

## **The Indian Knowledge System and the Bhakti Movement: A Fresh Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*Indian Knowledge System demonstrates significant intellectual achievements with enduring cultural and societal impacts. IKS has a rich and diverse history that can be traced back to the ancient Vedic scriptures. It has evolved and adapted over thousands of years, incorporating new ideas and philosophies while retaining its core principles. At the heart of ancient intellectual traditions is the deep connection between knowledge and spirituality. Knowledge, in this context, is not an abstract pursuit but a means of aligning oneself with the cosmic principles and achieving harmony between the mind, body, and environment. This holistic approach to knowledge remains relevant in contemporary global discourse. This article lays claim to widen the scope of the Indian Knowledge System from the assigned Sanskrit texts, but also to include oral traditions, oral culture, and the tradition of narration and exposition of texts. Pluralism is the ground reality of Indian intellectual life, which should find its respected place in the Indian Knowledge System, because pluralism facilitates universalism, a tolerance for the other and also respect for all dissenting thinkers. At this stage, it becomes imperative to make a reappraisal of and revisit the Bhakti Movement, which took place in medieval India, and the contributions of the saints of that historic period be acknowledged as a major contributor to the Indian Knowledge System.*

**Keywords:** Indian Knowledge System (IKS), Indian Intellectual Tradition, Vedic Knowledge, Sanskrit Texts, Oral Traditions, Oral Culture, Knowledge and Spirituality, Pluralism, Indian Philosophy, Bhakti Movement, Bhakti Saints, Medieval India  
**Introduction**

The Bhakti Movement in medieval India was not just a spiritual or religious movement but a mass social movement which inspired the masses. The common people of India were given a new hope, and it became a unifying, nationalizing and democratizing influence of the time. This people-centric democratic branch of Indian philosophy was engineered not by academic elites or Sanskrit scholars but by common weavers, gardeners, grocers, dalits, housewives and domestic workers who later became saints.

A towering force in India's intellectual history, Kabir fused absolute non-dualism with the practicality of ancient youth. Through his "Nirguna Bhakti", he democratized the search for

truth. For Kabir, knowledge was not an inheritance one derives by birth nor through learning; it was a reality to be actively tested, lived and made accessible to all.

Historian Purushottam Agrawal argues that in Kabir, “the weaver” represents a confluence of robust “indigenous modernity” with “spiritual universalism”. For Agrawal, Kabir represents the voice of a dynamic, reflective public ethos. Through his unique voice, he prioritises individual agency, giving utmost importance to morality. (Aditi Paswan. Kabir, the Rationalist, Indian Express, July 7, 2026) Even modern reformers like Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar claim him as their primary intellectual guide, who introduced a deeply rational and scientific temper within the Indian tradition.

Guru Ravidas was a 15th-16th C saint whose teachings emphasised a devotion to a formless God. He belonged to the chamar community of leather workers, the lowest in social hierarchy. While he rejected the ritualism of religion, he still wore the sacred thread (Janeu) and applied the tilak on his forehead. According to Ronki Ram, an eminent scholar of Guru Ravidas, Ravidas challenged the upper castes' monopoly over religious symbols. His life was a form of peaceful social protest at a time when the Bhakti movement sought to challenge all social hierarchies (The Indian Express, 31 July, 2026).

Ravidas became widely revered through his devotional poetry and reformist philosophy. He wrote in Sadhukari, a blend of Awadhi, Braj, Khari Boli, Punjabi, Rajasthani and Sanskrit. He presented the central idea of Begumpura, an ideal society founded on the principles of equality, justice, and freedom. Modern scholars like Gail Omvedt have described it as his earliest vision of a classless and casteless society. (Indian Express, 31 July, 2026.)

Guru Ravidas transformed personal experience into a universal message of equality, without hatred or revenge. Punjab's Ad Dharm movement of the 1920s adopted Guru Ravidas as its patron saint, a champion of an independent socio-political consciousness. For millions of Dalits, Ravidas remains the foremost spiritual figure, and his followers call themselves Ravidassis.

The lives of great saints are draped in fascinating legends, but historically they were outstanding philosophers, social and religious reformers, and even popular poets of their time. Saint Jnaneshwar narrated a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita at the age of fourteen, in the language of the people of the day, Marathi. At that time, the Bhagavad Gita was available only in Sanskrit, which was known only to the Brahmins and Purohits, and was beyond the understanding of the common people. The 9000 verses in the Jnaneshwari are lucid, devotional, and in the form of a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, as well as between Sanjaya, who had the celestial vision, and the blind Dhritarashtra. This commentary abounds in similes and allegories, and is regarded as a masterpiece of Marathi literature.

At the end of Jnaneshwari, Saint Jnaneshwar wrote the “Pasaydaan”, a prayer which asks for world peace, love and humanity for all. Subtitled “Vishwa Geet”, it expresses a dream where

the light of knowledge will remove the darkness of ignorance from the world, all evils will disappear, and only the soul's utterance will be heard. Jnaneshwar believed that the Bhagavat Gita was a philosophical science and it lays down a way of life which will ultimately bring peace and contentment to mankind.

The 13th & 14th C saints of Maharashtra like Jnaneshwar, Namdev, Eknath, Sawata Mali, Chokhamela, Tukaram are all devotees of Vithoba, also called Pandurang. Vithal is regarded as an incarnation of Vishnu, a pastoral Krishna and is also regarded as the 9th avatar of Vishnu, that is, Buddha. There is a tradition which has continued down the centuries in Maharashtra, where lakhs of devotees walk on a pilgrimage on foot, covering hundreds of miles, chanting "Ram Krishna Hari" in unison and throng to Pandharpur on Ashadhi Ekadashi to worship "Vitthal". All castes, creeds, genders, rich and poor intermingle in this congregation called "Varkaris" or pilgrims. All saints of the time undertook this pilgrimage to make the Varkari sect vibrant, progressive and dynamic. This pilgrimage or "Dindi". ...is undertaken annually in the month of Ashadh (July–August) and has become an important part of the religious, historical and cultural ethos of Maharashtra even to this day. It becomes not just a religious but a divinely sublime experience of the people drenched in faith, at peace with themselves and all around, and united with Bhakti. This Varkari tradition, going on for more than 800 years, should be made an integral part of the Indian Knowledge System.

Namdev travelled in those days from Maharashtra to Punjab to spread the message of devotion to God and to bring about a spiritual and religious renaissance. He adopted the "Kirtan" using the literary form of the "Abhanga", recited to inspire people to walk on the path of love, tolerance, brotherhood and humanity. Savata Mali, a gardener, was a saint who lovingly tended his garden where God's presence manifested in different forms, like the water, the well, the vegetables and the trees. Chokhamela, an untouchable, yearned for the sight of the deity, as he was denied entry into the temple because of his low caste. Eknath recited the Bhagavat in Marathi, and the sweet flow of rhythm, the chastity of the words and the richness of ideas entranced the listeners. Saint Eknath's altruism, his concept of universal love, his ingrained humility and his integrity were reflected in his Kirtans, which were ecstatic offerings of devotion to God. Tukaram, the rebel saint of Maharashtra, was born a trader, was illiterate, but people thronged to his Kirtans. Tuka explains: "When the mind is pure, fire doesn't burn, wild beasts of prey do not harm one, as man is at peace with the universe. All this happens when one realizes that the same Infinite Being abides in all creatures."

These poetic creations of the saints of medieval India are in the form of Abhangas, Kirtans and Dohas, and are representative of a life-enforcing life philosophy which stresses the path of truth, justice and self-realisation. Self-realization is the path to the realisation of divinity. Bhakti is a constructive social strength, and the poetic creativity in various verse forms becomes "spiritualized folklore."

The women saints of the Bhakti movement break free of the constraints of marriage,

domesticity and wander in search of God, who is imagined as the lover, the friend, the philosopher and guide. Even earlier, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which belong to the Indian Knowledge System, bring to mind the protest and resistance of Sita and Draupadi, their agony and the questioning of the many injustices heaped on them. Sita, after raising her two sons in the forest in exile, refuses to return back to her beloved husband, her rightful and dutiful place. She prefers self-annihilation, returning back to her Earth Mother, claiming respect, dignity and justice. Draupadi openly questions and taunts all the males present in the courtroom and finally seeks the help of Krishna, her friend, her Sakha, to save her from her humiliation in public. She declares her resistance and protest by inciting the Pandavas to declare and wage a war to avenge her humiliation and insult. Her struggle for her own dignity and selfhood is all seeds of feminism which can be traced in the Indian Knowledge System.

Women saints of medieval India like Mirabai renounce all riches and titles, claiming that her only mate was Girdhar Gopal, and no one else, not even her own legal husband. In the Bhagavat tradition, the myth of Radha–Krishna has created a supreme ideal of man–woman relationship which transcends all physical desires. It is an ideal, platonic, utopian relationship which has left a deep mark on the Bhakti cult of medieval India. The Radha–Krishna love story has provided a catharsis, a release, and provided a parallel to many women saints like Janabai, Venabai, Sakhubai, Akkamma, Muktabai and Bahinabai. The Bhakti cult, through these women saints, projected a new independent woman who symbolized the moral and spiritual power of womanhood.

The women saints suffered the hardships of domesticity, with all the household chores piled on them, keeping them as slaves or bonded labour. They felt suffocated in their lonely lives and their suffering and weariness found expression in the “Ovees” they sang early in the morning when they turned the grindstone. These “Jatyavarchya Ovi”, as they are called, have become an important part of oral literature. They called upon “Vithala”, the God, to release them from the burden of their existence and sought solace in faith.

Janabai, born in a Shudra family, was offered in service as a slave to Damashetty, a tailor of Pandharpur and the father of Saint Namdev. Her devotion and longing for God became so intense that she often forgot her work. Vithal is her friend, her support, a constant helpmate in her daily chores. She declares: “I eat God, I sleep in God, I breathe God, I feel God. I speak God and I give God and take God.”

She calls herself a slut who has set up a shop in the marketplace of Pandharpur and was out to break into God’s home. Nobody would be able to stop her:

“I cast off all shame, and sell myself, in the marketplace ... Jani says, My Lord, I have become a slut to reach your home.” (Tharu & K. Lalita ,1992 Women's Writing in India, Vol. I, p. 83).

Kanhopatra, the beautiful daughter of a courtesan, refused earthly riches and chose

Pandurang or Vithal as her Lord. When the Sultan's soldiers tried to forcefully drag her to the palace, she prayed for the Lord's mercy:

“Take me, O Lord, take me now, and relieve me of the evils of the world. Make me thine! Kanhopatra offers her body at your feet.”(Tharu & K. Lalita ,1992 in Women's Writing in India, Vol. I, p. 84)

Bahinabai was married as a child of three to a man who was thirty years of age. She suffered the tortures and physical abuses and lust of her husband all her life. What changed the course of her life was a dream in which Vithal and the famous poet-saint Tukaram visited her. This dream was a divine experience of liberation. She calls herself a “Sauri”—a libertine, offering herself to God with piety and devotion. The tensions in her marriage are reflected thus:

“The root of renunciation is to give up the family. Domesticity is a thorn in my flesh.”

The women saints have taken upon themselves the task of breaking free of all social customs and taboos, making their own choices and leading their own lives.

In conclusion, I assert that the Indian Knowledge System has to widen its scope and include medieval saint poetry and the reforms that took place in the society of the time. Saints have left behind a rich heritage to guide humanity towards peace, goodwill, tolerance, and social harmony, influencing generations over centuries. The creative expressions and the lessons left behind by the saints of India are an important legacy which must form a pillar of the Indian Knowledge System, which has to be revisited And re-studied to add fresh dimensions to our Indian heritage. Critical thinking, research orientation and integration will lead to an inclusivity to make the Indian Knowledge System more holistic, ethical, scientific, rational and sustainable over the coming years.

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