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Q1

Evaluate the nature of the Bhakti Literature and its contribution to Indian culture.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · GS I · 10 marks · Indian Heritage and Culture

Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.

Core demand of the question

- Evaluate the nature of the Bhakti Literature and its contribution to Indian culture
- Keep the evaluation within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Bhakti literature is lyric devotion in the people's languages.

Kabir, **Mirabai**, Tukaram, **Tulsidas**, and the Alvars show nirguna and saguna streams.

It made vernaculars sacred and fed kirtan, the Guru Granth, and later reform talk.

It criticised caste pride more than it abolished caste.

Court and matha history still decided which texts lasted.

Introduction

Bhakti literature is the body of songs, verses, and hagiographies through which devotion spoke in the people's tongues. Its nature is personal love of God; its contribution is a more open Indian culture of language, music, and social critique.

Body

Nature of the literature

- **It is mostly lyric and oral:** the abhangs of **Tukaram**, the pads of **Mirabai**, the vachanas of **Basavanna**, and the ramcharit retellings of **Tulsidas** were meant to be sung, not only read.
- It is theistic and intimate. **Kabir** used nirguna bluntness; **Surdas** and **Jayadeva** used saguna Krishna love; **Nammazhwar** and the Alvars made Tamil the language of Vishnu.
- It is often autobiographical and ethical. Saints name their own caste, hunger, and doubt, which is a different voice from court Sanskrit kavya.
- Hagiography, such as **Nabhadas's** Bhaktamal and Sikh janamsakhis, later packaged the saints as a shared cultural memory.

Contribution to culture

- **Vernaculars became high religious media:** Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, Tamil, Bengali, and Punjabi gained a sacred public, which later fed print and the novel.
- Music and temple practice absorbed kirtan, bhajan, and qawwali-adjacent forms; the Sikh **Guru Granth Sahib** is itself a multi-saint anthology.

- Social critique of caste pride and empty ritual, in **Ravidas**, **Kabir**, and **Chokhamela**, entered common speech even where varna did not vanish.
- A shared idiom of bhakti and prem later helped reformers and nationalists quote saints without quoting only the shastra.

Limits

- Bhakti did not abolish patriarchy or jati; many mathas became new establishments.
- Court patronage, as under the Vijayanagara and Mughal worlds, also shaped which texts survived.

Flow diagram

Bhakti literature -> Vernacular song
Bhakti literature -> Theistic intimacy
Bhakti literature -> Caste ritual critique
Vernacular song -> Indian cultural public

Conclusion

Bhakti literature is sung, vernacular, and personally theistic. It widened Indian culture by making devotion a public language of equality-talk, even when social structure only partly followed the song.

Facts & figures

Alvars and Nayanmars

Tamil Vaishnava and Shaiva hymnists who made bhakti a temple and street literature of the south.

Guru Granth Sahib

A canonical anthology that includes Sikh Gurus with Kabir, Ravidas, and Namdev.

Tulsidas

Ramcharitmanas carried Rama bhakti into Awadhi homes far beyond Sanskrit Valmiki readers.

Basavanna

Kannada vachanas attacked caste and ritual empty-form in the Lingayat stream.

Mirabai

Rajput woman-saint whose pads made Krishna love a public female voice.