

Dialectics Between Bhakti and Mukti Movements in India

Amit Kumar Yadav¹, Krishan Kumar²

¹PhD Research Scholar at Centre for Comparative Politics and Political Theory, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Email: [amitjnu6999\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:amitjnu6999[at]gmail.com)

ORCID ID - 0009 - 0007 - 8427 - 9131

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=rzm-MpcAAAJ&hl=en>

²PhD Research Scholar at Centre for Inner Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Email: [kkumar0076\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:kkumar0076[at]gmail.com)

Abstract: *The Bhakti and Mukti movements in India, often viewed as a unified spiritual phenomenon, are in reality two distinct ideological streams that reflect contrasting visions of social order and liberation. While the Bhakti movement, as represented by figures like Tulsidas, Mirabai, and Surdas, emphasized devotion and religious faith, the Mukti movement, championed by Sant Ravidas, Kabir, and Dadu, sought radical social transformation. Sant Ravidas's concept of 'Begumpura' represents an egalitarian vision of a casteless, classless society, challenging the hierarchical structures reinforced by mainstream Bhakti traditions. The historiographical interpretation of these movements has often diluted the revolutionary essence of the Mukti movement by subsuming it under Bhakti, thereby neutralizing its potential for social change. This paper re-examines the dialectics between Bhakti and Mukti movements, highlighting their inherent contradictions and the need to recognize Mukti as an independent liberation movement. Through an analysis of literary and historical sources, this study asserts the continued relevance of the Mukti movement in contemporary struggles against caste-based oppression and social injustice.*

Keywords: Bhakti Movement; Mukti Movement; Begumpura; Egalitarian; Ravidas; Tradition; Nirgun

The month of February holds historical significance, particularly for those engaged in the struggle for social justice, equality, and human liberation, and who envision a society free from exploitation. Every year, on February 12, the birth anniversary of Sant Guru Ravidas is celebrated, marking his role as a revolutionary figure in India's socio-cultural landscape. Sant Ravidas was not confined to mere devotion to God; rather, his consciousness resonated with a distinct rebellion against social injustice, caste discrimination, and systemic exploitation. It is no coincidence that within this broader movement, divergent streams emerged some of which challenged the existing social order. Traditionally, the Indian intellectual tradition has not emphasized rigid classification of ideas. Instead, it has fostered a philosophy of coexistence rather than confrontation. However, when it comes to social structures and power relations, it becomes evident that oppressors and the oppressed cannot be placed within the same theoretical framework. Thus, presenting the Bhakti movement as a monolithic and homogenous phenomenon is not only historically inaccurate but also unjust. The hegemonic scholars of Hindi literature have deliberately attempted to depoliticize and neutralize its revolutionary potential by labeling it as a mere Bhakti movement. In reality, what they define as the Bhakti movement was far from a singular ideological entity; rather, it comprised two conflicting streams, one that upheld religious devotion and submission to divine authority, and another that sought radical social transformation.

On one hand, poets such as Tulsidas, Mirabai, and Surdas emphasized devotion rooted in religious faith and surrender to God. Tulsidas's conceptualization of 'Ram Rajya' (the ideal kingdom of Lord Ram) sought to preserve the traditional social hierarchy, reinforcing the varnashrama system based on religious legitimacy. On the other hand, Sant Ravidas,

Kabir, Dadu, and other Nirgun saints articulated a vision that was not merely religious but deeply intertwined with socio-political transformation. Sant Ravidas's idea of 'Begumpura' envisioned a society devoid of kings and beggars, free from caste and social discrimination. This was not just a mystical or spiritual aspiration it was an unambiguous call for social liberation. A stark contrast can be observed between the ideological foundations of Tulsidas and Ravidas. While Tulsidas upheld the supremacy of a "worthless Brahmin" over a "learned Shudra" and propagated a philosophy of contentment through begging, Ravidas, in contrast, emphasized the dignity of labor and advocated for the reverence of even a "knowledgeable Chandal" (outcaste). Thus, equating Tulsidas and Ravidas within the same ideological framework is as erroneous as juxtaposing Karl Marx and Adam Smith as proponents of the same economic philosophy. Tulsidas's Ram Rajya reinforces the varnashrama system, whereas Ravidas's Begumpura envisions a casteless, egalitarian society. This inherent conflict has been strategically obscured within the broader Bhakti movement. Hindi literary scholars have homogenized this discourse, concealing the fundamental contradictions embedded within it. Their agenda was to pacify this movement by categorizing it under Bhakti, thereby stifling its revolutionary spirit and preventing its potential to ignite social transformation. To fully comprehend the dialectics of the Bhakti movement, one must also analyze the class structure of Indian society. In social theory, dialectics refers to the presence of contradictions within any ideological or social movement. The Bhakti movement was no exception. If reduced solely to God-worship and devotion, a crucial aspect its demand for social change remains obscured. Therefore, categorizing it into multiple streams is essential.

Volume 14 Issue 2, February 2025

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

www.ijsr.net

The internal conflict within the so - called Bhakti movement is evident. Figures like Mirabai, Tulsidas, and Surdas advocated individual salvation through divine grace. However, Sant Ravidas, Kabir, Dadu, and other saints did not limit their ideas to spiritual teachings; they directly challenged caste - based oppression and social injustice. Their words were not mere religious maxims but explicit critiques of the caste - ridden society. Sant Ravidas's vision of 'Begumpura' was not an abstract, utopian city but an articulation of a casteless, classless, and exploitation - free society. If this movement is solely interpreted as a Bhakti movement, it weakens its foundational radical consciousness. Hence, it must be re - examined as a Mukti (liberation) movement to restore and amplify its revolutionary potential. The relevance of this discourse persists today, just as it did in the medieval period. The struggle against caste - based exploitation, social injustice, and economic disparity continues. Broadly speaking, two opposing streams can be identified within this movement one that sought to preserve the status quo and another that pushed for socio - political revolution. Recognizing this dialectical tension is crucial for an accurate historical and ideological analysis. The conflict between the Bhakti and Mukti movements is not just a relic of history; it remains a contemporary issue. The ideological essence of the movements led by Sant Ravidas, Kabir, and others still resonates in today's social justice struggles.

Thus, it is imperative to reframe this discourse, to dissociate the Mukti movement from its Bhakti label, and to recognize it as an independent movement for liberation. This is essential for the oppressed sections of society to reclaim their historical legacy of resistance and transformation. The history of this movement is not merely a chronicle of religious devotion; it is also a history of socio - political struggle. A renewed scholarly engagement with this history is necessary to revitalize its radical energy and to establish it as a movement of liberation rather than passive devotion. This is the true legacy of Sant Ravidas and other revolutionary saints, a legacy that has been deliberately blurred under the name of Bhakti. The time has come to critically engage with and redefine this movement in its true essence.

Conclusion

The dialectical relationship between the Bhakti and Mukti movements underscores the complexity of India's socio - religious history. The Bhakti movement, often perceived as a monolithic tradition, encompassed both conservative and radical elements. While Tulsidas and his contemporaries reinforced existing social hierarchies through devotional submission, Sant Ravidas and other Nirgun saints envisioned an egalitarian order free from caste and class oppression. The historiographical treatment of the Bhakti movement has often obscured these ideological divergences, thereby limiting the transformative potential of the Mukti movement. Recognizing Mukti as a distinct movement is crucial for reclaiming the legacy of social resistance embedded within it. The vision of Sant Ravidas's 'Begumpura' serves as a reminder that devotion need divorced from mukti, and that spiritual consciousness can serve as a vehicle for liberation rather than submission. The struggle against caste oppression and social inequality continues to be relevant in contemporary times, and the teachings of Mukti proponents remain a vital

source of inspiration for ongoing movements advocating for dignity, justice, and equality. Thus, a critical re - evaluation of these movements is essential to restore their historical and ideological integrity. The time has come to shift the discourse from a homogenized Bhakti framework to a more nuanced understanding that acknowledges and amplifies the revolutionary impulses of the Mukti movement. This re - examination not only enriches our historical perspective but also strengthens the foundation for contemporary struggles against systemic oppression and social injustice.

References

- [1] Yadav, A. K. Embracing Liberation: An All - Encompassing Approach to Comprehending and Resolving Global Challenges.
- [2] Mahanta, K., Nath, P. K., & Deka, P. (2022). Hindi criticism and Acharya Ramchandra Shukla. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6 (3), 5719 - 5721.
- [3] Wakankar, M. (2020). The moment of criticism in Indian nationalist thought: Ramchandra Shukla and the poetics of a Hindi responsibility. In *Enchantments of Modernity*.
- [4] SADARANGANI, N. M. (2001). *THE CONTEXT OF BHAKTI POETRY IN MEDIEVAL INDIA* (Doctoral dissertation, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda).
- [5] Prentiss, K. P. (2000). *The embodiment of bhakti*. Oxford University Press.
- [6] Holdrege, B. A. (2015). *Bhakti and Embodiment: Fashioning Divine Bodies and Devotional Bodies in Krsna Bhakti*. Routledge.
- [7] Suarsana, Y. (2025). Of Culture and (Indian) Nation: The Mukti Revival in Colonial Discourse. In *Revival Movements as Conflict Agendas of the Popular in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (pp.41 - 61). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- [8] Dastidar, S. G. (2015). *Mukti: Free to be born again: Partitions of Indian subcontinent, Islamism, Hinduism, leftism, and liberation of the faithful*. AuthorHouse.
- [9] Guru, G. (2016). The Indian nation in its egalitarian conception. *Dalit studies*, 31 - 49.