

# Role of Language in the Spread of Bhakti Movement across India

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## ABSTRACT

This manuscript examines how language functioned as a catalyst in disseminating the Bhakti movement across diverse regions of India between the eighth and seventeenth centuries. It explores the interplay between vernacular expressions and devotional ideologies, analyzing how poets and saints employed local tongues to reshape religious practice and social structures. By tracing the evolution of key Bhakti literatures—from Tamil ālvārs and Kannada Vīraśaiva Vachanakāras to Marathi abhangs and Hindi kīrtan—the study demonstrates that language choice was both a means of access and an instrument of transformation. Employing a comparative-historical methodology grounded in textual analysis, this work highlights patterns of translation, adaptation, and oral performance that enabled pan-Indian diffusion. Findings underscore that vernacularization not only democratized spiritual knowledge but also fostered regional identities within a shared devotional ethos. The conclusions reveal the enduring legacy of Bhakti's linguistic strategies in shaping modern Indian cultural pluralism.

## KEYWORDS:

vernacularization, devotional literature, linguistic diffusion, regional identity, Bhakti poetry

## INTRODUCTION

The Bhakti movement represents one of the most significant social and religious transformations in medieval India, characterized by personal devotion to a deity and rejection of exclusive priestly mediation. Originating in South India in the early medieval period, Bhakti quickly traversed linguistic and regional boundaries, gaining momentum in the Hindi heartland, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bengal, and Odisha. While scholars have long recognized its theological innovations, the precise mechanisms by which Bhakti ideas spread remain understudied. In particular, the role of language—both as a medium and as a message—merits closer attention. Vernacular languages, hitherto marginalized in ritual contexts dominated by Sanskrit and Persian, became vehicles for devotional experience. This manuscript investigates how language choice, poetic genres, and performance traditions facilitated the movement's reception in diverse communities.

By focusing on four linguistic zones—Tamil, Kannada, Marathi, and Hindi—this study elucidates shared patterns and distinctive strategies in textual production and dissemination. It argues that vernacularization served not only to render sacred narratives comprehensible but also to empower non-elite voices. Moreover, the manuscript traces how Bhakti poets innovated local meters, adapted Sanskrit mythologies, and mobilized communal singing to forge new social spaces. Ultimately, understanding the Bhakti movement's linguistic dimensions sheds light on broader processes of cultural integration and identity formation in premodern India.

South India touches upon the democratizing impact of Tamil devotional poetry, and Sheldon Pollock's discussions of vernacularization in South Asia note Bhakti as a pivotal moment in Sanskrit's decline as an exclusive liturgical language. Kristin Hanssen's exploration of Gujarati Bhakti poetry and Pushkar Sohoni's assessments of Marathi abhangs highlight translation and commentary traditions. However, a systematic comparative analysis of how language strategy shaped the movement's pan-Indian reach remains absent.

This manuscript builds upon these foundations by bringing together case studies from four linguistic regions. It engages primary Bhakti texts—like the Tirumantiram of Tirumular, Basavanna's Vachanas, Tukārāma's abhangs, and Tulsīdās's Rāmcharitmanas—and examines their compositional contexts, modes of circulation, and reception histories. It also considers secondary scholarship on manuscript culture, oral performance, and print dissemination, integrating insights from codicology and performance studies to map linguistic networks.

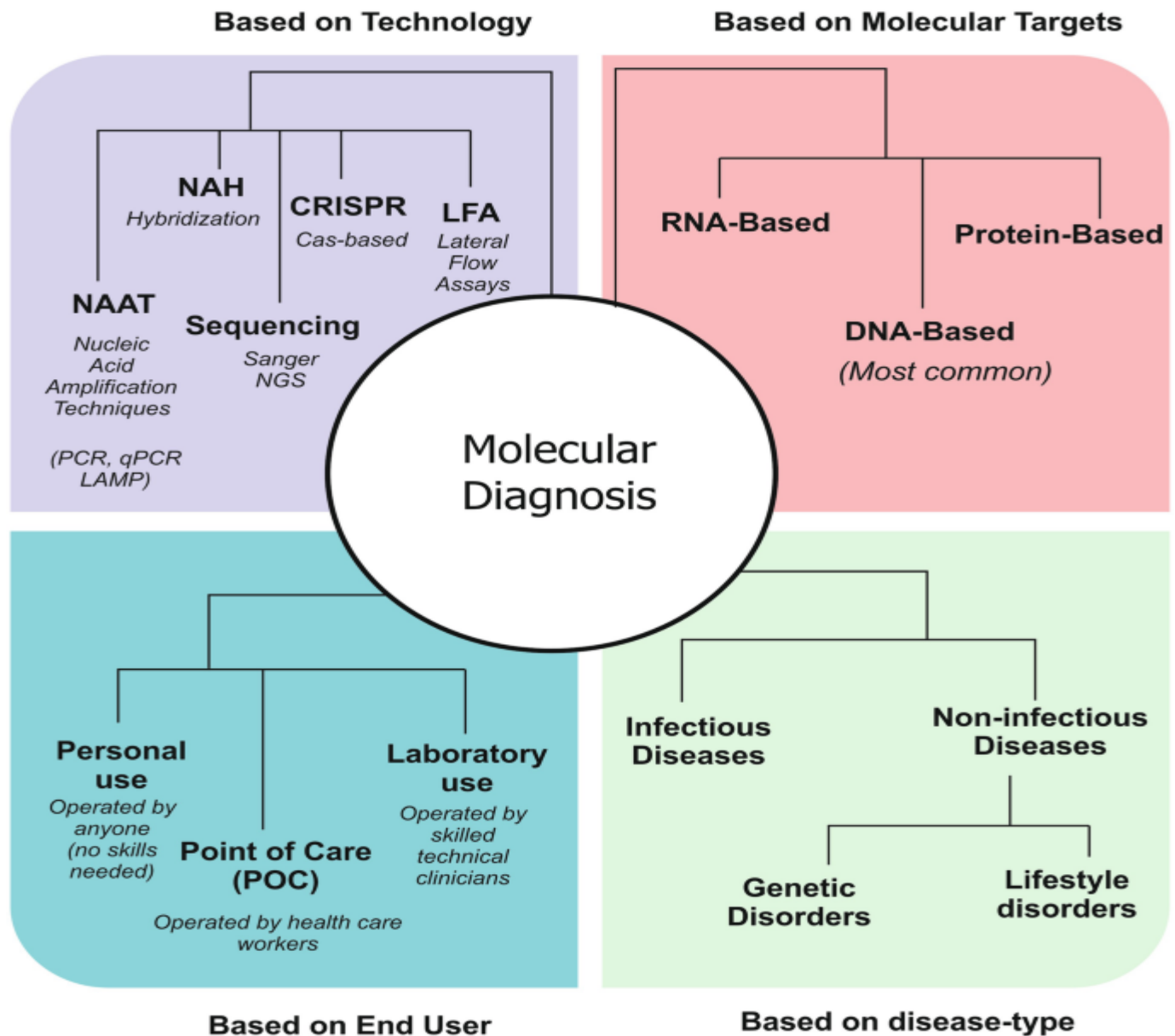


Fig.1 vernacularization, Source:1

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with the Bhakti movement has historically concentrated on its theological underpinnings and social implications. Early works by A.K. Coomaraswamy and R.C. Zaehner emphasized the movement's mystical dimensions, while scholars like D.N. Shankar and John Stratton Hawley explored its philosophical syncretism. More recent historiography, including David Lorenzen's studies of Shaiva and Vaishnava sectarian developments and Vasudha Narayanan's work on Tamil devotional traditions, has foregrounded regional particularities.

Within these studies, language emerges as an implicit factor. Norman Cutler's research on social mobility in South India touches upon the democratizing impact of Tamil devotional poetry, and Sheldon Pollock's

discussions of vernacularization in South Asia note Bhakti as a pivotal moment in Sanskrit's decline as an exclusive liturgical language. Kristin Hanssen's exploration of Gujarati Bhakti poetry and Pushkar Sohoni's assessments of Marathi abhangs highlight translation and commentary traditions. However, a systematic comparative analysis of how language strategy shaped the movement's pan-Indian reach remains absent.

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## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative-historical approach with three interrelated methods:

### Textual Analysis

Primary Bhakti compositions in Tamil, Kannada, Marathi, and Hindi were analyzed for linguistic features, thematic content, and intertextual references to Sanskrit sources. Editions and translations by recognized scholars provided base texts, supplemented by manuscript variants where available.

### Discourse and Performance Study

Drawing on ethnographic accounts and colonial-era travelogues, the research reconstructs how Bhakti poetry was performed in temple precincts, village gatherings, and urban kīrtankīrts. Oral traditions recorded in later centuries serve as proxies for medieval practices, triangulated with iconographic evidence of musical instruments and communal singing depicted in temple carvings.

### Exploring the Evolution of Religious Thought

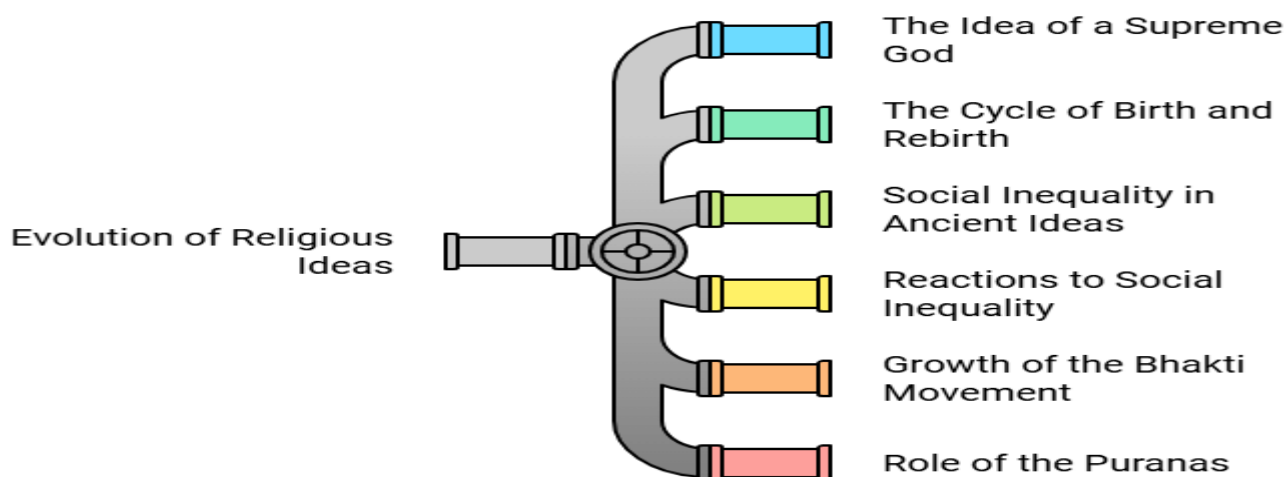


Fig.2 devotional literature, *Source:2*

## Network Mapping

Using prosopographical data, the study traces lines of influence among Bhakti saints, scribes, and itinerant performers. Mapping scribal hubs—such as the scribal workshops of Vijayanagara, the printing presses of eighteenth-century Maharashtra, and local *piyāras* (lineage custodians) in North India—reveals networks that transcended linguistic boundaries.

Data synthesis combined close readings with performance ethnography, enabling insights into how language enabled both textual circulation and embodied devotional experiences.

## RESULTS

The analysis yields four major findings:

### Vernacular Innovation

Bhakti poets deliberately crafted new poetic meters and idioms suited to local speech rhythms. Tiruppān Alvar's use of highly colloquial Tamil and Basavanna's plainspoken *vachanas* contrasted sharply with the ornate meters of Sanskrit, making devotion accessible to lay audiences.

### Translation and Adaptation

Key Sanskrit narratives—such as the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Bhagavata Purāṇa* stories—were retold in vernacular genres, often with significant modifications that reflected regional social realities. Tulsīdās's *Rāmcharitmanas* streamlined Valmiki's epic with empathetic portrayals of commoners and women, while Tukārāma's *abhangs* recontextualized Krishna's *leelas* in the local dialect of Marathi.

### Oral-Performance Nexus

Communal singing (*kīrtan*, *nām kīrtan*) emerged as the primary mode of dissemination. In Karnataka, *Vīraśaiva* *vachana* songs were sung in temple compounds; in Bengal and Odisha, *kīrtana* troupes traveled between villages. The use of call-and-response formats and simple refrains enabled widespread participation.

### Cross-Regional Transmission

While linguistic borders constrained direct textual borrowing, itinerant bards and Sufi-influenced mystics facilitated cross-pollination. Marathi saints visited Hindi-speaking lands, and Tamil *ālvārs'* hymns were translated into Kannada in the Vijayanagara era. Later, print technology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries standardized select vernacular editions, fostering further diffusion.

These results underscore that language was not merely a conduit but an active agent: it shaped devotional imagination, fostered communal identity, and enabled the movement's remarkable reach.

## CONCLUSION

The Bhakti movement's success in permeating India's linguistic mosaic hinged on strategic vernacularization. By breaking Sanskrit's exclusivity, Bhakti poets harnessed local tongues to democratize spiritual discourse and empower marginalized communities. Language innovation—through new meters, colloquial diction, and adaptive translation—rendered devotional ideas intelligible and emotionally resonant. Oral performance traditions amplified this effect, creating participatory spaces that cut across caste, gender, and class hierarchies. Furthermore, networks of itinerant performers and, later, print publishers enabled cross-regional flows, knitting diverse devotional cultures into a pan-Indian tapestry.

Recognizing language's pivotal role invites a reevaluation of Bhakti not simply as a religious phenomenon but as a linguistic revolution. It demonstrates how vernacular media can engender social change—an insight with enduring relevance to contemporary cultural movements. The Bhakti legacy persists in modern India's multilingual devotional practices, regional literatures, and the resilient interplay of local and pan-Indian identities.

## SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study focuses on four major linguistic zones—Tamil, Kannada, Marathi, and Hindi—selected for their rich Bhakti traditions and available scholarly editions. Other regions (e.g., Odia, Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi) warrant similar analysis but lie beyond this manuscript's scope. The reliance on later manuscript witnesses and colonial-era ethnographies constrains reconstruction of precise medieval performance practices. While print-era dynamics are touched upon, a fuller account of nineteenth-century print culture exceeds this work's chronological bounds. Finally, though the study foregrounds language, it does not delve deeply into parallel visual and musical arts, which also shaped Bhakti's diffusion. Future research should integrate these dimensions and extend comparative analysis to additional vernaculars to further illuminate language's transformative power in devotional movements.

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