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## The Idea of a Supreme God

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Before the emergence of large kingdoms, various groups worshipped their own gods and goddesses. With the growth of towns, trade, and empires, new ideas developed, including the belief in cycles of birth and rebirth influenced by one's deeds. Social inequality based on birth in noble families or high castes became widely accepted. Many were uneasy with these ideas and turned to teachings like those of the Buddha and Jainas, which emphasized overcoming social differences and the cycle of rebirth through personal effort. Others were attracted to the idea of a Supreme God who could deliver humans from bondage through devotion (bhakti). This concept gained popularity in the early centuries of the Common Era.

### Exam Question

**Q:** What new ideas about God and social order emerged with the growth of towns and empires?

**A:** The idea of a Supreme God who could deliver humans through devotion became popular, alongside beliefs in birth and rebirth cycles and social inequality based on caste.

## The Beginning of Bhakti

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Worship of deities such as Shiva, Vishnu, and Durga became central to later Hinduism. Bhakti, meaning devotion to a chosen deity, became a popular path accessible to all, regardless of caste, gender, or wealth. The Bhagavad Gita, a sacred Hindu text, contains the idea of Bhakti. Shiva, Vishnu, and Durga were worshipped through elaborate rituals, and local gods and goddesses were identified with these supreme deities. The Puranas incorporated local myths and allowed devotees to receive God's grace regardless of caste. Bhakti became so widespread that even Buddhists and Jainas adopted its beliefs.

### Exam Question

**Q:** How did the Bhakti movement make devotion accessible to all people?

**A:** Bhakti emphasized personal devotion to a chosen deity, allowing anyone, regardless of caste, gender, or wealth, to follow the path and receive God's grace.

## Bhakti in South India – Nayanars and Alvars

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Between the seventh and ninth centuries, the Nayanars (devotees of Shiva) and Alvars (devotees of Vishnu) emerged from diverse social backgrounds, including those considered untouchable. They preached love of Shiva or Vishnu as the path to salvation, drawing on Tamil Sangam literature and blending it with bhakti values. They composed devotional poems set to music, which were compiled into collections such as the Tevaram, Tiruvacakam, and Divya Prabandham. The Chola and Pandya kings built

temples around these shrines, strengthening the link between bhakti and temple worship. Hagiographies of these saints were also composed and serve as historical sources today.

## Exam Question

**Q:** Who were the Nayanars and Alvars, and what was their contribution to the Bhakti movement?

**A:** The Nayanars and Alvars were saint-poets devoted to Shiva and Vishnu respectively, from various social backgrounds. They composed devotional poems and helped spread bhakti through temple worship and music.

## Philosophy and Bhakti

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Shankara, an influential eighth-century philosopher from Kerala, advocated Advaita, the doctrine of the oneness of the individual soul and the Supreme God (Brahman). He taught that Brahman is formless and the world is an illusion, promoting renunciation and knowledge as paths to salvation. Ramanuja, from Tamil Nadu in the eleventh century, influenced by the Alvars, taught Vishishtadvaita or qualified oneness, where the soul remains distinct even when united with God. He emphasized devotion to Vishnu as the means to salvation. Ramanuja's ideas inspired later bhakti movements in northern India.

## Exam Question

**Q:** What are the main differences between Shankara's and Ramanuja's philosophies?

**A:** Shankara taught Advaita, the oneness of soul and Brahman and the illusory nature of the world, emphasizing renunciation. Ramanuja taught Vishishtadvaita, where the soul remains distinct but united with God, emphasizing devotion to Vishnu.

## Basavanna's Virashaivism

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In the mid-twelfth century Karnataka, Basavanna and his companions initiated the Virashaiva movement, advocating equality of all humans and opposing caste discrimination and ritual worship. They rejected Brahmanical caste ideas and idol worship. Basavanna's vachanas (sayings) express these ideas, emphasizing the body as a temple and the impermanence of material things.

## Exam Question

**Q:** What were the key teachings of Basavanna's Virashaiva movement?

**A:** The movement promoted equality, rejected caste and ritual worship, and taught that the body itself is a temple of God.

## Bhakti Movement in the Deccan

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From the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries, Maharashtra saw many saint-poets like Dnyaneshwar, Namdev, Eknath, Tukaram, and others, including women and members of the untouchable Mahar caste. They focused on devotion to Vitthala, a form of Vishnu, and emphasized personal god residing in the heart. They rejected ritualism, caste distinctions, and renunciation, advocating living with families and serving others. Their devotional songs, abhangs, and kirtans became popular and emphasized sharing others' pain as true devotion.

## Exam Question

**Q:** How did the Bhakti saints of Maharashtra challenge social norms?

**A:** They rejected caste distinctions, ritualism, and renunciation, promoted living as householders, and emphasized compassion and sharing others' pain.

## Nathpanthis, Siddhas and Yogis

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These religious groups criticized ritualistic religion and social order, advocating renunciation and meditation on the formless Ultimate Reality. They practiced intense mental and physical training, including breathing exercises and meditation, and were popular among lower castes. Their criticism helped devotional religion gain popularity in northern India.

### Exam Question

**Q:** What practices did the Nathpanthis, Siddhas, and Yogis promote?

**A:** They promoted renunciation, meditation on the formless Ultimate Reality, and intense mental and physical training.

## Islam and Sufism

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Sufis were Muslim mystics who emphasized love and devotion to God and compassion for all humans, rejecting outward religiosity and elaborate rituals. They developed spiritual practices like Zikr (chanting), sama (singing), raqs (dancing), and breath control under a master's guidance. Sufi orders like the Chishti silsila flourished in India, with notable saints such as Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti and Nizamuddin Auliya. Sufi shrines (dargahs) became pilgrimage sites for people of all faiths.

### Exam Question

**Q:** How did Sufism differ from orthodox Islam in medieval India?

**A:** Sufism emphasized personal devotion, love, and compassion, rejecting elaborate rituals and outward religiosity, and used practices like chanting and music to seek union with God.

# New Religious Developments in North India

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After the thirteenth century, a new wave of the bhakti movement emerged in North India, influenced by Islam, Brahmanical Hinduism, Sufism, and other devotional traditions. Saints like Kabir and Baba Guru Nanak rejected orthodox religions, while others like Tulsidas and Surdas sought to make existing beliefs accessible. Tulsidas composed the Ramcharitmanas in Awadhi, focusing on Rama. The movement emphasized devotion, social equality, and rejected caste distinctions.

## Exam Question

**Q:** What was the significance of the Bhakti movement in North India after the thirteenth century?

**A:** It promoted devotion accessible to all, challenged caste and orthodox practices, and included saints who rejected or reinterpreted existing religions.

## A Closer Look: Kabir

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Kabir, a fifteenth–sixteenth century saint, was born into a Muslim weaver family near Varanasi. His teachings, preserved in collections like the Guru Granth Sahib, rejected external worship, caste, and priestly dominance. He believed in a formless Supreme God and taught salvation through devotion. His poetry, in spoken Hindi, drew followers from both Hindu and Muslim communities.

## Exam Question

**Q:** What were Kabir's main teachings and how did they challenge religious traditions?

**A:** Kabir rejected external rituals, caste, and priestly authority, taught belief in a formless God, and emphasized devotion as the path to salvation.

## A Closer Look: Baba Guru Nanak

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Baba Guru Nanak (1469–1539), founder of Sikhism, traveled widely before establishing a center at Kartarpur. His followers practiced singing hymns and communal eating (langar), promoting equality regardless of caste, creed, or gender. His teachings emphasized worship of one God, social commitment, and active life. His successors compiled his and other saints' writings into the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy scripture. The Sikh community developed into a political entity by the seventeenth century.

### Exam Question

**Q:** How did Baba Guru Nanak's teachings influence the Sikh community?

**A:** He emphasized one God, equality, social commitment, and active life, leading to a community that transcended caste and became politically significant.

### Solved Examples

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**Example 1:** Explain how the Bhakti movement challenged the caste system.

**Answer:** The Bhakti movement emphasized personal devotion accessible to all, regardless of caste or social status. Saints from various backgrounds preached equality and rejected caste-based discrimination, making spiritual practices inclusive.

**Example 2:** Describe the contributions of Kabir to religious thought.

**Answer:** Kabir rejected external rituals and caste distinctions, taught belief in a formless God, and emphasized devotion as the path to salvation, influencing both Hindu and Muslim followers.

## Practice Set

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### Easy

- Who were the Nayanars and Alvars?
- What is Bhakti?

### Moderate

- Explain the main teachings of Basavanna's Virashaivism.
- Describe the role of Sufism in medieval India.

### Challenging

- Compare and contrast the philosophies of Shankara and Ramanuja.
- Discuss the social impact of the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra.

## Answer Key

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- **Who were the Nayanars and Alvars?** Saint-poets devoted to Shiva and Vishnu respectively, from diverse social backgrounds.
- **What is Bhakti?** Devotion to a chosen deity accessible to all people.
- **Explain the main teachings of Basavanna's Virashaivism.** Equality of all humans, rejection of caste and ritual worship, and the body as a temple.
- **Describe the role of Sufism in medieval India.** Emphasized personal devotion, love, and compassion, rejecting elaborate rituals.

- **Compare and contrast the philosophies of Shankara and Ramanuja.** Shankara taught non-dualism and renunciation; Ramanuja taught qualified non-dualism and devotion.
- **Discuss the social impact of the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra.** Challenged caste distinctions, promoted compassion, and made devotion accessible to all.

## Quick Reference

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- **Bhakti:** Devotion to a personal god accessible to all.
- **Nayanars and Alvars:** South Indian saint-poets devoted to Shiva and Vishnu.
- **Advaita:** Shankara's philosophy of oneness of soul and Brahman.
- **Vishishtadvaita:** Ramanuja's philosophy of qualified oneness.
- **Virashaivism:** Movement promoting equality and rejecting caste and rituals.
- **Sufism:** Islamic mysticism emphasizing love and devotion.
- **Kabir:** Saint who rejected rituals and caste, preached devotion to a formless God.
- **Baba Guru Nanak:** Founder of Sikhism, emphasized equality and social commitment.

## Glossary

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### Bhakti

Devotion or love for a personal god.

### Hagiography

Writing of saints' lives.

### Advaita

Philosophy of non-dualism taught by Shankara.

### Vishishtadvaita

Philosophy of qualified non-dualism taught by Ramanuja.

### Virashaivism

A movement rejecting caste and ritual worship, promoting equality.

### Sufism

Islamic mysticism focusing on personal devotion and love of God.

### Langar

Community kitchen in Sikhism promoting equality.

### Gurdwara

Sikh place of worship.