

National Seminar on “The Topography of Bhakti: Social Reform Watersheds in Indian Intellectual History (22-24 April 2019).

Concept Note:

“Bhakti” is one of the many untranslatable, interconnected and dynamic cultural-spiritual coordinates of the Indic world-view that characterize Bharat/ India as a living civilization, our “punyabhoomi” (sacred place) as well as “matri-pitra-bhoomi” (father/mother-land). Its ubiquitous presence in the very vitals of Bharatiya samaj and sanskriti (Indian society and culture), in perhaps every aspect of our national life-material, intellectual and spiritual gives a distinct “rasa” or flavour to the meaning of Bharat/India. One of the important clues to the amazing unity (ekata or ekatmakata) of Indian civilization, amidst its equally amazing seeming diversity- religious, linguistic, ethnic, diversity, “Bhakti” lies at the centre of the meaning of Bharat/India. The people of Bharat relished “Bhakti” so much that they envisioned and popularised what is known, in Indian Spiritual Tradition as “Bhakti-Yoga”, and in the realm of Aesthetics, as “Bhakti-Rasa/Aesthetic Emotion of Devotion”! In Indian tradition, “Bhakti” has always been a multivalent term and experience that signifies, inter alia, the process of “becoming integrated” with the whole, “being a part of or a division, devotion, fondness, trust, homage, worship, piety, love as a means of salvation, together with karman (works) and jnana (knowledge) a row, a series, that which belongs to, or contained in anything else”. Contrary to the semitic faiths, it is only in Hindu and other Indian faiths- Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, the advaitik or non-dualistic identification between the bhakta and Bhagawan (the devotee and the Lord) is considered a salient feature of process of attaining mukti or true freedom. Bhakti as a “Watershed” has been used in conjunction with “Social Reform” in the title of the Conference as a geographical metaphor that implies a crucially important or decisive factor, time or event that has always had a massive impact on the Indian people and their collective socio-cultural consciousness – empowering them to protest

against injustice of all sorts- whether caused by internal socio-cultural evils or by waves of invasions. Needless to say, whenever the people of India were subjugated or subjected to explosion and injustice, it is through the watershed of Bhakti that some important socio-cultural-political movement emerged and infused the Indian people with much-needed courage and hope.

In a remarkable sense, the continuous journey and undeniable significance of "Bhakti" in Bharat/India, from the ancient times- from the days of Rigveda, the Upanishadas, The Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Buddhist Therigathas, the Bhagavata, the Sangam Age, the Nayanars and the Alvars, Adi Shankaracharya, Such Saint- Acharya-Bhaktas as Ramanuja, Ramananda, Nimbarka, Basava, Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded, (as well as many women-bhaktas), Vallabhacharya, the Lingayatas, the Veershaivas, Tukaram, Eknath, Shankara Dev, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Kabir, Tulsi, Sur, the Sufis like Shah Hussain, Mirabai, Guru Nanak, Guru Tegh Bahadur, Guru Arjun Dev, Guru Gobind Singh, Ramkrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayananda, Tagore, Tilak, Gandhi, to this very day, clearly and emphatically suggests that the topography or spatiality of "Bhakti" has always been pan-Indian and its capacity to give rise to social reform watersheds (' watershed' -a geographical metaphor and concept- implying a crucially important or decisive factor, time or event, turning point or historic moment) has remained one of the most important factors of our national life or culture. It is in this sense that this Conference is an attempt to map the contours and flows of "Bhakti" in India's intellectual history. Hence the usage of the term- "topography". This very day throughout the mazes of known or unknown, recorded or unrecorded history has been the journey of Bharat as a civilization. It is to suggest this sense of "movement" of Bhakti from one place to another in the context of Indian history from the Rigveda to this day that the compound Bhakti Movement was constructed. But the point about "Bhakti", which has generally been ignored in the cultural

historiography of India, is that "Bhakti" per se, in consonance with Indian epistemological tradition, is always in movement! It is time to discuss "Bhakti-in- movement" now, as Bhakti Movement is a natural extension of Bhakti-in-Movement! It is through "Bhakti" that the people of India have tried to correct themselves socially as well as politically and follow the path of righteousness or dharma and swaraj! That is why, "Bhakti" and its different forms have given rise to so many "social reform watersheds" or the crucially important factors- social, political, cultural or spiritual that not only saved but also enabled the Indians to offer a brave resistance against the repeated and continuous military and cultural invasions and genocides for almost a thousand years in history. The Sikh Gurus, to prove the point, were great "Bhaktas" and "Saints"- having tremendous "Shastrabal" (power of knowledge) but they also understood and emphasized the value of "Shastrabal (the military power)". It was their unalloyed, selfless "Bhakti or devotion" to the Timeless Absolute that enabled them to create an important "social reform watershed" in Indian history.

What, however, pains a modern Indian is the almost uncritically accepted cultural historiography of India, and its validation through an ideologically-loaded pedagogy at school as well as university levels in the present-day India, that , more or less, has restricted or confined "Bhakti" to metaphysical / transcendental/ religious spaces in order to render it as a typical "orientalist" trait showing the irrational, the unscientific, the unintellectual and the backward-looking or un-progressive nature of Indian people or their collective cultural consciousness in order to validate, what Marx best defined as a territorial space sans history, culture and progress, and therefore, only fit to be colonized by the scientifically , rationally superior West/Europe!!

A National Seminar on "*The Topography of Bhakti: Social Reform Watersheds in Indian Intellectual History*" was organized at IIAS from 22-24 April, 2019. Dr. Gurpal Singh and Dr. Ravinder Singh from Punjab

University, Chandigarh were the conveners of this seminar. The Keynote address was delivered by Professor Sudhir Kumar, Punjab University, Chandigarh. Presidential Address was delivered by Professor Kapil Kapoor, Chairman, IIAS and the vote of thanks was given by Dr. Gurpal Singh.

Participants:

- Dr. Anju Jagpal, Associate Professor, Department of English, Government PG College, Ambala Cantt., Haryana
- Dr. Chitra Sreedharan, Fergusson College, Pune
- Professor Jagpal Singh, DES-MDRL, Panjab University, Chandigarh
- Dr. Ambuj Kumar Pandey, K.B.P.G College, Mirzapur, UP
- Professor Shrawan Kumar Sharma, Department of English, Gurukula Kungri Vishwavidyalaya, Haridwar, U.K.
- Professor Jagbir Singh, Delhi University, Delhi
- Dr. Dhananjay Singh, Assistant Professor in Hindi Dr. SRK Government Arts College, Yanam, Puducherry
- Professor Vijay Bahadur Singh, 29, Nirala Nagar, Dushyant Kumar Marg, Bhopal
- Dr. M.S. Siddiqui, Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Visva-Bharati (A Central University and An Institution of National Importance), Santiniketan, West Bengal
- Ms. Kanchan Gogate, Principal Correspondent and Copy Editor The Times of India, Pune
- Professor Palani Arangaswamy, 4, Lakshmi Colony, Medical College Road, Thanjavur
- Professor Satinder Singh, Former Pro Vice Chancellor, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar
- Dr. Avishek Ray, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology Silchar, Assam
- Dr. Manjinder Singh, Assistant Professor, Department of Punjabi, Guru Nanak Dev, University, Amritsar
- Dr. Ramkumar, Associate Professor, Department of History, Govt PG College, Ambala Cantt, Haryana
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- Dr. Gasper K.J., Assistant Professor Department of Philosophy Government College for women, Trivandrum

- Professor Kailash Baral, EFL University, Hyderabad
- Dr. Vaibhav Shah, Assistant Professor at Ahmedabad University, Gujarat
- Professor Ashok Modak, National Research Professor, MHRD, Govt of India and Chancellor G G Central University Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh
- Professor Priti Sagar, Dean, School of Literature MGAHV, Wardha, Maharashtra
- Dr. Manoj Pandya, Associate Professor, Hindi Department, Govind guru Govt College, Banswara, Rajasthan
- Dr. Bir Pal Singh Yadav, Assistant Professor, Department of Hindi & Comparative Literature MGAHV, Wardha, Maharashtra
- Professor Rajkumar Hans, Retd. Professor, Department of History, University of Gujarat, Baroda. Amritsar, Punjab
- Ms. Nishtha Saxena, Assistant Professor of English, Department of English, Gandhi Memorial National College, Ambala