
UNIT 15 EDUCATION, INTELLECTUAL TRADITIONS, INTERACTIONS AND PHILOSOPHY¹

Structure

- 15.0 Objectives
- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 Religious Learning and Educational Institutions
- 15.3 Secular Learning
- 15.4 Bhakti Traditions in South India
- 15.5 Shankaracharya and the Vaishnava *Acharyas*
- 15.6 Shakti Cult and the Incorporation of the Female Principle
- 15.7 Summary
- 15.8 Key Words
- 15.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 15.10 Suggested Readings

15.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will learn about:

- how different regions in the early medieval period such as Kashmir, Bengal, *Tamilaham*, etc. were experiencing the growth of cults and sub-cults of Hinduism and heterodoxical sects;
- the rise of Vajrayana Buddhism during the Pala rule in Bengal, Tamil Bhakti traditions in south India and Shaivism in Kashmir;
- how the elements of Shaktism were absorbed into other cults and practices;
- in what ways *Tamilaham* was transformed from its tinai tribal traditions into Shaiva and Vaishna Bhakti traditions;
- how the philosophy of Shankaracharya and Vaishnava *acharyas* linked the Vedanta philosophy with Puranic Hinduism which led to the revival of Hinduism; and
- how different educational institutions in numerous regions helped in the dissemination of the philosophy of various religious traditions.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

The systems of thought and philosophical reflection in ancient India mainly revolved around the various problems of cosmology (the nature of the universe), metaphysics (the nature of reality), logic, epistemology, ethics, etc. During the

ancient period, the six schools of philosophy or *shadarshana* came into existence which included *Samkhya*, *Yoga*, *Nyaya*, *Vaisheshika*, *Purva Mimamsa* and *Uttara Mimamsa*. *Uttara Mimamsa* is also commonly known as *Vedanta*. *Vedanta* is a generic term and there are different schools in *Vedanta* itself. Systems of thought or *darshanas* were derived through constant debates and dialogue, through commentaries on primary texts. They aimed at the realization of *moksha* or salvation. Consequently, this gave rise to a plethora of different schools, beliefs and practices. The two broad classifications that emerged in Indian thought were orthodox and heterodox schools. The orthodox school based their philosophy on the Vedic literature while the heterodox school (Buddhism, Jainism, Charvakas, Ajivikas, etc.) rejected the authority of the *Vedas*.

By the early medieval period the Shramanic religions (Buddhism and Jainism) on the one hand and Hinduism on the other began to incorporate diverse traditions and philosophical systems. The three main sects of Hinduism were: Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism and within these sects, there emerged many sub-sects. The bhakti tradition in *Tamilaham* helped in the expansion of the Vaishnava and Shaiva traditions. The *acharyas* of this time helped in bringing a clear connection between *Vedanta* and Puranic traditions and in reviving Hinduism. The notion of *dasavatara* (ten incarnations of Vishnu) became fairly standardized. Indigenous and tribal gods and goddesses were assimilated into the Hindu pantheon. Educational institutions and literary works which were produced owing to these religious developments also aided in the propagation of the philosophy and practices of Hinduism.

15.2 RELIGIOUS LEARNING AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Since ancient times, India had been a centre of learning. It attracted travellers and pilgrims of different climates and regions. Conversely monks and scholars from India travelled to different places to spread their teachings. Trade was another agency through which the dissemination of knowledge procured by the Indian intellectuals took place. Education was predominantly religious by nature. In the early medieval south India, *agrarahas*, *brahmapuris*, *ghatikas* became the main centres of brahmanical learning. Land grants gave an impetus to brahmanical learning. Such grants made either to a single brahmana or to a number of brahmana families were called *brahmadeyas*. *Ghatikas* were the institutions of higher education and also centres of intellectual discourses and disputations. The *agrarahara* was an allotment of a village or town or a number of villages by the king or noble family to brahmanas for their sustenance. Temples too were emerging as provider of several facilities including education. *Mathas* were often attached to temples. Shankaracharya set up many *mathas*. In such educational centres, *Mahajanans* (brahmana teachers) were responsible for delivering *shatkarmas* or six fold duties. The curricula were planned as per the needs of the students and the orientation of the institutions.

Buddhists and Jainas had monastic institutions and the medium of imparting education was Sanskrit. The exchange of ideas, discussions and dialogue between different schools was facilitated by monastic institutions. *Vedanta* philosophy came

to the forefront. In the Tamil region, Jaina monasteries were called *palli* which means to *lie-down*. The Jaina monks as they grew old and approached the twilight of their life, retired to caves where they spent their time till their death in imparting education to people. Some inscriptions show that in the Kazhugumalai *palli* there were about fifteen female teachers and nuns teaching between the 8th and 12th century CE. Probably, the concept of school and education came to this region from early Tamil Jinas. At Cuddalore there was the Pataliputra monastery of Jinas. The *Mattavilasa Prahasana*, a Sanskrit play written by the Pallava king, Mahendravarman I (571-630 CE), talks of the Buddhist friars and nuns and of a rich Buddhist monastery near Kanchi. When in 642 CE Huien Tsang visited Kanchipuram, he observed that there were about 100 *sangaharamas* or Buddhist monasteries and 10,000 Buddhist priests who were involved in the study of Mahayana Buddhism. Dharmapala (530-561 CE) was a Buddhist scholar of Kanchipuram who later became the head of the Nalanda University.

We also have some major universities which became prominent centres of intellectual activities during this time. Both religious and secular learning was encouraged. Vallabhi University was founded around 600 CE in modern Gujarat by the Maitraka dynasty. Nalanda Mahavihara, established by Kumaragupta I (415-455 CE), housed a great library called *Dharmaganja*. Some eminent personalities associated with it were Aryabhata, Huien Tsang, I-tsing, Santarakhsita (founder of *Yogachara Madhyamika* philosophy), Nagarjuna (founded *Madhyamika* school of Mahayana Buddhism), Atisa Dipankar, etc. At Nalanda University, a wide range of subjects such as the *Vedas*, *yogashastra*, the art of war, fine arts, politics, astronomy, mathematics and medicine were taught. It was one of the oldest universities in the world. Odantapuri *mahavihara* was built by Gopala I (750-770 CE), the founder of the Pala dynasty of Bengal. Another Pala ruler named Dharmapala (783-820 CE) established Vikramashila *mahavihara*. The most important subject taught here was Vajrayana Buddhism. It maintained contacts with Tibet and scholars from Tibet came to study here. In the 12th century, it is believed that there were about 3,000 scholars studying here. Many manuscripts were written in Sanskrit and also translated into Tibetan. Atisha Dipankar (980-1054), a Buddhist in the Pala kingdom was an *adhyaksha* (head of the university) here. He also founded Somapur *Mahavihara* in modern Bangladesh. Taranath, a Tibetan Buddhist scholar Dharmapala built 50 religious institutions. Later in the late 12th century the mahaviharas of Nalanda, Odantapuri and Vikramashila were destroyed by Bakhtiyar Khilji, a military commander of Qutubuddin Aibak.

To spread their teachings, scholars visited modern Nepal, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia and China through trade routes. Vajrabodhi (671-741 CE) before visiting China, stayed at Srivijaya for a period of five months while Atisha Dipankara as per Tibetan sources stayed there for 12 years. He returned in 1025 CE and then in 1040 CE he went to Tibet via Nepal where he converted Padmaprabha, the son of the ruler of Nepal, Anantakirti, into Buddhism. Padmasambhav (Rimpoche) who taught at Nalanda went to Tibet in 747 CE on the invitation of its king, Thi-srong-detsan where he introduced Tantric Buddhism.

Kashmir too became an important centre of learning during the early medieval period. An eminent scholar during the reign of Avantivarman (855-883 CE) who founded the Utpala dynasty was Anandavardhana who wrote *Dhyanalok* in

Sanskrit. He is credited to have revived Sanskrit learning in Kashmir. The works of Kshemendra (990-1070), a Sanskrit poet include didactic texts, devotional works, poetics and satires (e.g. The Courtesan's Keeper). He introduced the concept of *auchitya* in poetry i.e. the use of *guna*, *rasa*, *alankara*, *pada*, in a poem in their rightful place. He mentions 27 different types of *auchitya*.

Shaivism became popular during this time in Kashmir. *Shivasutrani*, composed by a sage called Vasugupta (875-925) describes the nature of human consciousness and guides towards the realization of the true characteristics of Shiva within our own selves. Kshemaraja (975-1025), a disciple of *Abhinavagupta* wrote a Sanskrit commentary on it and further elaborates the methodologies prescribed by Vasugupta towards achieving *moksha* or salvation. *Spandakarika* describes the nature of *spanda*, the first vibration or the explosive sensation which was a precursor to the creation both in the cosmos and in the human body. *Pratyabhijnahrdayam* explains the essence of *prayabhijna* or the knowledge of pure perception. Somananda founded the *Pratyabhijna* school. The concept is described in his work *Sivadrishti* which was later developed by his son, Utpaladeva. Abhinavagupta integrated it with other schools of Shaivism in Kashmir. His work also informs about the existing schools of philosophy in India in those times which shows that there were intellectual interactions among scholars and philosophers from different regions and they were aware of the current intellectual trends.

Trika Shaivism of Kashmir incorporated *tantra* traditions. Several texts on *tantra* and Shaivism were written. *Vigyan Bhairav Tantra* is an important work which deals with 112 ways of meditation which is believed to have been prescribed by Shiva to Parvati. *Tantraloka* by Abhinavagupta is one of the most popular works which elucidates all the 64 *tantra* traditions of *tantragama* and several concepts relating to the creation of *lingas*, *mandalas*, *mudras*, etc.

Likewise, the bhakti tradition and the *Vedanta* philosophy of medieval *acharyas* led to the production of a corpus of religious literary works. The hymns of *Nayanars* and *Alvars* were collected and compiled into texts. Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya and Madhavacharya wrote commentaries such as on the *Brahmasutra* of Badarayana. Temple texts called *Agamas* were composed from c. 5th-15th centuries CE which became popular among the adherents of the certain branches of Shaivism such as Kashmir Shaivism, etc. They deal with various aspects of temple construction and worship of temple deities. Such literary works gave an impetus to the growth of Hinduism.

15.3 SECULAR LEARNING

Apart from religious learning, encouragement was given to secular learning as well. Mathematics and astronomy were the regular disciplines which were taught at the elementary and higher levels. However, this was also the time when practical knowledge of an artisan, a metallurgist or pharmacist was not taught in the classrooms. But theoretical knowledge was imparted. Some important mathematician-astronomers of the time were Mahaviracharya, Shridhara, Aryabhata II, Shripati and Bhaskaracharya (Bhaskara II). Mahaviracharya (c. 800-870) was a Jain mathematician during the reign of the Rashtrakuta king, Amoghavarsha Nrupatunga (814-878). In Jainism, mathematics and physics

formed a part of the four *anuyogas*. Their aim was to explain Jaina Metaphysics and to provide an aid to attaining liberation of the soul. Mahaviracharya further developed the concepts propounded by Aryabhata and Brahmagupta. Earlier astrology and mathematics were treated as the same subject. Mahaviracharya identified the two as different branches of study. He wrote the *Ganitasara Sangraha*. Bhaskaracharya II (1114-1185 CE) or Bhaskara II was one of the most significant mathematicians of the early medieval period. His major work, *Siddhanta Shiromani* consists of four volumes viz. *Lilavati* (dealing with arithmetic and measurement), *Bijaganitadhyaya* (algebra), *Ganitadhyaya* (astronomy) and *Goladhyaya* (astronomy). In his work *Surya Sidhanta* he puts forward the concept of *akrsta shakti* (law of gravity) i.e. the earth's gravitational force. Much earlier Aryabhata was the first one to expound the concept of zero and the heliocentric theory in the *Aryabhatiyam*. He rejected the popular belief that the earth is *achala* (immovable). He maintained that the earth is spherical in shape and rotates on its axis and orbits the sun. He calculated the circumference of the earth, the distance between the earth and the moon and gave the scientific explanation for solar and lunar eclipses. His findings were further developed by other Indian mathematicians such as Brahmagupta, Bhaskara I, Mahaviracharya, etc. and also by the Arabs.

Brahmagupta defined zero as a number integer. Integer arithmetic was adopted by the Arabs in the 9th century. Al Khwarizmi², father of algebra wrote *kitab al-hisab al-hindi* ('Book of Indian computation') and *kitab al-jam'wa'l-tafriq al-hisab al-hindi* ('Addition and subtraction in Indian arithmetic'). He introduced Hindu-Arabic numerals to the West with the decimal system which in time replaced the Roman numerals. The Arabs made their own contributions to the knowledge they received. The Arab mathematicians such as al-Khwarizmi and al-Uqlidisi (920-980 CE) unlike Indian mathematicians did not consider zero as a number but an empty place-holder. Through the Arab world Indian and Arabic knowledge was transmitted to North Africa and Europe. In North Africa, Leonardo Pisano (Fibonacci) of Pisa (1170-1250 CE) obtained a mastery over them and documented the mathematical traditions of India in his book, *Liber Abaci*. Thus, this was also the period when significant developments were made in the fields of mathematics, astrology, etc. The observations and findings in these fields based on earlier findings and their diffusion led to further developments in these fields.

15.4 BHAKTI TRADITIONS IN SOUTH INDIA

The term bhakti means devotion to a personal god. The concept is very old and can be traced back to the *Rigvedic* times. References to it have been found in the *Katha*, *Mundaka* and *Shvetashvatar Upanishads*, in the *Bhakti sutras* such as the *Narada* and *Sandilya Bhakti Sutras*, the *Bhagavata Purana* etc. But during its long history, its meaning changed according to the context it found itself in. It was not confined to a particular sect in Hinduism. Western scholars of the 19th century identified bhakti with Vaishnavism entirely. Their theory along with the subsequent writings described bhakti as a devotee's complete devotion to his/her *saguna* deity and emphasized on the ever-existent duality between them. But as the bhakti movement reached north India later in the medieval period, personalities

² The words algebra and algorithm are derived from Al-Khwarizmi.

like Kabir and Nanak speak of *nirguna bhakti* which was focused on the impersonal and *nirguna Brahman* (the Ultimate Reality). So, the concept acquired a wider meaning. But before we understand the advent of Tamil bhakti tradition, let us first briefly look at the scenario existing prior to its arrival.

During the early historic period, *Tamilaham* or *Tamilakam* (the ancient Tamil region) had tribal polities and traditions, associated with five different physiographic divisions of the region called *tinai*. Each *tinai* had their own major deities, rituals and cultic practices. For instance, Murugan (god of war and victory) was the chief deity of the people inhabiting *kurunji* (hills) *tinai* and Korravai (the goddess of war) was the patron deity of *palai* (drylands) *tinai*. The inhabitants of the *tinai*s were aware of the Vedic and Brahmanic rituals along with those of the Shramanas but the local traditions enjoyed prominence.

From the 3rd-6th century, the region was undergoing a very important shift. With the arrival of the Kalabhras, Shramanic and Brahmanic traditions started to gain importance. It is during this transitional phase that the five different *tinai*s were interlinked. Local deities of *tinai*s came to be identified with *Puranic* deities. Korravai was worshipped as Durga. In the classical or *Sangam* age, *Sangam* literature primarily dealt with secular themes: *akam* (on intimate emotions of love) and *puram* (on war and heroism). During the post-*Sangam* age, there was a reworking of the Classical themes especially those referring to the concept of *viraha*. *Viraha* denoted separation among lovers. The devotee in the bhakti tradition felt the agony of separation from his god. Puranic deities and myths were localized through bhakti saints who travelled from one place to another, singing hymns. Temple construction on a large scale helped in the institutionalization of the *bhakti* tradition. Bhakti songs were composed and sung by Tamil saint-poets who either belonged to the Vaishnava or Shaiva sect. The Vaishnav bhakti saints were 12 in number and were called *Alvars* whereas the 63 Shaiva saints were known as *Nayanars*. All *bhakti* hymns of the *Nayanar* saints were compiled in the twelve books which are collectively called *Tirumurai*. Nathmuni (823-951) collected 4,000 hymns of *Alvar* saints and compiled the *Nalayira Divyaprabhandam* which is also called *Dravida Veda* or the fifth *Veda*. The saints prescribed the singing of devotional songs in order to attain salvation. These hymns are still sung in the temples of south India.

The bhakti saints preached the philosophy of complete surrender to one's personal god. The god takes care of his devotees. His *karuna* (compassion), *kripa* (mercy) and divine intervention will extricate his devotee from this mundane world. The *bhakti* saints view themselves as the dust of their respective deities. Sundarar, one of the four great *Nayanar* saints³ in his hymns calls himself as '*van tontar*' i.e. a zealous devotee of Shiva and also as Lord's friend as he offers his devotion as friendship to Shiva. This concept of *sakhabhava* is expressed in the *Bhaktisutra* of Narada and the *Bhagvata Purana*. But this friendship is extraordinary. He calls Shiva sometimes as a madman and sometimes addresses him as a *pittan* (meaning great grandfather). He also calls himself as *atiyarkkum atiyen* (the slave of the slaves or the servant of the servants). He considers other saints as servants and

³ Appar, Sundarar, Sambandar and Makikkavasagar are known as the four great Tamil Shaivite saint-poets.

views himself as their servants. Vishnuchittan considers Vishnu to be his child. He composed songs to ward off the evil eye and protect the deity. So, he was regarded as the eldest of all *Alvars* and even elder to Vishnu and from *Vishnuchittan*, he became *Periyalvar* or the Elder *Alvar*.

On the other hand, the notion of bridal mysticism was utilized by some bhakti saints to express their bhakti. Nammalvar whose devotional hymns are called *Tiruvaymoli*, compiled by another *Alvar* named Madhurakavi, imagined himself as a woman deeply in love with Krishna who had abandoned him. The hymns of Andal, the only *Alvar* woman saint and the adopted daughter of Periyalvar too reflects this concept. In her compositions, erotic elements are very strong where she expresses her longing to be wedded to Vishnu and her unabashed desire for physical union with her deity, punctuated by her anguish and frustration. The devotional songs of these bhakti saints speak of separation and suffering. This theme is very noticeable in the *Alvar* bhakti hymns and very restricted in the songs of the *Nayanars*. However, in the Tamil bhakti traditions some extreme form of devotion, exhibiting violence by inflicting self-injury or by injuring someone else is also evident. Satti Nayanar cut off the tongue of anyone who spoke ill of Shiva or his devotees. The hunter Kannappa plucked out his eyes to offer to Shiva.

Therefore, the bhakti hymns are principally about the doctrine of self-surrender. This concept later led to a serious theological dispute over “grace versus karma” in the 18th and 19th century between the two sub-sects of Sri Vaishnavism (a branch of Vaishnavism): *tenkalai* and *vatakalai* schools. The *tenkalai* school through the analogy of the cat i.e., *marjarayaya* emphasizes that god saves the soul in the manner a mother cat carries her kitten to a safe place. One’s *karma* is not of much relevance as the soul is fully passive. It is the grace of god and not a person’s action that saves him. The *vatakalai* school affirms that god saves the soul in the way a mother monkey carries her baby monkey and just as the baby monkey makes the effort to hang on to the mother, the soul too needs to work for the salvation and thus, they believe in the *markatanyaya*.

Thus, we see that according to the Tamil bhakti traditions there are different ways to approach one’s personal deity who can be imagined as a great grandfather, a son, a beloved, or a friend (*tolan*), etc. The relationship between a deity and his devotee is intimate and very personal. The emphasis is on the individual relation of a devotee to his/her deity. A *bhakta* is denoted by terms like *tontar* (meaning “servant” in Tamil) or *atiyan* (“slave”). The path of a *van tontar* (hard servant) who led the life of asceticism and renunciation, who sacrificed his family, children and himself, cannot be followed by common people. The path of a *men tontar* or a soft servant was more feasible for others to follow who lived within the society but was detached from social matters. He was only preoccupied with his relationship with his deity and with other *bhaktas*. Before becoming a *bhakta*, he or she renounced all social privileges. Manikkavasagar, who was a minister at the court of the Pandyan ruler, Varagunavarman II (c. 862-885 CE) in Madurai, gave up all his worldly ambitions.

The bhakti hymns also reveal interreligious dialogue. By the early medieval period, only Buddhism and Jainism remained as the dominant representatives of the heterodox sect. There were different schools of philosophy and religious cults

coming up. And they were fiercely vying for state patronage, inflaming the animosity especially between the heterodox and orthodox traditions. The bhakti saints talk of Buddhism and Jainism with genuine hatred. The hymns of Appar who had been a Jaina himself before converting to Shaivism exhibited anit-Jaina sentiments. Sundarar in his hymns regards Jainas as dirty. The compositions of Manikkavasagar are replete with harsh condemnation of the heterodox sects. The contempt and hostility were not obvious only in the hymns of the saints but rulers too were beginning to fiercely extend their patronage. Mahendravarma I as a Jaina was hostile to Appar but as he was converted to Shaivism by Appar, his hostility was directed at the heterodox sects. He wrote a satire, the *Mattavilasa Prahasana* on the heterodox sects (Buddhism and Jainism) and the heretic sects: Kapalika and Pashupata.

Hence, the anti-Shramana sentiments reflect the antagonism between the Brahmanic tradition and Shramanic religions which were sharpening by this time. In Buddhism and Jainism it was emphasized that *nirvana* or salvation, the Final, was achievable through total denial and renunciation. But the bhakti traditions stress that it is through the means of complete surrender, devotion and worship of one's personal god that one can achieve salvation. The purely intellectual ethical conceptions of Jainism could not attract the attention of the masses to whom those concepts along with the excesses of Jaina asceticism seemed too abstract. The attitude of Buddhists and Jainas became strongly antisocial in the Tamil society, stressing that the world was full of misery and desire and that even the charms of childhood, womanhood and motherhood were lost. Conversely, Tamil bhakti saints extolled motherhood and womanhood in their hymns. Nammalvar considered the best way of expressing his devotion to god is by visualizing himself as a lady friend of Krishna. Although, the *Periya Puranam* says that the *Nayanar* saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar renounced her femininity so that she could be completely devoted to worshipping Shiva.

However, Buddhism relatively maintained its underlying unity of ideas, beliefs and practices which made it more unified as a religion. The different schools of philosophy in Buddhism gradually evolved their own systems of metaphysics and carved out a separate path of development while those who continued to be *astika*, believing in the authority of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishadic* concept of *Atman* or *Brahman*, chose to form their own distinct sectarian beliefs and systems of philosophy. To check the influence of Buddhism, Jainism or such *nastika* elements as they were called, it was important to ideologically unify all separate identities within the *astika* fold. Thus, the medieval *acharyas* began reviving and reorganizing Hinduism during this time. You will read about them in the following section.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) What were the contributions of various religions during the early medieval period in the growth of educational institutions and literary works?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

15.5 SHANKARACHARYA AND THE VAISHNAVA ACHARYAS

In this section, you will read about the different schools of *Vedanta* which came into existence during the early medieval period. Through their *Vedantic* philosophy, they weaved various traditions of Hinduism together. All schools of *Vedanta* speak of the goal of an individual's life which is to realize the Ultimate Reality. But they all differ on how to realize the end goal. Shankaracharya (788-820 CE) propounded the philosophy of *Advaita Vedanta* (non-dualism). His commentaries on *Upanishads*, *Brahmasutra* and *Bhagvada Gita* are important in comprehending the concept of *advaita*. He emphasizes that *Brahman* is the Ultimate Reality and it is the one and only reality. Knowing *Brahman* is not an intellectual process but knowing *Brahman* is to become *Brahman*. It cannot be perceived through senses or described by words. It is *Nirguna Brahman*. It is *Sat-Chit-Anand* (Pure Existence-Pure Consciousness-Pure Bliss). It is not the cause or the creator of the universe. He identifies *Atman* (soul) with ultimate pure consciousness, pure spirit in all beings, just as *Brahman* and therefore, *Brahman* and *Atman* are the same eternal realities. Both are of the same essence and there is no duality. The world is not real but a relative reality, created by *Maya* (illusion) which is the creative force, inherent in *Brahman*. To gain *moksha* or liberation of the soul, one needs to dispel *avidya* (absence of knowledge and erroneous knowledge) and *Maya* with the power of *avarna* (the power of veiling) and the power of *vikshepa* which makes a person to identify himself/ herself with the body, mind and intellect. It is then the duality of the *Self* and *Brahman* disappears. In contrast to Shankaracharya's *advaita* philosophy, Ramanuja (1017-1137 CE) developed *vishishtadvaita* philosophy. According to him, *Brahman* and *Atman* are not exactly the same realities. *Atman* is part of *Brahman* but the *Atman* retains its separate identity even after *moksha*.

Though Shankaracharya conceived *Brahman* as *nirguna*, yet he composed *stotra* (poetry) dedicated to *saguna Brahman* mentioned in the *Puranas*. He also wrote on *tantra*. In this way, he linked Vedic Hinduism (as his philosophy was based on Vedic knowledge) to Puranic tradition. He also established four major *mathas*. He distinguished between Buddhism and Hinduism on the basis of the concept of *Atman*. Buddhism asserts that there is no *Atman* whereas Hinduism believes in *Atman* and *Brahman* and it is to address this issue i.e., how *Atman* can realize *Brahman*, Shankaracharya and other medieval *acharyas* developed their respective theories. It is believed that all these attempts to revive and integrate various cults and traditions within Hinduism led to the decline in the popularity of Buddhism.

The Vaishnava *acharyas* further popularized the Tamil *Alvar Bhakti* tradition.

Ramanuja became Andal's elder brother as he fulfilled the vow which Andal had taken. It was during the time of Ramanuja that the hagiography of the *Alvar* saint-poets was completed and their hymns became a part of the Vedic form of worship. Each *Alvar* saint was revered as an incarnation of some aspect of Vishnu. Periyalvar was considered to be the incarnation of Garuda, Vishnu's *vahana* (mount). Andal came to be venerated as the incarnation of Bhudevi or Bhumidevi. Her birthplace, Srivilliputhur is known to worship Vishnu as Andal's consort, not Lakshmi's. Later, after the conquest of the Andhra region, the Vijaynagar ruler, Krishnadeva Raya wrote *Amuktamalyada* in Telugu on Vishnu and Andal. The title of the epic poem which means the 'giver of one's own garland' underlines her devotion to Vishnu as she would wear the garland before offering it to Vishnu. Hence, Ramanuja who was a Sri Vaishnava, combined Vaishnava theology and popular worship of Vishnu with the *Vedanta* philosophy. Like Ramanuja, other Vaishnava *acharyas* such as Nimbarakacharya, Madhavacharya and Vallabhacharya too contributed to the Vaishnava cult and bhakti tradition and connected the Puranic elements with the Vedic knowledge.

15.6 SHAKTI CULT AND THE INCORPORATION OF THE FEMALE PRINCIPLE

The roots of the Shakti cult go back to the Indus Valley civilization where the worship of the Mother Goddess was prevalent in both symbolic and iconographic forms. The genesis of Shaktism has no link with ancient Brahmanism since it predates the Vedic period and is different in essence from Vaishnavism and Shaivism. In the Vedic religion, the female principle had no prominent position unlike male deities. The female deities were accorded a subordinate role and the goddesses were few in number. Gradually, Shaktism incorporated the philosophy of the Brahmanical tradition, but at the same time, it maintained some of its characteristics and shaped the philosophy of other cults and practices. The *Devi Mahatmya*, *Devi Bhagvata Purana*, *Kalika Purana*, *Tripura Upanishad* and *Shakta Upanishad* are considered some important sources on Shaktism.

With the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism, a new meaning was given to the concept of *bodhisattva*. In Theravada Buddhism, a *bodhisattva* is a person on the way to Enlightenment while in the Mahayana tradition, he or she is an enlightened being but postpones his/her *nirvana* (salvation) so as to help all other beings in attaining buddhahood and *nirvana* from *dukha* (suffering) and *samsara* (the cycle of death and rebirth). With this conception, the *shakti* elements too became important in Buddhism. For instance, the feminine counterpart of Avalokiteshvara (the *bodhisattva* of infinite compassion and mercy) is Goddess Tara who is the personification of knowledge. She is also called Prajnaparamita. Manjushri, the personification of wisdom too has either Lakshmi or Saraswati or both as his consort(s).

Around 6th or 7th century CE Vajrayana Buddhism which means "the Thunderbolt Vehicle" was founded. It became popular in eastern India and was codified under the Pala rulers. It is also known as Tantric Buddhism because of the presence of tantric⁴ components in it. In Hinayana, the path to *nirvana* is by gradual loss of

⁴ The adherents of the *Tantric* tradition worshipped with the aid of *tantric* mandalas, *mantras*, rituals, etc. The elements of this tradition were seen in Hinduism and Buddhism.

individuality through the means of self-discipline and meditation. In Mahayana, heavenly Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* help the followers to attain *nirvana* whereas Vajrayana offers its followers a faster and more effective path to Enlightenment by maintaining that *nirvana* can be attained by obtaining magical power, *vajra*. Like Mahayana Buddhism, Vajrayana too puts emphasis on the role of the *bodhisattvas* and further expands the *bodhisattva* pantheon. Female deities creep in and the principal ones were Tara and Chakreshvari. The feminine divinities became associated with the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* as their consorts or *shakti*. *Pisacis* (demons), *yoginis* (sorceresses) and *matangis* (outcaste women) were considered as the lesser female deities.

Vajrayana rapidly grew into an intricate philosophical and ritual system, comprising of *mantras* (mystic syllables), *mandalas* (ritualistic circles), *yantras* (magical diagrams), *dharanis* (spells), etc. Sexual symbolism and union became a part of its religious rites. In Vajrayana gods are approached through goddesses who should be compelled, rather than persuaded and that is why, elaborate rituals were prescribed and the need for religious teachers arose for teaching the philosophical and ritual traditions. Vajrayana reached Tibet and became very popular there. In Tibet, a guru is called *lama*. The famous Sadaksara, “Om mani padme hum” (Hail the Jewel in the Lotus) is the great mantra of Tibetan Vajrayana which has sexual and mystical connotations i.e., the union between the Buddha and his *shakti* or between Avalokiteshvara and Tara. In Vajrayana, it is believed that the world is created because of the union of the two principles: the male and female.

Shakti theology conceives the Goddess as the Ultimate Reality. She is regarded as the supreme godhead. She is represented by many female divinities and all of them are the manifestations of one supreme goddess. She is seen as the representative of the dynamic energy. She is the creative principle of existence. Without the female principle, there is no creation. Shaktism does not entail non-acceptance of the male. The male energy is incapable without the union with the female creative energy. Shiva without Shakti is *shava* (a corpse). The male and female are considered as interdependent and inseparable realities. This philosophy is well represented by the iconography of Ardhanarishvara in Shaivism where the image of Shiva is depicted as half woman. The female half is interpreted as ‘*Prakriti*’ (a primal creative or natural force). The male half is identified with ‘*Purusha*’, the spiritual essence of reality which causes *prakriti* to evolve into several forms. The image is recognized as a form of Shiva, not the goddess. Gods are endowed with their *shakti* and so, they have a female form. However there is no goddess who has a male form. The fusion in the imagery of Ardhanarishvara neither alludes to the concept of the consort (as seen in the iconography of Uma-Maheshvara) nor to the concept of gender equality.

Shaivism incorporated Shaktism through the mythology associated with Shakti *pitha*. The Epic and Puranic traditions speak of the self-immolation of Sati, Shiva’s consort and her dismembered limbs falling in different parts of India which came to be recognized as 51 Shakti *pithas*. This is significant from the perspective of how it encouraged the expansion of sacred geography connected to Shaktism. Gradually, the benevolent as well as fierce aspects (e.g. Durga, Mahishasurmardini, etc.) of the Shakti cult were absorbed into Shaivism.

The elements of Shaktism became visible in Vaishnavism too. From the early Gupta period, the female principle in Vaishnavism was represented through the icons of Lakshmi and Shri as consorts of Vishnu. In the Tamil region, Andal, an *Alvar* woman saint who expressed her sexuality brazenly through her bhakti hymns dedicated to Vishnu, is believed to be married to Vishnu. In Srivilliputhur Andal temple, she is worshipped as the consort of Vishnu. The concept of bridal mysticism reflective in her bhakti songs was later employed to present Radha as the divine companion of Krishna. Jainism too succumbed to the influence of the Shakti cult but to a much lesser extent. The concept of Shaktism though incorporated as the female creative principle was accorded a supplementary role. Goddesses became a medium through which gods could be approached. In Shaivism the notion of feminine principle was comparatively more pronounced than Vaishnavism.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Write a note on the philosophy of Shankaracharya.

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Explain how the concept of female creative principle affected other religious cults and sects during the early medieval period?

.....

.....

.....

.....

15.7 SUMMARY

This period witnessed a great multiplicity of religious sectarian and philosophical traditions. The issues of esoteric ideological differences and the race to obtain state patronage, etc. created frictions especially in the *Tamilaham* region. Bhakti tradition helped in localizing Puranic myths and assimilating local deities of various *tinai*s. The *acharyas* associated their *Vedanta* philosophy with Puranic deities and made Hinduism more appealing to the masses which effectively helped in the integration of various cults and practices and in the revival and expansion of Hinduism. This, in turn, led to decline in the popularity of the heterodox sects.

15.8 KEY WORDS

Nirguna : In Hinduism, the Ultimate Reality is conceived as the *Brahman*. There are two schools of thought, *Nirguna* and *Saguna* which explain the concept of *Brahman*. *Nirgunas* believe that the *Brahman* has no form or shape and no qualities.

Puranic Hinduism : Puranic Hinduism deals with the concept of *Trimurti*

(three principal deities) viz. Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Preserver) and Shiva (the Destroyer). Devotion is an integral part of it.

Saguna : *Sagunas* believe that *Brahman* has a form and qualities and is represented by several gods and goddesses.

15.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 15.2
- 2) See Section 15.4

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) See Section 15.5
- 2) See Section 15.6

15.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Banerjea, J. N. (1966). *Puranic and Tantric Religion*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta.

Bhandarkar, R. G. (1938). *Vaishnavism, Saivism and Other Minor Religious Systems*. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.

Champakalakshmi, R. (2011). *Religion, Tradition and Ideology in Pre-colonial South India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Dehejia, Vidya. (1988). *Slaves of the Lord: The Path of the Tamil Saints*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.

Sharma, Krishna. (1987). *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement, A New Perspective, A Study in the History of Ideas*. Delhi: Munshilal Manoharlal.

Varadachari, K. C. (1966). *Alvars of South India*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan.

Veluthat, Kesavan. (1979). The Temple-Base of the Bhakti movement in South India. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*. Indian History Congress. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44141959>