

Divine Devotion and Imperial Design - Tracing the Interplay of the Bhakti Movement and Mughal Governance in Mewar

Mrs. Shallu Agarwal

Assistant Professor, Sangam University, Bhilwara

Corresponding Author: Shallu.agarwal@sangamuniversity.ac.in

Available online at: www.sijmr.org

Received: 09-07-2025, Accepted: 26-09-2025, Online: 30-09-2025

Abstract— This article explores the profound influence of the Bhakti Movement and the Mughal Empire on Indian society, focusing specifically on the spiritual ideology of the Bhakti Movement and the administrative practices of the Mughal Empire in the region of Mewar. Originating in South India between the 7th and 10th centuries and spreading northward, the Bhakti Movement challenged orthodoxy by emphasizing direct personal devotion to a deity, free from ritualistic and caste barriers. It promoted a form of spiritual democracy that found expression in local languages and cultural practices, significantly influencing Indian social structure and cultural norms. Simultaneously, the Mughal Empire, from the 16th to the 18th century, refined the administrative systems in the regions they controlled, including Mewar, following periods of conflict and negotiation. This article examines how Mughal governance introduced sophisticated bureaucratic and cultural frameworks that reshaped local administration and societal norms. By juxtaposing these two historical influences, the article analyses how the Bhakti Movement's spiritual ethos intersected with the Mughal's pragmatic administration, particularly in how both movements contributed to shaping the socio-political landscape of Mewar.

Keywords— Bhakti Movement, Mughal Empire, Mewar Administration, Devotional Practices, Spiritual Emancipation

I. INTRODUCTION

The Bhakti Movement and the Mughal Empire are two important periods in the history of India that, though they differ greatly, have heavily influenced the social, cultural and political formation of the Indian sub-continent. The commencement of the Bhakti Movement around the 7th century in the south India, which was the start of a considerable wave of devotion that spread throughout the country by the 15th century, was the birth of the Bhakti Movement. This kind of movement was based on an emotional and personal way of dealing with the divine, where the faithful people chose to seek spiritual liberation through direct, heartfelt devotion to a deity, thereby ignoring the orthodox rituals and the intermediaries of the existing religious order. It was a religious democratization that opposed and eventually weakened the power of caste and the ritual purity by the universal access to spiritual experiences. This equalitarian way of life not only generated a cultural renaissance in the different regions but also brought the society with a new kind of inclusion in the spiritual practices.

On the other hand, the Mughal Empire which was formed in 1526 started with the victory of Babur at the Panipat battle, which led to the beginning of a period full of great governance and culture. The Mughals, specially under the rule of emperors such as Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan, established advanced administrative systems and were the creators of the artistic and architectural innovation which

was unmatched. This age is recognized as a time of great achievements in Indian architecture, literature, and art that had a strong impact on the Indian culture and which are still the main source of the Indian ethos. The Mughal rule, which lasted till the mid-19th century even when it declined after Aurangzeb's death in 1707, was made of a central authority that managed to unify different regional polities under single administrative framework, hence the composition of a culture that absorbed and reinterpreted many local traditions, including those of the Bhakti saints.

The Bhakti Movement and the Mughal Empire's intersection is a wonderful vehicle for the study of the combined interaction of spiritual and temporal powers. The Bhakti Movement flourished in a time when India was politically fragmented, with most of its states being small kingdoms. This fragmentation became a space where the Bhakti ideology emerged, which offered spiritual salvation to everyone, no matter their caste or creed, thus, attacking the dominant social hierarchies that were controlled by both the religious and the monarchical systems. The movement penetrated the everyday people and changed the spiritual pattern of the whole region, thus creating a wide cultural integration that was no longer limited by the social barriers.

On the one hand, the Mughal Empire's method of governing was much appreciated by the Indian people who were used to living in anarchy. The empire's rulers, specially Akbar, were famous for their policy of religious tolerance and the involvement with various faiths,

including the ones that were based on the Bhakti tradition. The blend of Islamic and Hindu traditions that was created under the Mughals led to a unique cultural environment that was the basis for the exchange of ideas and the beliefs that were shared between the two cultures, thus, the Indian culture was enriched.

While scholarship has extensively discussed the Bhakti saints and Mughal rulers separately, limited attention has been given to their intersection in Mewar. This study fills that gap by showing how devotional egalitarianism and imperial governance interacted, shaping the socio-political order of the region. This novelty strengthens the contribution of this paper to historical and cultural studies.

II. EXPLORING THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

The Bhakti Movement emerged in the 6th century in South India, heralding a transformative era in the Indian religious landscape. This movement marked a significant departure from the previously dominant practices characterized by ritualistic and elite-controlled religious traditions. It advocated a spiritual experience centred on personal devotion and love for the divine, challenging the exclusivity and ritual complexity enforced by the priestly classes.

By the 15th century, the Bhakti Movement had expanded vigorously into Northern India, bringing about a radical reconfiguration in the religious contours of the region. It was during this period that several charismatic figures emerged, catalysing the movement's growth and influencing vast swathes of Indian society. Among these were influential saints like Kabir, who despite his humble origins as a weaver, challenged the entrenched social hierarchies by disregarding caste distinctions and preaching the universality of God. Similarly, Mirabai, a Rajput princess, defied her aristocratic confines and the traditional roles of women by expressing her unyielding devotion to Lord Krishna. Further west, in Maharashtra, Tukaram, a merchant-turned-saint, left a profound impact on the cultural life of the region with his soul-stirring abhyangas and hymns, underscoring the ethos of Bhakti that prioritized devotion over social status or material wealth.

At its core, the Bhakti ideology celebrated an unconditional, direct love for the divine, thus enabling a personal and intimate connection with God that transcended the mediating roles of priests. This relationship was inherently democratic, promising every individual, irrespective of their social or economic background, direct access to the divine. This inclusivity was a direct affront to the stratified and hierarchical structures prevalent in traditional Hinduism. Furthermore, the Bhakti saints pioneered the use of vernacular languages for spiritual discourse, thereby democratizing religious practices and making them accessible to a broader audience. This not only broke the monopoly of Sanskrit as the language of spiritual and intellectual elitism but also contributed significantly to the cultural and linguistic

development of various regions, fostering a deeper, localized sense of spiritual community and identity.

The societal implications of the Bhakti Movement were profound and revolutionary. By openly challenging the caste system and the Brahmanical dominance in religious affairs, it provided a voice and a spiritual outlet to the marginalized and the lower castes, who had been excluded from spiritual narratives. This inclusiveness instigated notable shifts in societal attitudes and helped in reshaping social practices. Culturally, the movement was instrumental in nurturing regional literatures and music, infusing them with expressions of devotional fervour that resonated widely with the common people. The proliferation of poetry, music, dance, and theatre inspired by Bhakti themes not only enriched the Indian cultural milieu but also promoted social cohesion by bridging communal divides.

Comparatively, the Bhakti Movement bore remarkable similarities to other global religious reformations, such as the Protestant Reformation in Europe, which also emphasized a personal, direct relationship with God while critiquing the corruption and opulence of the prevailing religious orthodoxy. In the Indian context, it shared common ground with Islamic Sufism, which likewise stressed personal piety and disdain for materialism. Both movements celebrated divine love through rich traditions of poetry and music and sought to make spiritual experiences more personal and direct. This cultural and spiritual confluence underscored a global, medieval quest for authentic spiritual expression and reform, and highlighted the Bhakti Movement's significant role in crafting a syncretic and inclusive spiritual landscape in medieval India.

III. THE MUGHAL EMPIRE AND ADMINISTRATION OF MEWAR

The Mughal Empire, distinguished by its extravagant era and complex bureaucratic structure, stands as a pivotal chapter in the annals of Indian history, showcasing an era where governance was not only centralized but also monumental in scope. The ascent of the Mughal rulers heralded the establishment of an organized administrative system deeply imbued with Persian influences, fostering a period of considerable economic prosperity and cultural renaissance across the Indian subcontinent.

Among the prominent figures of this dynasty, Akbar and Aurangzeb are particularly notable for their distinctive approaches to governance that profoundly impacted the region. Akbar, celebrated for his progressive outlook, enacted numerous reforms that had lasting effects on both military and civil spheres, most notably the Mansabdari system, which was an innovative method of organizing the military and bureaucracy through a system of ranks and responsibilities. His reign also saw a flourishing of arts and culture, supported generously by his court, making it a golden era of cultural patronage and liberal policies.

In stark contrast, Aurangzeb’s tenure was marked by a more orthodox application of Islamic principles and conservative fiscal measures, such as reintroducing the jizya tax on non-Muslims. His governance philosophy reflected a return to traditionalism and had significant implications for the social and cultural fabric of the empire. The divergent ruling styles of Akbar and Aurangzeb illustrate the dynamic and adaptable nature of Mughal governance, capable of spanning a wide spectrum from liberal patronage to conservative orthodoxy.

The relationship between the Mughal Empire and the region of Mewar, a stronghold of Rajput valor and defiance, was complex and fraught with conflict yet interspersed with periods of pragmatic diplomacy. The enduring resistance of iconic figures like Rana Pratap, who famously contested Mughal supremacy at the Battle of Haldighati, eventually gave way to more diplomatic engagements by his successors. The culmination of these engagements was the formation of strategic matrimonial alliances and the acceptance of Mughal overlordship, which paved the way for a more peaceful coexistence and integration of Mewar into the Mughal administrative orbit.

As Mewar was assimilated into the empire, it experienced significant transformations in both governance and culture. Mughal administrative policies, especially those concerning revenue collection and military organization, were gradually merged with local practices, leading to enhanced efficiency and central oversight. This administrative amalgamation also ushered in an era of cultural enrichment where Persian art, architecture, and the Persian language began to intermingle with local traditions. Architectural marvels such as Udaipur’s City Palace are emblematic of this period, showcasing a fusion of Rajput robustness with Mughal elegance.

Despite these efforts at integration, resistance to Mughal authority continued in various forms, with Rajput warriors often resorting to guerrilla tactics against the imperial forces. Over time, the intensity of this resistance diminished as the strategies of accommodation and adaptation were employed by Rajput of Mewar. This nuanced balance of resistance and accommodation enabled Mewar not only to survive within the vast expanse of the Mughal Empire but also to maintain a unique cultural identity that, while influenced by Mughal practices, remained distinctly Rajput at its core. This interplay of cultural assimilation and regional distinctiveness underlines the complex and multifaceted nature of Mughal-Rajput relations during this epoch.

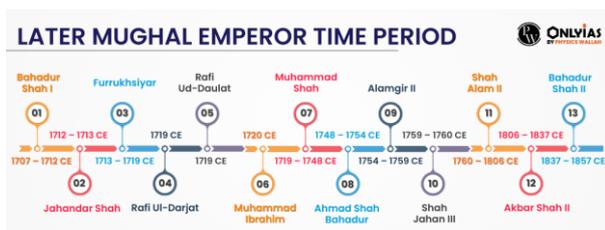


Figure 1 - Timeline of Key Bhakti–Mughal Interactions in Mewar,

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The intricate dance between the devotional fervour of the Bhakti Movement and the expansive administrative machinery of the Mughal Empire reveals a fascinating overlay of spiritual and political dimensions. In regions like Mewar, these interactions were particularly pronounced, given the area’s strategic importance and its rich cultural tapestry. The Bhakti Movement, with its emphasis on personal devotion and disregard for ritualistic and caste barriers, offered a stark contrast to the hierarchical and ceremonially rich structure of Mughal governance. However, the two were not always in opposition.

Under the reign of Akbar, known for his policy of Sulh-e-Kul (universal peace), there was a notable permeation of Bhakti ideals into the broader ethos of Mughal administrative practices. Akbar’s engagement with local religions, including his participation in discussions with various religious figures such as the revered Vaishnava saint Ramananda, illustrated a reciprocal influence where Bhakti principles subtly informed the imperial approach to governance. This synthesis was evident in Akbar’s administrative reforms, which emphasized moral governance and the welfare of his subjects, resonating with the Bhakti call for humility and humanism.

In Mewar, the confluence of Bhakti and Mughal influences manifested in several ways. The local rulers, while often in conflict with the Mughals, adopted certain administrative techniques from them, which were blended with the region’s existing practices that were already being shaped by the Bhakti ethos. This included a more benevolent approach to governance, where the welfare of the peasantry began to take precedence, echoing the Bhakti ideal of equality and compassion towards the less privileged.

The interplay between Bhakti and Mughal influences had profound socio-political outcomes, particularly visible in societal structures, caste dynamics, and religious practices. The Bhakti Movement’s challenge to the rigid caste system found a strange and unintended ally in the Mughal administrative focus on centralization and merit. In areas under Mughal control, administrative positions and military appointments could, at times, transcend the traditional caste hierarchies, a practice somewhat aligned with the Bhakti disregard for caste distinctions.

Moreover, the spiritual inclusivity promoted by Bhakti saints like Kabir and Meera, who hailed from the lower and upper echelons of the caste spectrum respectively, found a resonance in the Mughal policy of religious tolerance (at least during the reigns of more liberal emperors like Akbar). This dual pressure from both a spiritual movement and political governance disrupted traditional caste rigidities, facilitating a cultural milieu in Mewar and beyond, where social mobility became more conceivable than before.

Aspect	Bhakti Movement	Mughal Governance	Impact in Mewar
Religious approach	Personal devotion, rejection of rituals	Tolerance (Akbar) / Orthodoxy (Aurangzeb)	Shaped pluralistic yet contested faith practices
Social structure	Equality, caste resistance	Merit-based appointments in some cases	Enabled limited social mobility
Language & culture	Vernacular hymns, poetry, music	Persian court culture, art, architecture	Fusion of Rajput and Mughal artistic traditions
Governance ethos	Compassion and humility	Centralized bureaucracy	Local rulers adopted hybrid administrative model

V. CONCLUSION

The intricate interplay between religious movements and political power has undeniably sculpted the historical and cultural landscape of India, a narrative vividly illustrated by the Bhakti Movement and the administrative practices of the Mughal Empire in Mewar. The Bhakti Movement, with its profound emphasis on personal devotion and disregard for ritualistic and caste barriers, emerged as a formidable force challenging the established social order. It fostered a culture where love and personal connection to the divine were celebrated, enabling a form of social and religious democratization that resonated deeply across diverse sections of society. This ethos of inclusivity and emotional devotion not only permeated the spiritual realm but subtly influenced the socio-political fabric of regions under its sway, including Mewar.

Conversely, the Mughal Empire, renowned for its robust and systematic administrative frameworks, brought about significant changes in the governance of territories like Mewar. The Mughals introduced advanced bureaucratic practices and a centralized form of governance that contrasted sharply with the traditionally decentralized polities of Rajputana. Their approach, often a blend of military strategy and diplomatic negotiation, left an indelible mark on the administrative and cultural landscapes of the regions they governed. In Mewar, these influences manifested through architectural innovations, the introduction of new governance practices, and the occasional cultural exchange, yet were also met with

resistance and a fervent clinging to regional identity and traditions.

The relationship between these two dynamics, religious reform and political governance, highlights a fascinating aspect of Indian history: the capacity for religious movements to influence political structures and vice versa. In Mewar, the Bhakti Movement’s ideals of equality and devotion occasionally clashed with, but also permeated, the Mughal administrative ethos, suggesting a complex layer of mutual influence. This interplay shaped not only Mewar’s response to Mughal governance but also contributed to the broader cultural synthesis observed in other parts of India, where spiritual and administrative ideas from diverse origins mingled and adapted.

REFERENCES

- Haberman, D. L. (1992). *Devotion Divine: Bhakti Traditions from the Regions of India* [Review of the book by D. L. Eck & F. Mallison (Eds.)]. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 51(4), 953–954. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2059102>
- Indian Culture. (n.d.). *Mewar and the Mughal emperors (1526–1707 A.D.)*. <https://indianculture.gov.in/mewar-and-mughal-emperors-1526-1707-ad>
- Nath, P. (2023). Pilgrimage, performance, and peripatetic kingship: Akbar’s journeys to Ajmer and the formation of the Mughal Empire. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 33(2), 271–296. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186322000153>
- Saha, S. (2007). The movement of Bhakti along a north-west axis: Tracing the history of the Puṣṭimārg between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 11(3), 299–318. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11407-008-9050-3>
- Online GK. (n.d.). *The Bhakti Movement in India: A journey of devotion and unity*. <https://www.onlinegk.com/history/the-bhakti-movement-in-india>
- Religious Idea. (2024, January 7). *The Bhakti Movement – India’s medieval period of devotional worship*. <https://religiousidea.com/the-bhakti-movement/>
- Kreately. (2021, May 1). *The power dynamics of Mewar and Mughal treaty*. <https://kreately.in/the-power-dynamics-of-mewar-and-mughal-treaty/>