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Bhaktism and Social Equality: How Saguna and Nirguna Traditions Inspired Anti-caste Movements in Indian History

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Introduction – The Idea of Imagined Egalitarianism

Imagined Egalitarianism is the human capacity to envision a world of equality, even when surrounded by deep inequality. It is the courage to believe that caste, hierarchy, and exclusion are not natural, but can be challenged and overturned. In other words, Imagined egalitarianism is the Moral and Spiritual capacity to **conceive equality amid inequality**. It is not the presence of equality but the human power to dream it and thereby make injustice visible. In Pre-modern India, this imagination crystallized in the Bhakti movement, a continent-wide vernacular awakening that recast religion from ritual privilege to devotional participation. Through songs, vernacular poetry, and shared emotion, saint-poets challenged the metaphysical basis of the caste system, which had long defined worth through birth.

Caste is sustained not merely by political or economic power, but by a cultural belief structure. In other words, a deep-seated '***Senso Comune'*** or Common Sense that validates inherentspiritual difference based on ***Janma*** (Birth). The concept of Imagined Egalitarianism operates as a necessary counter-ideology to this hegemonic structure.

The Bhakti movement—beginning around the sixth century in Tamil Nadu with the ***Āḻvārs*** and ***Nāyanārs*** and spreading north through Ramananda, Chaitanya, Kabir, Mirabai, and Guru Nanak—revolutionized India's moral imagination. It democratized spirituality by locating divine realization not in ritual but in **Love** (***prema***), **Faith** (***śraddhā***), and **Devotion** (***bhakti***). Bhakti broke the monopoly of Sanskritic priesthood through vernacular language, collective singing, and direct experience of God. Within Bhakti, two intertwined philosophical streams—**Saguna philosophy**, where God was worshipped with name and image, and **Nirguna philosophy**, saints rejected temple, idol, and ritual altogether, proclaiming a formless divine equally accessible to all—became profound challenges to caste ideology. Saguna and Nirguna traditions employed parallel yet distinctly differentiated strategies in their challenge to caste. The Saguna movement pursued reformist inclusion by democratizing ritual access, focusing on the accessibility of the personal deity through vernacular practices and communal participation. Conversely, the more radical Nirguna tradition mandated metaphysical rupture by eliminating the foundation of ritual purity, proclaiming a formless divine inherently accessible to all, thereby directly dismantling caste's theological premises. This duality represents a two-pronged intellectual attack on the established

social order. This spiritual blueprint for equality offered an ideological foundation for subsequent secular democratic and anti-caste social imaginary movements, particularly in colonial and post-colonial eras.

Scholarly engagement with Caste and Bhakti spans sociology, theology, and postcolonial philosophy, yet remains fragmented. Louis Dumont's Homo Hierarchicus (1966) defined caste through hierarchy and purity, while M. N. Srinivas (1952) and André Béteille (1965) examined mobility within a rigid social frame. Later, David Lorenzen (1995), John Stratton Hawley (2005), and Karen Pechilis (2012) reimagined Bhakti as a democratizing force, and Anantand Rambachan (2014) as a theology of equality. Yet few have bridged the metaphysical depth of Saguna and Nirguna thought with their radical social critique of caste. Postcolonial thinkers like Ashis Nandy and Sudipta Kaviraj reveal Bhakti as moral politics, but its ontological defiance of varna-dharma remains neglected. This study thus locates that devotion in India was not submission, but dissent — **an imagination of equality before God as equality among humans.**

Varna System and Caste System: From Theory to Praxis

The caste system (Originally, ***Varna Pratha***) in India is simultaneously a social institution and a metaphysical construct. Its conceptual origins lie in the Vedic idea of varṇa, which was originally functional, not hereditary. The Ṛgveda describes the cosmic origin of social differentiation in the famous Puruṣa Sūkta:

"ब्राह्मणोऽस्य मुखमासीद् बाहू राजन्यः कृतः।

ऊरू तदस्य यद्वैश्यः पद्भ्यां शूद्रो अजायत॥" (Rig Veda, 10.90.12 — Purusha Sukta)

"The Brāhmaṇa was his mouth, the Kṣatriya made from his arms, the Vaiśya from his thighs, and the Śūdra was born from his feet."

This verse forms part of the ***Purusha Sukta*** — one of the most philosophically profound hymns in the Rig Veda, describing the cosmic being (Purusha) whose sacrifice gives rise to the universe and social order. ***Verse 12*** in particular is often cited as the mythic origin of the varna (class) system, portraying social differentiation as a divine cosmological act. However, it is crucial to note that early Vedic texts did not imply a hierarchical or hereditary caste structure as later social orders did. The verse symbolizes functional differentiation within a unified cosmic body — suggesting that all varnas emerge from the same sacred source (Purusha), emphasizing interdependence rather than inequality.

In early Vedic thought, Varna was a cosmological, not hereditary, concept. The Bhagavad Gita (4.13) states: "चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागशः।"—"The fourfold order was created by Me

according to qualities and actions." This verse from the Bhagavad Gita marks a pivotal theological reinterpretation of social order. Krishna's declaration transforms varṇa from a ***Birth-based (Janma) hierarchy*** into a moral and psychological classification determined by one's intrinsic Disposition (***Guṇa***) and ethical Action (***Karma***). It thus redefines the varna ideal in metaphysical rather than genealogical terms — a framework that later Bhakti saints invoked to challenge caste orthodoxy through the language of divine equality.

The early Indian scriptures conceived varṇa as an ethical and spiritual disposition, not as hereditary hierarchy. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad affirms: "यथा सोऽस्मिन्नर्येण ब्राह्मणेन कर्मणा जायते तथा शूद्रः कर्मणा सर्वे हि पुरुषा ब्रह्म एव।" ("As by action one becomes a Brahmin, so by action another becomes a Shudra, for all humans are in truth forms of Brahman.") (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.4.5; Radhakrishnan 184).

Here, spiritual realization, not birth, defines worth; every soul, being Brahman itself, is equally divine. The Mahābhārata reinforces this ethic of conduct over lineage: "न जात्या ब्राह्मणः कोऽपि शूद्रो नापि स्वकर्मभिः। कर्मणा ब्राह्मणो ज्ञेयः शूद्रश्च कर्मणा भवेत्॥" ("No one is a Brahmin or a Shudra by birth; by actions one becomes a Brahmin, and by actions one becomes a Shudra.") (Mahābhārata, Vana Parva 180.25; Ganguli 568). Both texts thus dismantle the later idea of hereditary caste, defining varṇa as moral vocation grounded in karma and dharma rather than descent.

Theoretically, the varna system in its earliest conception represented a moral–psychological framework, not a social heredity. Rooted in the doctrine of ***Guna*** (qualities) and ***Karma*** (action), it described the diversity of human temperaments and social functions necessary for harmony. The Bhagavad Gita (18.41–44) clearly bases varna on innate disposition—self-control, courage, enterprise, or service—rather than lineage. In this philosophical sense, Brahminhood symbolized wisdom, Kshatriyahood valor, Vaishyahood productivity, and Shudrah humility—all attainable through conduct. Only in later centuries, under ritual codification and social ossification, did varna mutate into jati, a rigid caste system that sanctified inequality instead of expressing the fluid ethics of dharma.

Saguna Bhakti: Reform through Inclusion

The Saguna path, which worships God with attributes, name, and image, aimed not at destroying tradition but at democratizing access to the sacred. It turned Sanskritic exclusivity into vernacular accessibility and ritual hierarchy into emotional community.

Ramananda: The Inclusive Voice of the North: Ramananda (fifteenth century), operating in Banaras—the intellectual capital of Brahmin orthodoxy—became the first Vaishnava teacher to accept disciples from all castes. The Bhaktamāl records his saying:

"Ask not one's caste or creed; whoever worships Hari belongs to Hari" (Bhaktamāl 23).

Among his disciples were Kabir (a weaver), Ravidas (a cobbler), and Sena (a barber). Through the shared devotion to Rama, Ramananda broke the priestly monopoly over spiritual attainment. His gatherings on the ghats of Banaras united artisans, women, and peasants in public recitation. Historian Rameshwar Bahuguna observes that Ramananda's bhakti "shifted the sacred center from Sanskrit ritual to vernacular emotion" (Bahuguna 46).

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu: The Egalitarian Ecstasy of Bengal: In sixteenth-century Bengal, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu turned Bhakti into a collective performance through sankirtan (public chanting of divine names). The Chaitanya Charitamrita (Adi 4.45) proclaims: "Divine love is the supreme goal of human life."

By inviting all—Brahmins, Shudras, and women—into communal singing, he dissolved ritual boundaries. The street became the temple; music replaced mediation. Through ecstatic devotion (bhava), Chaitanya's followers experienced equality as shared emotion. Theologically, he declared that Krishna's name itself is God, thereby erasing the need for priest or idol.

Mirabai: The Voice of Devotional Defiance in Rajasthan: Mirabai (1498–1546), a Rajput princess, defied patriarchal and caste norms by rejecting royal privileges to live as Krishna's devotee. Her poems, composed in Rajasthani, speak of a divine intimacy beyond social duty: "I have found my Lord within my heart; all other relations are dust." (Mirabai Poems, 34).

In a region where both gender and caste restricted spiritual expression, Mirabai's public singing and wandering life symbolized freedom through love. Her Krishna was not a deity of ritual but a beloved of conscience.

Saguna Bhakti spread across northern and western India—from Banaras to Bengal, from Rajasthan to Maharashtra—turning bhakti into a popular theology of inclusion. Yet, as Bahuguna notes, "it retained traces of hierarchy even as it challenged them" (Bahuguna 49). The key contribution of Saguna saints lay in opening ritual spaces to those historically excluded, making language, song, and body the new temples of equality.

Nirguna Bhakti: Rebellion through Negation

If Saguna Bhakti reformed caste from within, Nirguna Bhakti dismantled its metaphysical foundations. It envisioned God as formless, nameless, and beyond ritual mediation, thus denying caste's very grammar of separation.

Kabir: The Weaver of Truth: Kabir (fifteenth century), born in a weaver family near Banaras, challenged both Hindu and Muslim orthodoxy. He sang: "Do not ask the saint's caste; ask for his

wisdom. Look at the sword, not the sheath." (Kabir Vani, Doha 98). "The Lord is in every heart; why search for Him in the temple or the mosque?" (Kabir Granthavali, Sakhi 73). For Kabir, the divine was immanent in all beings, making ritual distinction absurd. His verses—recited in bazaars, not monasteries—made devotion the religion of common people. Charlotte Vaudeville writes that Kabir "spoke in the people's idiom to liberate them from the priest's Sanskrit" (Vaudeville 114).

Ravidas: The Utopia of Begampura: Ravidas, a leatherworker and Ramananda's disciple, translated Nirguna theology into a vision of social equality. In his hymn included in the Guru Granth Sahib (p. 345), he sings: "Begampura is the city's name; there is no suffering there, no tax or caste; all stand equal before God."

Begampura—"city without sorrow"—is not a heaven elsewhere but an imagined moral society on earth. Ravidas's egalitarian gatherings in Varanasi attracted artisans, traders, and women, turning devotion into social solidarity. Gail Omvedt notes that Ravidas's vision "transforms mysticism into a programme of equality" (Omvedt 54).

Guru Nanak: The Universal Truth of Punjab: Guru Nanak (1469–1539) extended Nirguna Bhakti into the Punjabi milieu, rejecting both Brahminical ritualism and Islamic exclusivity. In the Japji Sahib, he declares: "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim; all are children of the One Creator." (Guru Granth Sahib 1:1).

He institutionalized this truth through the sangat (congregation) and langar (community kitchen), where all sat and ate together regardless of caste. Food became the ritual of equality. The Sikh scripture later affirmed: "The same divine light pervades all; who then is pure, who impure?" (Guru Granth Sahib 1349).

Nirguna Bhakti dissolved caste's metaphysical support by erasing its ritual distinctions. Without idol or priest, the theology of purity lost ground. Jon Keune observes, "Equality in Bhakti is performed, not proclaimed—it lives in shared practice and food" (Keune 112). The Nirguna path thus enacted spiritual anarchy that became the foundation of sacred democracy.

Bhakti as the Precursor to Modern Anti-Caste Thought

Despite centuries of reform, caste persists as a social habitus embedded in marriage, occupation, and even modern institutions. The Bhakti movements could **imagine** equality but could not always **institutionalize** it. The enduring intellectual contribution of the Bhakti movement cannot be overstated. By pioneering a discourse of "castelessness, non-hierarchy and caring human fellowship" through indigenous, vernacular intellectual history, Bhakti supplied the necessary moral and philosophical vocabulary for subsequent structural critiques of caste.

Modern Indian Political Thinkers like Jotiba Phule, M. G. Ranade, and B. R. Ambedkar in later centuries drew explicitly on these conceptual resources to articulate modern interpretations of freedom and equality that challenged intra-religious domination. The Bhakti movement's "Imagined Egalitarianism" thus served as a vital intellectual precedent, supplying the foundational cultural resources required for India's eventually secular and democratic social imaginary.

Conclusion: The Audacious Grammar of Equality

The Bhakti Movement, viewed through the prism of political philosophy, was not merely a devotional resurgence but a profound intellectual insurrection against the theological scaffolding of caste hierarchy. Its transformative strength resided in the dialectical interplay between Saguna and Nirguna Bhakti — the former reformist, seeking inclusion through love and participation; the latter revolutionary, seeking liberation through negation and interiority. Saguna Bhakti democratized divinity, dismantling priestly monopolies and reimagining spiritual worth as independent of birth. Nirguna Bhakti, in contrast, subverted the metaphysics of purity itself, relocating the sacred from ritual exclusivity to the universal self.

Together, these two currents forged an enduring moral and philosophical imagination — an ***Imagined Egalitarianism*** — that, though historically partial, shattered the complacent faith in caste as destiny. In the vernacular poetics of Kabir's couplets, Mirabai's defiance, and Tukaram's lamentations, we witness not only faith but argument — not only devotion but dissent. This imaginative insurgency did not abolish hierarchy overnight, yet it inaugurated a new political consciousness: that equality is not merely a social arrangement, but a spiritual truth awaiting realization. The Bhakti saints thus authored a living grammar of resistance — an ***Audacious grammar of equality*** — whose echoes continue to unsettle power, inspire reform, and remind India that the most radical revolution begins in the heart that refuses to bow to injustice.

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