HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

INDIAN CULTURE- Post-Classical Period

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Part I : EARLY POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Overview

The literature and art of the early post-classical period were deeply influenced by religious devotionalism. Indeed, while 'classical' Indian culture is said to have formed during the Gupta Empire of the preceding centuries (3rd-5th CE), that earlier period was only the beginning of a longer process of development that came to fruition in the centuries up to 1000 CE. Beginning about 500 CE in the Tamil country, poetry, myth and song were composed and sung in the languages of common people, and temples were built for the worship of Siva and Visnu. Sanskrit poetry also flourished, largely by recycling stories from the Sanskrit epics.

Art

Architecture The rock-cut temples, stupas and prayer-halls at Ellora (c. 600-1000 CE) represent a continuation of those same Hindu and Buddhist structures carved earlier at Ajanta, in the same region of western India. In particular, the Kailasanatha temple at Ellora dedicated to Siva is impressive. It was carved out a single rock face, starting from the top and working down. It has a courtyard, a tower, a central shrine, five minor shrines and a columned arcade three stories high, with alcoves and sculpted panels. Soon these rock-cave structures gave way to free-standing ones, although both rock-cut and free-standing temples are seen at Mahabalipuram (c. 700 CE). Free-standing temples were built according to conventions laid down in canonical texts (*sastra*s), the most important being that the design was a symbolic representation of the universe. Temples were largely built with stone, although brick and mortar continued to be used in areas where stone was not readily available. The earliest (and still magnificent) temples were built in the 6th century CE at Aihole and Badami in the Deccan. By the end of the period, several other distinct regional styles had developed, in the far south (Tamil Nadu), on the west coast (Kerala), on the east coast (Orissa) and in Bengal. Late Buddhist architecture is represented by the great monastery at Nalanda (9th c. CE) and the hall at Bodh Gaya (6th-7th c. CE).

Sculpture Outstanding examples of early Hindu sculpture are seen on both the rock-cut and free-standing temples at Mahabalipuram and in the caves at Ajanta and Ellora. Further developments in stone sculpting of Hindu gods and goddesses are seen on the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram, the Pallava capital, not far from Madras. The 'lost wax' method of bronze casting had been known in the Indus Valley civilisation (3rd millennium BCE), but it reached perfection in the figures sculpted in South India at the end of this period..

Painting Continuity with the earlier tradition of wall painting is seen in the exquisite images depicted on the walls and ceilings of rock-cut temples at Ellora. Some of the most beautiful images are of graceful *apsaras*, female spirits of air and water in Indian mythology. Although the paintings have deteriorated, copies made both by hand and camera in the 19th century provide us with a good idea of their original beauty.

Religion

Devotionalism The devotionalism that emerged in this period is the second great shift in the history of Indian religion. The ritualism of the Vedas was followed by a turn to inner contemplation in the Upanishads. By the end of the fifth century CE, Hinduism shifted away from philosophical speculation toward a personal, often intense and direct relationship with a deity, saint or guru. This was the *bhakti* movement, named after the Sanskrit word *bhaj*, which has a spectrum of meanings from 'belonging' to 'attachment.' However, bhakti did not happen in Sanskrit. Instead, belonging and attachment were articulated and experienced in the regional languages, through which people communicated with local gods and goddesses. Although devotionalism had been expressed in earlier Sanskrit texts (especially the *Bhagavad Gita*), the new bhakti poetry spoke in a different idiom. Longing, pain, ecstasy, anger and passion were more viscerally expressed in one's mother tongue.

History The first bhakti poems were composed in Tamil in the 6th to 9th centuries CE. Despite their regional origins, these poems draw on pan-Indian myths and iconography of Siva and Visnu. These cultural influences from Sanskrit texts had been carried to the south through royal patronage of the Pallava kings in the northern

Tamil country. Favoured by other royal patrons, the movement later spread across the face of the subcontinent and has been the dominant form of Hinduism ever since.

Even Buddhism, which the bhakti poets 'sang out of India,' was affected by devotionalism. New Mahayana figures, such as bodhisattvas (Avalokitesvara and Maitreya) and goddesses (Padmini and Tara), were worshipped in shrines and with rituals similar to those in Hinduism.

Sanskrit literature

Poetry In this post-classical period, Sanskrit poets produced excellent 'classical' works, particularly in the *mahakavya* genre and usually by reworking material from the Sanskrit epics. Perhaps the most highly regarded poet of the period is Magha, who lived in the seventh century CE in a small court in Rajasthan. His most enduring work is *Shishupala Vadha* ('Slaying of Shishupala'), a skilful composition employing 23 different metres. The imprint of devotionalism is also evident in that the poet glorifies Visnu as the preserver who slays an evil king.

Other poets Bhatti (probably 7th c. CE) wrote *mahakavya*s based on episodes from the Rama story, the most famous being the *Ravanavadha*. Bharavi (probably 6th c. CE and probably from south India) modelled his *Kirātārjunīya* on earlier tellings of same story from the *Mahabharata*. Kumaradasa (7th c. CE) is remembered for his retelling of the 'rape' of Sita (*Janakiharana*), a story from the *Ramayana*. Bana (7th c. CE), who was also a playwright and author of the first biography in Indian literature (*Harschacarita)*, wrote poems collected under the title *Candisataka*.

Fiction Several important story collections appeared in this period, also. The source for many is the *Bṛhatkatha (* 'The Great Story') composed by a Jain author in the 6th or 7th c. CE but now lost. One extant and very entertaining text is Dandin's *Dasakumaracarita* ('The Tales of the Ten Princes'), a seventh-century collection tales held together by a frame-story.

Tamil literature

Nayanmars Tamil bhakti poets who composed songs in praise of Siva were collectively called the Nayanmars ('Servants of the Lord'). These 63 poets focused on a specific form of Siva associated with a place or mythic story. Some of their poems have a raw, wounded quality, often literally in the description of bodily mortification. Sometimes that poetic ferocity is directed against Jain and Buddhist scholars, philosophers and mendicants, who had considerable influence in south India at the time.

Alvars The Tamil poets who sang devotional songs to Visnu were known as Alvars (lit. 'Deep Ones'). These poets are fewer in number than their Saiva counterparts—only 12 names are recorded—but they produced more than 4,000 poems. The worship of Visnu (the preserver) as opposed to the worship of Siva (the destroyer) is also predictably less fierce in tone, less visceral in imagery and less uncompromising in its sectarian loyalty. The approach to Visnu in these poems is a mixture of contemplation, mythological drama and rapturous love.

Nammalvar The most prolific and highly regarded of these Vaisnava poet-saints is Nammalvar ('Our Alvar'). Born into a high caste (but not a Brahmin) in the 9th century CE, he went on pilgrimages to sacred places, including many in north India. Although he died at 35, his poetry was lauded as the 'Fifth Veda' or the 'Tamil Veda', and images of the poet were cast in bronze and installed in temples across south India. His collection of a thousand poems (*Tiruvaymoli*, 'Sacred Speech') describes the ten avatars of Visnu in both physical and spiritual attributes. The thousand poems are linked together by repeating the last syllable of each poem as the first syllable of the next poem, creating a garland of sound and sensibility.

Myths Another literary form of Tamil devotionalism was the myth. Although they borrowed heavily from Sanskrit myths, these south Indian texts focused on a specific Siva temple associated with one of his many stories or attributes. For this reason the 275 Tamil myths are called *stala* ('place') *purana*s. In effect, they are a form of the 'guide' poem(well-known in medieval Europe), directing worshippers to the many Siva temples that dot the Tamil countryside.

Discussion/questions

1. The early rock-cut temples and monasteries are feats of considerable engineering and artistic skill. How exactly were they built, and why were they built in these unlikely places? The frescoes in them are

regarded as perhaps the greatest achievement of Indian visual art. But how were they created and for whom?

2. The popularity of devotional Hinduism is generally attributed to language: the poems/songs were composed and sung in regional languages. Compare the role of language in the spread of other world religions. For example, scholars claim that one reason for the rapid spread of Islam was that it was preached in Arabic and not in the languages of those who had ruled the Arabs up until the 7th century (Persian, Latin, Greek, Coptic, Aramaic and Syriac).

3. Devotional poetry marked a decisive shift from philosophical speculation to passionate engagement with the divine that remains the life-blood of Hinduism. However radical it may have been, this shift had antecedents in earlier cultural forms. What can you find in that earlier literature that presages devotionalism? What political, social or economic factors might explain such a major change at this particular point in history?

4. The Tamil versions of the Sanskrit myths are distinguished by their specificity of place. How does this physical grounding make a difference to the tone and function of these mythological texts?

Reading

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Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple (*Calcutta, 1946)
George Michell, *Architecture and Art of Southern India* (Cambridge, 1995)
George Michell and Mark Zebrowski , *Architecture and Art of the Deccan Sultanates* (Cambridge, 1999)

Texts

1. From *Shishupala Vadha by* Magha, trans. Subhadra Jha

Then the warrior, winner of war, with his heroic valour, the subduer of the extremely arrogant beings, he who has the brilliance of stars, he who has the brilliance of the vanquisher of fearless elephants, the enemy seated on a chariot, began to fight.

2. From *Kirātārjunīya* by Bharavi, trans. Sampadananda Mishra,

O man who desires war! This is that battlefield which excites even the gods, where the battle is not of words. Here people fight and stake their lives not for themselves but for others. This field is full of herds of maddened elephants. Here those who are eager for battle and even those who are not very eager, have to fight.

3. From *Dasakumaracarita*, trans. by A.L. Basham

When this was done, she put the grains of rice in a shallow wide-mouthed, round-bellied mortar, took a long and heavy pestle of acacia-wood, its head shod with a plate of iron. With skill and grace she exerted her arms, as the grains jumped up and down in the mortar. Repeatedly, she stirred them and pressed them down with her fingers; then she shook the grains in a winnowing basket to remove the beards, rinse them several times, worshipped the hearth, and place them in water which had been five times brought to the boil. When the rice softened, bubbled and swelled, she drew the embers of the fire together, put a lid on the cooking pot, and strained off the gruel….

4. From the poems of Nammalvar, trans. A.K. Ramanujan, 1982

   We here and that man, this man,
   and that other-in-between,
   and that woman, this woman,
   and that other, whoever,
   those people, and these,
   and these others-in-between,
   this thing, that thing,
   and this other-in-between, whichever,
   all things dying, these, things,
   those things, those others-in-between,
   good things, bad things,
   things that were, that will be,
   being all of them,
   he stands there.

   [Note: 'He' in the last line refers to Visnu. Each of the Tamil personal pronouns ('he,' 'she,' and 'it') has three forms: 1) for near the speaker, 2) far away and 3) in the middle. There is also a distinction between 'we' (inclusive) and 'we' (exclusive)].

5. From *Tirumurai*, a poem by Appar about Siva

   We are not subject to any; we are not afraid of death; we will not suffer in hell; we live in no illusion; we feel elated; we know no ills; we bend to none; it is one happiness for us; there is no sorrow, for we have become servants, once and for all, of the independent Lord, and have become one at his beautiful, flower-covered feet.

Part II : LATE POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Overview

During this period, Indian culture was enriched by the influences from Persia, Turkey and Central Asia that were brought to the subcontinent and patronised by Muslim rulers. New synthetic styles emerged in architecture, poetry and religion, which were further developed during the Mughal Empire that followed.

Art

Indo-Islamic architecture The sultans of Delhi, and the minor Muslim rulers in the Deccan, oversaw the development of an Indo-Islamic style of architecture, characterised by ornate and intricately designed arches and domes. Pillars, mosques and tombs were decorated with floral patterns and calligraphic inscriptions from the Qur'an. The royal tombs of the Lodi sultans in Delhi are an excellent illustration of this style. The most famous structure, however, is the Qutb Minar, a pillar standing 73 metres high at centre of a large complex of buildings, including tombs and mosques on the outskirts of Delhi. Made of brick but covered with metal and later enlarged by adding six storeys made of sandstone and marble, the Qutb Minar is an architectural metaphor for the Sultanate as a whole. Begun in 1192, it was struck by lightning, damaged by an earthquake, repaired and then enlarged, until it reached its present form in the early 16th century.

Hindu architecture Some of the most magnificent Hindu temples in India were also built in the early centuries of this period. Regional styles evolved in Bengal, Kerala and Orissa, but the most spectacular temples were constructed in the far south. A large open space, often with a pool of water, was enclosed by a square with high towers on each of four walls. Outstanding examples are the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram and the Brihadishvara temple at Tanjore, both in modern-day Tamil Nadu.

Sculpture The quality of sculpture in north India declined during the Sultanate and produced a predominance of massive, rigid forms. However, a subtle school of bronze sculpture developed in eastern India, as seen in the images of Buddhist gods and goddesses at Nalanda and Kurkihar. In the south, the tradition of exquisite Chola bronzes (made with the 'lost-wax' method) continued to produce excellent pieces.

Religion

Islam Early Indian Islam was guided by the Qur'an and the Sunna, which tradition held were the words and principles of the Prophet. In effect, the Islam practiced in Delhi in this period would have differed little from that observed in Baghdad or Damascus. There were minor differences, however, especially in the interpretation of Islamic law (*shariah*), resulting from a recognition that adjustments had to be made when Islam conquered people of different faiths.

Sufism Islam during the Delhi Sultanate was also tempered by the Sufis, the wandering Muslim mystics who took their name from the coarse wool tunic they wore. Sufis represented the ecstatic impulse supressed in legalistic schools of Islam, as illustrated by this famous statement: 'Mystics learn from God; scholars learn from books.' Although Islam held that the only path to paradise was unwavering faith in god, Sufi saints believed that one could draw closer to divinity during one's lifetime and thereby experience mystical oneness. As singers and poets, they helped to spread Islam through the countryside, in a way that traditional Islamic teachers could not. The Sufi poet-saints were virtually indistinguishable from the poet-saints of devotional Hinduism. Both groups sang of a direct, personal contact with the divine, a power that they believed transcended petty social categories like caste and religious identity.

Hinduism Devotionalism, which had begun centuries earlier in the Tamil country, spread like wild fire across the entire subcontinent. Hindu poet-saints composed songs in Kannada, Marathi, Malayalam, Telugu, Gujarati, Hindi and Assamese. As one scholar famously put it, they 'sung the Buddhists out of India.' Royal patronage for this rampant devotionalism was provided by the Chola kings in the far south and the Vijayanagar kings in the Deccan, who built temples and local shrines. A theological basis for devotionalism was articulated by the south Indian scholar Ramanuja (c. 1017–1137 CE) and his school of *Vishistadvaita* ('qualified non-dualism').
Rather than merge into oneness with god (the goal of the rival *advaita*, or non-dualism, school), he argued that the worshipped could become immersed in god and yet retain a personal identity that could form a bond with god.

Literature

Hindu Hindu literature during this period was inspired by the devotionalism that had begun in the Tamil-speaking region of the south a few centuries earlier. The new literary-religious impulse spread to the adjacent Kannada-speaking area, where in the 11th and 12th centuries CE a group of poets invented a new genre of the *vacana* ('speech'), with which to speak to Siva. Known as Virasaivas ('Militant/Heroic Saivas'), these poets used this simple verse from to propagate their spiritual vision and egalitarian social ideals. In Tamil, the outstanding literary achievement was a devotional retelling of the Ramayana by Kampan (12th c. CE?). Another Ramayana of similar iconic status in the north was written in Hindi by Tulsi Das (15th c. CE). In Sanskrit, the prevailing devotionalism is best illustrated by the *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva (12th c. CE).

Indo-Persian A new literary culture developed at the court of the Delhi Sultanate and the courts of minor Muslim rulers in the Deccan. The wealth and fame of these rulers attracted poets from the eastern reaches of the Persian Empire and stimulated local talent, as well. Writing in Persian, but often incorporating Indian themes and metres, these poets experimented with Indo-Persian genres, such as the *qasida* (panegyric ode) and the *masnavi* (mixing romantic love and moral instruction). But the pre-eminent genre, in both Persia and India, was the *ghazal*, a short lyric of rhymed couplets combining the conventions of a love poem with those of a drinking song. Its imagery is drawn almost entirely from the landscape, flora and fauna of Persia, the most famous example being the contrast between the rose (*gul*) and the nightingale (*bulbul*). Its subtle poetic language is made even more enigmatic by the Sufi religious themes that supply its content. Many *ghazal*s express emotions of longing and loss, in both ordinary human experience and the mystical experience of god. A master of the *ghazal*, and other genres, was Amir Khusrau (1253-1325 CE?), who is also credited with developing the influential *qawwali* tradition by fusing Persian and Indian music traditions.

Story of the Parrot The Indo-Persian literary synthesis is epitomised by the 'Story of the Parrot' (*Tuti Nama*), written in the 14th century CE. The author, Nakhshabi, was a poet and physician born in Persia who migrated to north India and found patronage under a Muslim ruler. While still in Persia, however, he had translated a Sanskrit version of the story (*Sukasaptati*, 'Story of 70 Parrots'), which he later adapted as the *Tuti Nama*. In his text, a single parrot tells 52 tales over as many nights in order to prevent its mistress from having a love affair while her husband is away (a delaying tactic of storytelling that is familiar to us from the *Thousand and One Nights*).

Discussion/questions

1. The Qutb Minar in Delhi is a large architectural complex, almost like an archaeological site that contains historical layers of a culture. Analyse the Qutb Minar complex by studying its various layers. Why were the different structures built at different times? Who commissioned them? And who used them?

2. Hindu devotionalism is a movement with many strands, but in essence it refers to a personal, intense and often painful relationship between a worshipper and a god or goddess. Some critics have compared the relation between a bhakti poet and a deity to that between a lover and a beloved. Analyse Hindu devotional poetry as a form of divine love. Select three poets for close reading, and then include a writer of similar love poetry from outside India for comparative purposes (for example, Sappho, Rumi, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila or Shakespeare).

3. Several north Indian bhakti poets were either Muslims or influenced by Sufism. Analyse the work of the north Indian poets for their religious content. Do they, for instance, transcend the categories of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'?

4. Indo-Persian writers did more or less the same thing as their native-born Indian writers: they adapted pre-existing, mostly Sanskrit story literature. However, they often used genres borrowed from their native Persian. How does this change the fiction they wrote?

Reading

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Texts

1. Kannada poem by Basavanna, trans. A.K. Ramunujan

The rich will make temples for Siva.
What shall I, a poor man, do?
My legs are pillars,
the body the shrine,
the head a cupola of gold.

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,
things standing shall fall
but the moving ever shall stay.

2. Hindi poem by Kabir, trans. Rushil Rao

Hiding in this cage
of visible matter

is the invisible
lifebird

pay attention
to her

she is singing
your song

3. Persian poem by Amir Khusrau, trans. Hadi Hasan

I am a pagan and a worshipper of love: the creed (of Muslims) I do not need;
Every vein of mine has become taunt like a wire,
the (Brahman's) girdle I do not need.
Leave from my bedside, you ignorant physician!
The only cure for the patient of love is the sight of his beloved –
other than this no medicine does he need.
If there be no pilot in our boat, let there be none:
We have god in our midst: the sea we do not need.
The people of the world say that Khusrau worships idols.
So he does, so he does; the people he does not need,
the world he does not need.