

# HIS†ORY

## Chapter 8: Devotional Paths to the Divine



## Devotional Paths to the Divine

The medieval period in India was not only known for several political developments and the establishment of a stable empire in India, but also for the emergence of various movements within the fold of existing religions. Many saints stressed on true devotion to God and criticised the prevalent caste system. Religious developments at this time were largely marked by the *bhakti* and the *sufi* movements.

### The Worship of a Supreme God

- In ancient times, people worshipped many gods and goddesses. However after the formation of large empires, people started believing in the idea of life after death.
- They also believed in the caste system which denied equality to all people. Later, many people began to oppose these notions and accepted Buddhism and Jainism in order to overcome social differences.
- A section of people began to believe in the existence of one supreme god, who could liberate them from the inequalities which existed in the society through the path of bhakti or devotion.
- The three gods Shiva, Vishnu and Durga began to be worshiped as they came to be regarded as supreme deities.
- These developments also became the part of the Puranas. While the Puranas introduced the methods of worship in the society, they also stressed on an idea that a person can attain grace of god irrespective of his caste through the path of devotion.
- Later, this principle of bhakti became so widespread that it was even adopted by the Jains and the Buddhists.



Many people embraced Buddhism due to the existence of extreme social division in the Hindu society.

## The Bhakti Movement in South India

- In the seventh century, new religious movements emerged in South India led by the Nayanars (saints who were worshippers of Shiva) and the Alvars (saints who were worshippers of Vishnu). The people of these two religious movements also belonged to the lower castes such as the Panars and the Pulaiyars.



The Alvars and the Nayanars visited villages and sang songs in devotion to the deities enshrined in the temples

- The followers of these movements criticised Buddhism and Jainism and stressed that only by worshipping Shiva or Vishnu, could the path of salvation be achieved.
- They were proud of the Sangam literature and blended them with the values of Bhakti.
- The Nayanars and the Alvars visited villages and composed many poems in praise of the deities which were enshrined in the nearby temples.
- Later, the Chola and the Pandya kings constructed temples around these shrines which strengthened the links between the Bhakti tradition and temple worship.
- Around this time the hagiographies (religious biographies) of the Nayanars and the Alvars began to be composed. These texts are today, used as sources for writing histories of the Bhakti tradition.

### Contributions of Shankracharya and Ramanujam

Shankracharya was one of the greatest philosophers in India. He was born in the eighth century in Kerala. He believed in the doctrine of oneness of the individual soul. He also believed in one supreme god who he called the only 'Ultimate Reality'. He preached that this ultimate reality is without any form or attributes. He considered world to be *maya* or an illusion. He believed that the path of knowledge should be adopted to attain the final salvation or deliverance.



Shankracharya

Ramanuja was born in Tamil Nadu in the eleventh century. He was influenced by the Alvars and hence preached that devotion to Vishnu will lead to the path of salvation. He advocated the doctrine of vishishtadvaita which means that even if a soul is unified with the supreme god, its identity remains separate. His ideas largely influenced the Bhakti movement in North India.

## The Basavanna's Virashaivism and the Saints of Maharashtra

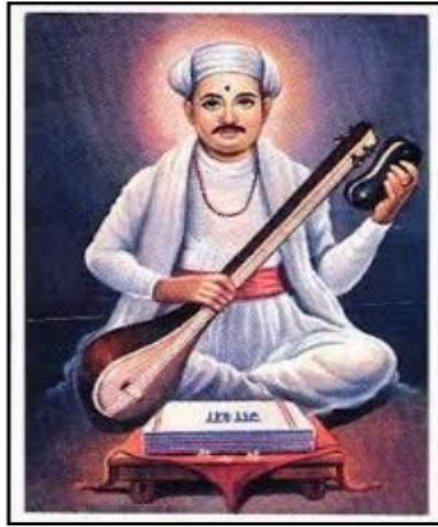
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### The Basavanna's Virashaivism

- The Virashaiva movement was propounded by Basavanna and his companions such as Allama Prabhu and Akkamahadevi.
- This movement began in Karnataka in the middle of the twelfth century.
- The Virashaivas preached equality of all people particularly those belonging to the lower castes and women. They also did not believe in the supremacy of the Brahmins.
- They rejected idol worship and rituals.

### The Saints of Maharashtra

- Many saint poets inspired the people of Maharashtra from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century.
- These saint poets preached their teachings in Marathi which was easy for the common people to understand.
- Some important saints of this period were Namdev, Eknath, Jnaneshwar, and Tukaram. Sakhubai was a woman saint who belonged to the untouchable 'Mahar' caste.



Saint Tukaram

- Many saints of this region focused on the Bhakti of Lord Vitthala (form of Lord Vishnu) in the temple at Pandharpur.
- They also believed in the idea that god resides in the hearts of all the people.
- The saints in Maharashtra did not believe in ritualism and caste system. They even did not believe in the idea that world should be renounced in order to gain salvation. According to them, salvation could be achieved even when one was living with family.
- The poet saints of this time can be called humanists as they believed in sharing the pain and sorrows of other people.

Apart from Virashaivism and the Saints of Maharashtra, a number of other religious groups in India criticised the caste system and rituals by using simple language and logical arguments. These groups were the Nathpanthis, the Siddhacharas and the Yogis. They asked the people to give up worldly pleasures as the path to salvation could be achieved through oneness with the ultimate reality, which is possible only by performing yogasanas, breathing exercises and meditation. These groups became more popular among the people belonging to the lower castes.

## Islam and Sufism

- Sufism in the medieval period developed within the fold of Islam. Sufis were the spiritual Muslims who believed in love and devotion towards god.
- The Sufis rejected the Muslim rituals and believed that the heart can be trained in many ways in order to look at the world differently.
- Like the saints poets, the Sufis composed poems, prose and fables to express their



feelings.

- The Sufis developed detailed methods of training using zikr (chanting of a name), sama (singing), raqs (dancing), breath control etc. under the guidance of a pir or a master.



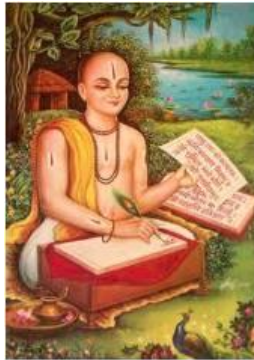
**Singing and dancing in devotion to god was the part of the Sufi Movement.**

- This led to the emergence of silsila, a lineage of the Sufi teachers, each of them following slightly different methods of giving instructions.
- During the period of Delhi Sulatanate, many Sufis from Central Asia settled in India and established their centres. The Chishti silsila became the most popular order. It had many respected teachers such as Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti of Ajmer, Baba Farid of Punjab, Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi etc.
- The Sufi teachers held their assemblies in their hospices or khanqahas. They were visited by the common people, kings and the nobles. Family, worldly and spiritual matters were discussed in the hospices.
- People also began to worship the tomb or the dargah of Sufi saints.

## Religious Developments in North India

- North India witnessed a new form of religious development after the thirteenth century. Many new saints preached their teachings to the people in simple languages and influenced the people belonging to every section of society. These saints preached diverse ideas.

- While saints such as Kabir and Guru Nanak rejected the element of orthodoxy that existed in all religions, Tulsidas and Surdas accepted the existing beliefs and practices.
- Tulsidas, a devotee of Lord Rama composed the 'Ramcharitmanas' in Awadhi language. Surdas on other hand worshipped Lord Krishna and composed famous literary pieces such as Sursagar and Surasarvalli.



Saint Tulsidas wrote  
"Ramcharitmanas" in  
the Awadhi language

- Shankradeva of Assam, a devotee of Lord Krishna wrote plays in Assamese. He is credited with the practice of setting up of namghars or houses of recitation and prayers.
- Other notable saints were Meerabai, Ravidas and Dadu Dayal. Mirabai being a Rajput princess composed bhajans (devotional songs) in devotion to Lord Krishna. She challenged the rituals and customs followed by the people of upper castes. She became famous among the popular masses of Gujarat and Rajasthan. She was a disciple of Saint Ravidas, who belonged to the lower caste.



Meerabai composed  
many bhajans in  
devotion to Lord  
Krishna

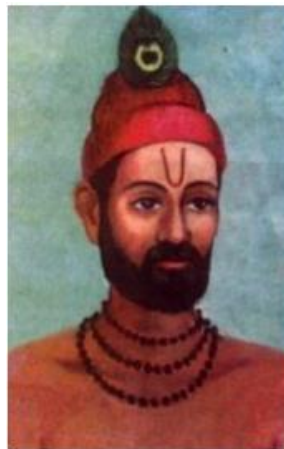
- The works of most of the saints were composed in regional languages and could be easily understood by the people. The songs written by them have become very popular. They have been orally transmitted from generations to generations and are even sung today, though in a changed form.

## Two Great Saints of the Medieval Period

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### Sant Kabir

- He probably lived during the fifteenth-sixteenth century. He was the most influential saint of this period.
- Sant Kabir was raised in a family of a Muslim weaver who lived in the city of Banaras.
- We do not know a lot about the events of his life.
- We gather information about him from a large collection of verses called sakhis and pads. These were composed by him and were sung by the wandering bhajan singers.
- Some of these were preserved in the Guru Granth Sahib, Panch Vani and Bijak.



Sant Kabir

### Baba Guru Nanak

- Baba Guru Nanak was born at Talwandi in the present day Pakistan.
- He established a centre at Kartarpur where his followers worshipped and sang his hymns. They assembled here and dined in the langar or the kitchen irrespective of any caste or creed.
- This holy place established by Guru Nanak came to be known as a dharmsa, which is now known as a Gurudwara.



- Guru Nanak stressed on the worship of one god and did not believe in the social order which created differences in the human race.



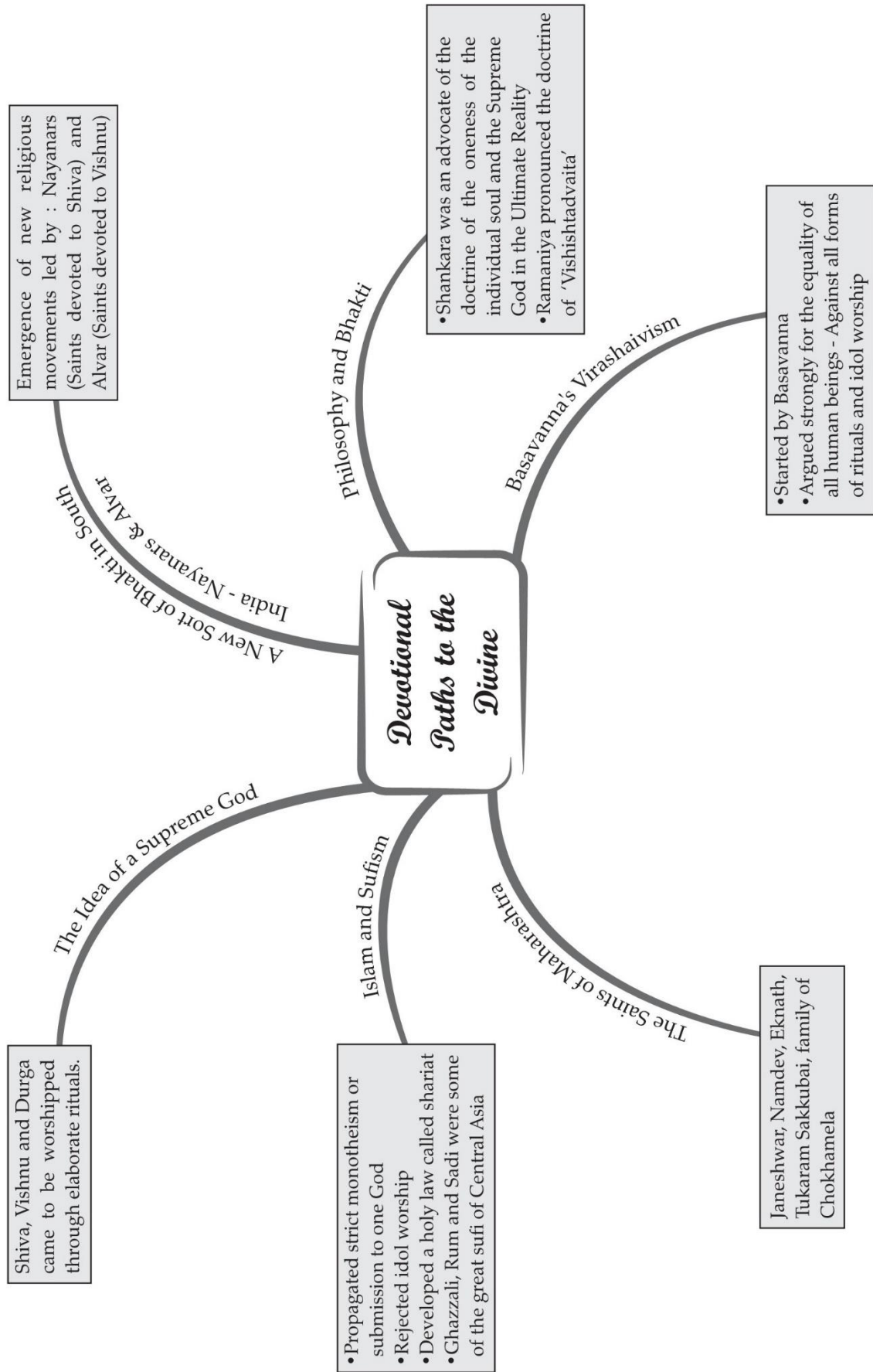
Guru Nanak accepted people belonging to every caste as his followers

- He believed in the principles of nam (right worship), dan (welfare of others) and insan (purity of conduct). He also believed in having the right belief and worship, honest living and helping others.
- According to him, the idea of liberation involved living an active life which included a strong sense of social commitment.
- Guru Nanak appointed one of his followers as his successor before his death in 1539. He came to be known as Guru Angad.
- Guru Angad compiled the compositions of Guru Nanak in a new script called the Gurumukhi. His successors also wrote under the name of 'Nanak'. This compilation was added to the writings of other prominent figures of this time such as Sant Kabir, Namdev, Guru Teg Bahadur etc.
- Later, Guru Gobind Singh validated the compilation and it is now known as the Guru Granth Sahib.
- People of different castes, communities and occupations became the followers of Guru Nanak.
- In the beginning of the seventeenth century, the town of Ramdaspur (Amritsar) developed around the main Gurudwara called Harmandir Sahib (now known as Golden Temple).
- The Sikh community became powerful during the early seventeenth century.
- The Mughal Emperor Jahangir ordered the execution of Guru Arjan Dev. The Sikh movement was strengthened by the institution of khalsa started by Guru Gobind Singh. The community of Sikhs known as the Khalsa Panth became a powerful political unit.



## MIND MAP : LEARNING MADE SIMPLE

## CHAPTER-18



## Important Questions

### ➤ Multiple Choice Questions :

Question 1. Gum Granth Sahib is the holy book of the:

- (a) Muslims
- (b) Hindus
- (c) Sikhs

Question 2. Ghazzali and Rumi were the great Sufis of the:

- (a) Central America
- (b) Central Asia
- (c) East Asia

Question 3. Sankaradeva was from:

- (a) Assam
- (b) Manipur
- (c) Mizoram

Question 4. Mirabai was a devotee of:

- (a) Lord Krishna
- (b) Vishnu
- (c) Shiva

Question 5. Nanak was bom in:

- (a) Ramdaspur
- (b) Talwandi
- (c) Banaras

Question 6. Islam propagated:

- (a) Submission to one God
- (b) Talwandi
- (c) Submission to many God

Question 7. The term 'langar' refer to:

- (a) Common place of worship
- (b) The Gurudwara
- (c) The Gums

(d) Common kitchen

Question 8. Dargah Khwaja Muinuddin Chisthi is situated at:

- (a) Jaipur
- (b) Udaipur
- (c) Ajmer
- (d) Alwar

Question 9. Narsi Mehta was a saint of:

- (a) Maharashtra
- (b) Rajasthan
- (c) Punjab
- (d) Gujarat

Question 10. Muslim scholars developed a holy law called:

- (a) Shariat
- (b) Bhakti
- (c) Meditation
- (d) Salvation

Question 11. Where did the composition of Surdas compiled?

- (a) Sursagara
- (b) Sursaravali
- (c) Sahitya lahari
- (d) All of the above

Question 12. Where did Sufi masters held their assemblies?

- (a) In Ichanqahs
- (b) In public hall
- (c) In their houses
- (d) None of these

Question 13. Whose songs become popular in Rajasthan and Gujarat?

- (a) Surdas
- (b) Tulsidas
- (c) Guru Nanak
- (d) Mira Bai

Question 14. Surdas was an ardent devotee of whom?

- (a) Vishnu
- (b) Krishna
- (c) Shiva
- (d) Durga

Question 15. Who were Sufis?

- (a) Mystics Hindu
- (b) Mystics Muslim
- (c) Mystics Buddha
- (d) None of these

➤ **Fill in the blanks :**

1. Shankara was an advocate of \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Ramanuja was influenced by the \_\_\_\_\_.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ was an important centre of the Bhakti tradition in Maharashtra.
4. In the process, local myths and legends became a part of the \_\_\_\_\_ stories.
5. Alvars' songs were compiled in the \_\_\_\_\_.

➤ **Write true (T) or false (F) :**

1. Tribal societies had rich oral traditions.
2. Pulaiyar and the Panars were the caste of barahamans.
3. Abhang is a Marathi devotional hymn.
4. Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture of the Hindu.
5. All of Nanak's compositions were compiled by Guru Arjan in 1604.

➤ **Very Short Questions :**

1. What did the Puranic stories consist of?
2. Who were the Pulaiyar and the Panars?
3. How many Alvars were there?
4. Name the two sets of compilations of Nayanar's songs.
5. Name the set of compilation of Alvars' songs.
6. What did Ramanuja propound?
7. What is abhang?



8. Name any two saints of Maharashtra.
9. Who were Sufis?
10. Name any two great Sufis of Central Asia.

### ➤ Short Questions :

1. Who were the Nayanars and Alvars? Write about them in brief.
2. Who was Ramanuja? What are the main points of his preachings?
3. What do you mean by Khanqahs? What purpose did it serve?
4. "The songs are as much a creation of the saints as of generations of people who sang them." Explain.
5. Who was Kabir? How do we know about him?

### ➤ Long Questions :

1. Write in brief about the ideas of Shankara and Ramanuja.
2. Write a brief note on new religious developments in north India.
3. What were the major teachings of Baba Guru Nanak?
4. What were the major beliefs and practices of the Sufis?

### ANSWER KEY –

### ➤ Multiple Choice Answer :

1. (c) Sikhs
2. (b) Central Asia
3. (a) Assam
4. (a) Lord Krishna
5. (b) Talwandi
6. (a) Submission to one God
7. (d) Common kitchen
8. (c) Ajmer
9. (d) Gujarat
10. (a) Shariat
11. (d) All of the above
12. (a) In Ichangahs
13. (d) Mira Bai

14. (b) Krishna
15. (b) Mystics Muslim

➤ **Fill in the blanks :**

1. Advaita
2. Alvars
3. Pandharpur
4. Puranic
5. Divya Prabandham

➤ **Write true (T) or false (F) :**

1. True
2. False
3. True
4. False
5. True

➤ **Very Short Answer :**

1. The Puranic stories consisted of local myths and legends.
2. They were considered untouchables.
3. There were 12 Alvars.
4. Tevaram and Tiruvacakam.
5. Divya Prabandham.
6. He propounded the doctrine of Vishishtadvaita or qualified oneness in that the soul even when united with the Supreme God remained distinct.
7. It is a Marathi devotional hymn.
8. Namdev and Tukaram
9. Sufis were Muslim mystics.
10. Ghazzali and Rumi.

➤ **Short Answer :**

1. The Nayanars and Alvars led religious movements in south India during seventh to ninth centuries. The Nayanars were devotees of Shiva while the Alvars were the devotees of Vishnu. They came from all castes including those considered 'untouchable' like the Pulaiyar and the Panars. They preached the intense love of Shiva or Vishnu as the path to

salvation. They went from place to place composing beautiful poems in praise of the deities enshrined in the villages they visited and set them to music. There were 63 Nayanars who belonged to different caste backgrounds. There were 12 Alvars who came from equally divergent backgrounds.

2. Ramanuja was a Bhakti saint. He was born in Tamil Nadu in the 11th century. He was deeply influenced by the Alvars.

**The main points of his preachings are:**

- Ramanuja taught people that the best means of attaining salvation was through intense devotion to Vishnu. Vishnu in His grace helps the devotee to attain the bliss of union with Him.
  - He propounded the doctrine of Vishishtadvaita or qualified oneness in that the soul even when united with the Supreme God remained distinct.
3. Khanqahs were houses of rest for travellers especially one kept by a religious order. Sufi masters usually held their assemblies here. Devotees of all descriptions including members of the royalty and nobility, and ordinary people flocked to these Khanqahs. Here, they discussed spiritual matters, sought the blessings of the saints in solving their worldly problems or simply attended the music and dance sessions.
  4. The works of the saints were composed in regional languages and could be sung. They became very popular and were handed down orally from one generation to another. Usually, the most deprived communities and women transmitted these songs. They even added their own experiences to them. Thus, the songs as we have them today are as much a creation of the saints as of generations of people who sang them. They have become a part of our living culture.
  5. Kabir probably lived in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries. He was one of the most influential saints. He was brought up in a family of Muslim jalahas or weavers settled in or near the city of Benaras, now Varanasi. We have little reliable information about the life of Kabir. We come to know of his ideas from a vast collection of verses called sakhis and pads, which are said to have been composed by him and sung by wandering bhqjan singers.

➤ **Long Answer :**

1. Shankara. He was one of the most Influential philosophers of India. He was born in Kerala in the eighth century. He was an advocate of Advaita or the doctrine of the oneness of the individual soul and the Supreme God, the Ultimate Reality. He taught that Brahman, the only or Ultimate Reality, was formless and without any attributes. He considered the world around us to be an illusion or maya, and preached renunciation of the world and adoption of the path of knowledge to understand the true nature of Brahman and attain salvation. Ramanuja. He was born in Tamil Nadu in the eleventh century and was deeply influenced by the Alvars. He preached that the best means of

attaining salvation was through intense devotion to Vishnu. Vishnu in His grace helps the devotee to attain the bliss of union with Him. He propounded the doctrine of Vishishtadvaita of qualified oneness in that the soul even when united with the Supreme God remained distinct.

2. During the thirteenth century a new wave of the Bhakti movement began in north India. This was an age when Islam, Brahmanical Hinduism, Sufism, various strands of Bhakti, and the Nathpanths, Siddhas and Yogis influenced one another. Ordinary people such as craftspersons, peasants, traders, etc. showed their interest in listening to these new saints. Kabir and Baba Guru Nanak did not approve orthodox religious. Tulsidas and Surdas accepted existing beliefs and practices but wanted to make these accessible to all. Tulsidas conceived of God in the form of Rama. His Ramacharitmanas is a unique creation, Surdas was an ardent devotee of Krishna. His compositions compiled in the Sursagara, Sursaravali and Sahitga Lahari, express his devotion. Shankaradeva of Assam emphasised devotion to Vishnu and composed poems and plays in Assamese. He began the practice of setting up namghars or houses of recitation and prayer. Saints like Dadu Dayal, Ravidas and Mirabai are worth-mentioning here. Mirabai was a Rajput princess and was married into the royal family of Mewar in the 16th century. She became a disciple of Ravidas, an untouchable saint. She devoted her life to Lord Krishna. She composed a number of bhajans expressing her intense devotion. A unique feature of most of the saints is that their works were composed in regional languages and could be sung. Therefore, they became very popular among the common mass.

### 3. Teachings of Baba Guru Nanak:

- i. He emphasized the importance of the worship of one God.
- ii. He insisted that caste, creed or gender was irrelevant for attaining liberation. His idea of liberation was not that of a state of inert bliss but rather the pursuit of active life with a strong sense of social commitment.
- iii. He himself used the terms nam, dan and isnan for the essence of his teaching, which actually meant right worship, welfare of others and purity of conduct.
- iv. His teachings underline the importance of right belief and worship, honest living, and helping others.

### 4. Major beliefs and practices of the Sufis:

- i. Sufis were Muslim mystics. They rejected outward religiosity and emphasised love and devotion to God and compassion towards all fellow human beings.
- ii. The Sufis often rejected the elaborate rituals and codes of behavior demanded by Muslim religious scholars.
- iii. They sought union with God much as a lover seeks his beloved with a disregard for the world. Sufis too believed that the heart can be trained to look at the world in a different way.

- iv. They developed elaborate methods of training using zikr (chanting of a name or sacred formula), contemplation, sama (singing), raqs (dancing), discussion of parables, breath control, etc. under the guidance of a master or pir.