show certain resemblances without implying that there is anything apart from the separate individuals. *bhakti* thus, could mean the love of Jesus, or *Krsna* or *Narayana*. Its other instances would have to be understood in the light of their own separate individually than in the light of some ideal paradigm. Guy Poitevin and Hema Raikar in a recent publication entitled “Stone Mill and *Bhakti*” have argued that the historian of *bhakti* should not postulate a developing essence but rather give an account of diverse phenomena connected with *Bhakti* as they come up in different time and places. As an example of Essentialism they have mentioned my book “Birth of *bhakti* in Indian Religions and Art” and commented on it in detail. This view however, does not appreciate the real nature of *bhakti* as not merely a cultural phenomenon or a social movement but an eternal spiritual verity which underlies them. Man as a spiritual being in the toils of finitude and mortality finds himself in a standing contradiction. As a spiritual being he seeks his fulfilment in immortality and infinitude. This longing can be fulfilled only by the grace of the Supreme Spirit and *bhakti* is nothing but the willingness of man to surrender himself to the force of grace. In essence thus, *bhakti* is the universal core of all religions. The real problem in the historiography of *bhakti* is to discuss the role of unity and differentiation within the historical variations of religions.

Anti-essentialism is historiographically relevant only in so far as it repudiates transcendental forces as historical explanations since these are not evidencible. This cannot however justify a purely behavioral or positivistic approach which also presupposes an empiricist metaphysics. Nor can the

concept of family resemblances avoid further questions about the sources of such resemblances. Phenomena cannot be identified by arbitrary abstractions but only by adequate or essential causes.

About the meaning of words we may recall the lively controversy on the subject in ancient times. Some believe that words signify universals, others particulars, still others individuals combining the two. It is the Buddhist nominalists who had to posit the notion of "*family resemblance*" to make clarification possible. The historian cannot avoid assuming the working of human nature and the effort of seeking to understand human behavior in terms of its various dimensions. The history of religion cannot be understood without the assumption of a spiritual dimension in human nature and this spiritual dimension of seeking presupposes the idea of a supreme spirit. Whether such an idea is true or not is a metaphysical question beyond the ken of the historian. Even so, the discussion of his question of truth lie within the history of ideas. It is also difficult for the historian to avoid a personal choice in such matters thought he must avoid dogmatism.

Hence, we see that there is strong trend of social determinism in the recent historiography of religion. In point of fact however, if social conditions are treated as autonomous realm or as determined by economic conditions it can have only an external relationship with religious life. It can help or hinder the prevalence of a certain kind of religious faith but it cannot determine the inner content of that faith. On the other hand, it could be truer to say that religious faith has a profound effect on social attitudes and thus, on social condition e.g. it is the *bhakti* movement which has shaped the social

attitudes in its age whether we take the age of *Alavars* or *Nayanars* or the age of saints of Northern India in the fifteenth-sixteenth social attitude of *bhakti* thus represents the expressions of a deeper spiritual feeling transforming traditional social attitudes. *Mahabharata* (*Ajagara parva*) *Yudhishtira* says that if a Sudra is endorsed with high moral qualities then he should be considered a Brahmin. *Bhagawata* says that even Sudras and outcastes are eligible for *bhakti*. The *Bhagawata* also expresses a class attitude, when *Krsna* says that he is worshipped most by the poor. This social liberalism isn't the consequence but the cause of the spread of *bhakti* in all classes and castes.

The trend of Philosophical explorations, in the Indian *bhakti* tradition has been revived by eminent philosophers as Dr. Daya Krishna recently. In his *bhakti* – a contemporary discussion (proceedings of a seminar sponsored by ICPR) he has raised many issues related to the philosophical dimensions of the *bhakti* tradition, most of the questions are related to *bhakti* a matter of feeling *visavis bhakti* as a matter of philosophical thought. In his introduction he has raised the questions whether the *gopis* love *Krsna* or were in love with their own feeling of live, and why *Arjuna* could not stand the “real reality” of God in his *visvarupa* form (Introduction). But as an answer to the above Questions it can be said that *Arjuna* even after losing out to the *Abhiras* after *Krsna's* departure sings the glory of *Krsna* saying at the same time that he had been tricked by his brethren – *Krsna* – *Vancitoaham maharaja Harina bandhurupina* (*Bhagawata Purana*, 1.15.5) The enigmatic personality of *Krsna* becomes even more an object of *bhakti* which is beyond all the apparent paradoxes. The Indian mind is no perturbed by them.

It may be said that the various stories and incidents from the Krsna katha express the various levels and nuances of love in *Bhakti*. Just as the nature of love is described as ineffable (*anirvacaniya*) like a dumb person's

taste of delight in *Narada Bhakti sutra* (4th Ch. *sutras* 51-56) similarly a synoptic vision of the nature of love cannot be expressed in words or as a philosophical discussion. The love of *gopis*, of *Arjuna* and others are instances of the expression of the various states of the interaction of the absolute with the phenomenal, the self-caught between its empirical and transcendental identity and the asymptotic approach to spiritual illumination. Hence a kaleidoscopic vision of *Bhakti* is presented by the different types of stories and *bhaktas* especially in the Puranas. What cannot be expressed fully in language is sought to be expressed through stories especially in *Krsna katha*. Judging individual instances as the ultimate expression of *Bhakti* would result in the error of *akhyati*. Similarly interpreting the stories entirely in the context of human situation would also be hazardous as they have an independent realm of their own which is also symbolic.

Probably this was the reason why an entire theory of *Bhakti* as *rasa* developed in ancient India it was identified with the highest spiritual state I have discussed this in detail in my article *bhakti and rasa their historical connection and philosophical meaning*.

BHAKTI AND THE SCIENCE OF RELIGION

Although the history of religion has remained for long, the most important modern approach to the study of religion, and has virtually

replaced the earlier nineteenth century study of comparative religion, there have emerged some new approaches which consider the truth claims of different religions without any ostensible commitment to any one of them. The philosophy of religion in its modern phase is largely a rational evolution of theological beliefs. The science of religion is essentially a phenomenology of religion. It regards religion as a basic form of human behavior from which different traditions of reflection have produced diverse theologies. Besides the science of religion is not committed to any one theology but seeks to appreciate the plurality of religious phenomena and their ideological interpretation. It is not a science of the transcendent objects of religion nor does it like the philosophy of religion seek to determine the real and unique truth of religion by the logical analysis of diverse truth claims. The science of religion is a phenomenological science which studies the forms and structures of religious experience in different traditions.

The comparative religion in the 19th century west was principally founded by Max Muller tended to distinguish between the studies of pre Christian religion as mythological and Christian religion understood in terms of theology. In the vogue of positivistic social science theology remained distinct although attempts were made to demythologize it. The comparative study of archaic mythical religion was linked to philological study. The history of religion as already explained in the previous section has not

escaped the subterranean influences of theology or positivism. The philosophy of religion tends to be critical and agnostic in so far as religious truth is taken literally. The most important critique of religion arises from the analytical philosophy. Analytical philosophy as expressed by logical positivism reduces reality to sense data and is left with the task of explaining the unity and structure of knowledge. Unless reality itself is structured, structured knowledge would be arbitrary or at best founded on some mental bias rising from evolutionary factors. In particular the question of the universal cannot be eliminated from any philosophy of mathematics as was realized by Russell. Wittgenstein himself saw the difficulties of the tractatus and gave it up. The later logical positivists were hard put to defend the doctrine of truth as empirical verification. The study of the language of religion however tends to emphasize the non-literal symbolic significance of religious beliefs. From this point the science of religion is largely an appraisal of religion as a plurality.¹¹ Mythic and symbolic signification embedded in diverse psycho social experiences are encountered in the course of religious behavior.

The inalienable connection of religion with experience held to be veridical and not merely a form of psychological consolation and make belief requires a notion of truth which is neither theological nor scientific. The theological notion of truth is incompatible with the genuine plurality of religion. The scientific notion of truth is inapplicable to the symbolic expressions of

11 Ninian Smart, *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge*, Ch. 1.7

mystical experience or transcendental reality. It is in India that a distinctive understanding of religion is in the context of the ideological co-existence of religious diversity. From the Vedic *ekam sad vipra bahudha uadanti* to Madhusudan Saraswati and concept of *prasthanabheda* the idea of the unity of religious truths in and through the diversity of *sadhana* has been accepted as a working philosophy of spiritual life in India. In modern times Raja Ram Mohan Roy formulated this doctrine through an authentic study of religions. Ram Krishna Paramhansa personally verified the diversity of religious truth. Scholars like Mm Gopinath Kavi Raj have expounded it. It is this point of view which kaviraj ji called the confederation of metapsychic verities that appears the most acceptable.

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