



## BHAKTI MOVEMENT AND SANT TUKARAM: LESSONS FOR CIVIL SERVICES ASPIRANTS



The Maharashtra government's decision to rename Pune International Airport to "Jagadguru Sant Tukaram Maharaj Airport" marks a significant cultural tribute, reflecting the enduring influence of Sant Tukaram Maharaj on Indian spirituality and social thought. The approval of this proposal, which has gained support at the state level and awaits central government clearance, has sparked interest in the Bhakti movement and the life of one of its most influential saints, Tukaram Maharaj. For civil services aspirants, understanding the historical roots and impact of the Bhakti movement, along with the teachings of Sant Tukaram, is crucial to grasping India's cultural and social history.

### Renaming Pune Airport

The proposal to rename Pune International Airport after Sant Tukaram Maharaj is not only symbolic but deeply meaningful. Sant Tukaram, a revered 17th-century saint, was born in Lohegaon, the very place where the Pune airport is located, adding historical and spiritual resonance to the renaming. His life's work in promoting devotion, equality, and spiritual growth through his Abhanga poetry remains central to Maharashtra's cultural identity.

This move to honor Sant Tukaram's legacy opens a broader conversation about the significance of the Bhakti movement in medieval India, a time when spiritual reformers like Tukaram challenged social norms and inspired generations with their devotion, inclusivity, and humanistic values. As the Bhakti movement reshaped Indian society, its core tenets remain relevant for civil services aspirants who seek to understand India's diverse heritage and social evolution.



## The Bhakti Movement: A Brief Overview

The Bhakti movement, which spanned from the 7th to the 17th centuries, was a major spiritual and cultural awakening that swept across India. Originating in South India, it eventually spread to the North, with various saints and poets leading the movement in different regions. Bhakti, meaning devotion, emphasized the worship of a personal god, breaking away from the rigidities of orthodox Brahmanical rituals and caste-based hierarchies.

At its core, the Bhakti movement encouraged personal devotion (bhakti) to God, irrespective of caste, gender, or social status. Saints of the Bhakti movement, such as Kabir, Meera Bai, Guru Nanak, Ramanuja, and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, preached equality and devotion to a formless or personal god, such as Vishnu, Shiva, or Krishna. Their teachings focused on love, equality, and the pursuit of spiritual knowledge over rigid adherence to rituals.

The Bhakti movement emerged as a response to the growing ritualism and caste divisions in society. It provided an alternative, offering spiritual liberation (moksha) through personal devotion. The saints of the Bhakti movement often challenged the established norms, questioning caste discrimination and advocating for social justice and equality. Their teachings also found resonance among the masses, especially the lower castes, who were marginalized by the hierarchical society of medieval India.

## Key Characteristics of the Bhakti Movement

- 1. Personal Devotion to God:** The Bhakti saints emphasized the personal and direct relationship between the devotee and God, without the need for priests or elaborate rituals. This form of devotion was accessible to all, regardless of caste or gender.
- 2. Equality and Inclusivity:** Bhakti poets and saints condemned the rigid caste system, promoting equality in the eyes of God. Saints like Kabir and Ravidas, from lower castes, became revered figures, breaking societal barriers.
- 3. Vernacular Languages:** The Bhakti movement is also credited with promoting regional languages. Saints composed their devotional songs in the local languages, making their teachings accessible to the common people. Tukaram's Abhangas were written in Marathi, while Kabir's couplets (dohas) were in Hindi, and Guru Nanak's hymns were in Punjabi.
- 4. Opposition to Ritualism and Priesthood:** Bhakti saints rejected the excessive ritualism of Vedic religion, instead advocating for simplicity in worship. They believed that true devotion required only sincerity of heart.
- 5. Emphasis on Love and Compassion:** The central theme of Bhakti poetry is divine love, and the love of God was often equated with human compassion. This focus on compassion led many Bhakti saints to speak against social injustices, caste oppression, and economic inequality.



## Notable Bhakti Saints and Their Contributions

- **Kabir:** A mystic poet and saint from North India, Kabir's verses are known for their sharp critique of both Hindu and Muslim orthodoxy. His teachings focused on the idea that God is beyond religious distinctions and can be found within oneself.
- **Meera Bai:** A Rajput princess, Meera Bai became one of the most famous women saints of the Bhakti movement. Her poetry expressed her deep love and devotion for Krishna, often depicting him as her divine lover.
- **Guru Nanak:** The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak's teachings were rooted in the Bhakti tradition. He emphasized devotion to a formless God, social justice, and equality, forming the core of the Sikh faith.
- **Chaitanya Mahaprabhu:** A Bengali saint, Chaitanya was a devotee of Krishna and spread the practice of congregational chanting (kirtan). His movement had a profound impact on the development of the Vaishnava tradition.

## Sant Tukaram Maharaj: The Poet-Saint of Maharashtra

Sant Tukaram, one of the most celebrated saints of the Bhakti movement, was born in 1608 in Dehu, near Pune. He was a Varkari, a devotee of Vithoba (an incarnation of Lord Vishnu worshipped in Maharashtra). Tukaram's life and teachings, encapsulated in his Abhanga poetry, reflected his devotion to God and his deep empathy for the downtrodden.

## Teachings of Sant Tukaram

1. **Devotion to Vithoba:** Tukaram's devotion was centered around Vithoba of Pandharpur. His poetry, known as Abhanga, is filled with love and devotion for Vithoba, depicting God as a personal, accessible deity who listens to the prayers of the devotee.
2. **Equality and Social Justice:** Like other Bhakti saints, Tukaram rejected the caste system and preached equality. He encouraged people from all walks of life to participate in spiritual devotion, breaking down caste-based barriers.
3. **Simplicity and Humility:** Tukaram lived a simple life, encouraging others to renounce material wealth and pride. His poems often conveyed the importance of humility, sincerity, and inner purity in the path to God.
4. **Pantheism and Divine Omnipresence:** One of the most significant aspects of Tukaram's teachings was his belief in the omnipresence of God. He saw God in every element of the universe, expressing a deep connection between the divine and the natural world.



## Contribution to Indian Society

Tukaram's contributions extended beyond spiritual realms. His poetry addressed issues of social injustice, moral decay, and the struggles of common people. Through his kirtans (devotional songs), he provided spiritual solace to the masses while also encouraging them to pursue justice and equality.

One of Tukaram's greatest legacies is the Tukaram Gatha, a collection of around 4,500 Abhangas, which continues to inspire people in Maharashtra and beyond. His teachings have influenced generations of social reformers, including Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who drew from the Bhakti tradition's emphasis on equality and social justice.

## Impact of the Bhakti Movement on Indian Society

The Bhakti movement played a transformative role in Indian society. Its emphasis on equality, devotion, and compassion challenged the rigid caste system and promoted a more inclusive approach to spirituality.

By using vernacular languages, Bhakti saints democratized religious and spiritual discourse, allowing common people to engage with and understand profound spiritual teachings.

Moreover, the Bhakti movement fostered a sense of unity among different communities, creating a spiritual foundation for social reforms. The movement's focus on devotion, irrespective of one's social status, helped to bridge the gap between different castes, encouraging a more egalitarian social structure.

## Conclusion

The renaming of Pune International Airport to honor Sant Tukaram Maharaj is a reflection of the enduring legacy of the Bhakti movement. Sant Tukaram's life and teachings, rooted in devotion, equality, and compassion, continue to resonate with people today, transcending time and societal changes. For civil services aspirants, understanding the Bhakti movement and the contributions of saints like Tukaram offers valuable insights into India's cultural and social fabric. The Bhakti movement's message of inclusivity, social justice, and spiritual devotion remains relevant in contemporary discussions on nation-building, social reforms, and governance.

## Main Practice Questions

**1.Examine the significance of the Bhakti movement in reshaping medieval Indian society. In your answer, highlight the key characteristics of the movement and how Bhakti saints contributed to social and spiritual reforms.**

**2.Discuss the life and teachings of Sant Tukaram in the context of the Bhakti movement. How did his emphasis on devotion, equality, and social justice influence the society of his time and continue to resonate in modern India?**



## Answer Guidelines

### Question 1:

Examine the significance of the Bhakti movement in reshaping medieval Indian society. In your answer, highlight the key characteristics of the movement and how Bhakti saints contributed to social and spiritual reforms.

- **Introduction:**
  - Brief overview of the Bhakti movement (origin and spread across India).
  - Mention its emergence as a reaction to rigid rituals and caste divisions.
- **Key Characteristics of the Bhakti Movement:**
  - *Personal Devotion:* Emphasis on personal, direct worship of God without intermediaries.
  - *Equality and Inclusivity:* Rejection of caste-based discrimination; promotion of spiritual equality.
  - *Use of Vernacular Languages:* Bhakti saints composed songs and poetry in regional languages (e.g., Marathi, Hindi, Punjabi) to connect with common people.
  - *Criticism of Ritualism:* Opposition to elaborate rituals and priestly dominance, focusing instead on sincere devotion.
  - *Love and Compassion:* Central themes in Bhakti poetry, stressing divine love and human compassion.
- **Social and Spiritual Reforms:**
  - Bhakti saints like Kabir, Meera Bai, Guru Nanak, and Sant Tukaram challenged societal norms and hierarchical structures.
  - Advocacy for social justice, reduction of caste and gender-based discrimination.
  - Promotion of moral values, community harmony, and spiritual egalitarianism.
- **Conclusion:**
  - Summarize how the Bhakti movement brought profound changes in Indian society, spiritually uniting people across social divides and influencing future social reforms.



## Question 2:

**Discuss the life and teachings of Sant Tukaram in the context of the Bhakti movement. How did his emphasis on devotion, equality, and social justice influence the society of his time and continue to resonate in modern India?**

- **Introduction:**
  - Brief introduction to Sant Tukaram and his place within the Bhakti movement.
  - Mention his role as a leading Varkari saint from Maharashtra.
- **Life of Sant Tukaram:**
  - Born in Dehu near Pune, spent his life dedicated to Vithoba worship.
  - Experienced hardships but remained devoted to spiritual practices and writing poetry (Abhanga).
- **Teachings of Sant Tukaram:**
  - *Devotion to Vithoba:* Central theme of his Abhanga poetry, focused on love and devotion to God.
  - *Equality:* Rejection of caste hierarchy, inclusivity in spiritual practices.
  - *Simplicity and Humility:* Advocated renunciation of material wealth, promoted inner purity and humility.
  - *Pantheism and Divine Omnipresence:* Saw God in all elements of nature and emphasized the connection between the divine and the universe.
- **Impact on Society:**
  - His teachings inspired social and spiritual reforms, addressing social injustices and moral corruption.
  - Encouraged equality and justice, influencing reformers like Phule and Ambedkar.
  - His poetry continues to resonate in modern Maharashtra, promoting cultural and spiritual unity.
- **Conclusion:**
  - Summarize Sant Tukaram's lasting influence on Indian society and the relevance of his teachings in contemporary social and spiritual life.