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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The Bhakti Movement Beyond Our Textbooks: Testing NEP 2020's Promise of Indian Ethos

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HISTORY & CULTURE**GS1****GS2**

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GS1

GS2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"If the Bhakti movement's core achievement was that it let a barber, a potter and an untouchable stand as spiritual equals to Brahmin priests, what would it mean to teach it in schools without also teaching its critique of caste, and is a sanitised version still the Bhakti movement at all?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A twelfth-century woman walked naked into a hall of strangers to debate philosophy as an equal, and a barber, a potter and a maidservant sat in the inner circle of a Maharashtrian saint. Six centuries of this happened across every Indian language. Most students meet none of it as a single story.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Bhakti movement questions are usually answered as a roll call, Kabir, Mirabai, Tulsidas, Guru Nanak, each treated as an isolated literary or religious figure. This editorial supplies the connective structure examiners actually reward: recognising the Bhakti movement as one pan-Indian, multi-century, multilingual reform movement with a shared social content, caste critique, anti-ritualism, direct personal communion with the divine, rather than a collection of unrelated names. It also supplies a genuine, current GS2 hook: whether NEP 2020's stated civilisational commitment has produced actual curricular change, which is exactly the kind of policy-evaluation angle that separates a strong answer from a descriptive one.

GS Paper 1: Salient features of Indian society; the Bhakti and Sufi movements; their contribution to literature, art, culture and social reform.

GS Paper 2: Issues relating to development and management of social sector and services relating to education; government policies and interventions in education for development.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Anubhava Mantapa	The “hall of spiritual experience” founded by Basavanna at Kalyana, an open assembly cutting across caste and gender	Cited as one of the world’s earliest deliberative assemblies; directly examinable
Virashaiva Lingayats	Reform movement founded by Basavanna and Allama Prabhu, rejecting caste, image worship, animal sacrifice	Distinguishes a specific twelfth-century Karnataka strand of Bhakti
Varkari tradition	Maharashtrian devotional cult of Vithoba centred at Pandharpur, associated with Namdev, Janabai, Chokhamela	Regional strand with strong caste-critical membership
Ik Onkar	Guru Nanak’s foundational statement of the oneness of the Supreme Being, opening the Mul Mantra	Core Sikh theological concept, frequently tested
NEP 2020	National Education Policy, approved by the Union Cabinet on 29 July 2020, replacing the 1986 policy (as modified 1992)	The current policy framework this editorial evaluates

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The **Bhakti movement** is not a single, dated event but a devotional and social reform current that ran, in its fullest span, from the **Tamil Alvars and Nayanars of roughly the sixth to ninth centuries CE** in South India through to northern saints such as **Tukaram (1608-1650)** in the seventeenth century, a period of well over a thousand years across which it moved progressively from South to North India. Its most intensively studied “classical” phase, spanning the twelfth-century Lingayat movement in Karnataka through the great sixteenth and seventeenth-century northern saints, covers roughly six centuries, the span Varma’s essay foregrounds.

Regional strands included the Virashaiva Lingayats of Karnataka under **Basavanna** and **Allama Prabhu**; the Varkari tradition of Maharashtra centred on **Namdev (1270-1350 CE)** and later **Tukaram**; the Vaishnava Bhakti of **Chaitanya** in Bengal; **Mirabai** in Rajasthan; and the distinct, monotheistic tradition founded by **Guru Nanak (1469-1539)** in Punjab, which developed into Sikhism. All wrote in regional vernaculars rather than Sanskrit, which is one reason the movement reached deep into non-elite social strata that classical, Sanskrit-mediated religious authority did not.

The **National Education Policy 2020**, approved by the Union Cabinet on **29 July 2020**, states as an explicit goal that education should be rooted in “Indian ethos” and Indian civilisational heritage, alongside its more widely discussed structural reforms such as the 5+3+3+4 schooling structure and the emphasis on foundational literacy. Varma’s argument engages this specific, less-discussed strand of the policy.

THE ANALYSIS

1. The movement's unity is structural, not incidental. Across a dozen regional traditions and languages, a recurring pattern holds: direct, unmediated personal communion with the divine, rejection or de-emphasis of priestly intermediation and Sanskrit liturgical monopoly, and an explicit social critique of caste hierarchy. That this pattern recurs independently across Karnataka, Maharashtra, Bengal, Rajasthan and Punjab, in different languages and different centuries, is itself evidence of a genuine pan-Indian phenomenon rather than a retrospective historian's construction.

2. The Anubhava Mantapa is a documented case of institutionalised social radicalism, not merely of religious devotion. Akka Mahadevi's admission to the Lingayat order as an equal [interlocutor](#) after a philosophical dialogue with Basavanna at Kalyana is a specific, namable instance of a woman being treated as a serious philosophical peer in a twelfth-century Indian institution, a fact rarely foregrounded in standard treatments of the period.

3. Namdev's circle demonstrates the movement's caste critique was lived, not only preached. A barber, a gardener, a potter, a maidservant (Janabai) and a Dalit devotee (Chokhamela) forming the intimate circle of a major Bhakti saint is a concrete social fact, not a rhetorical claim about equality, and it is the kind of detail that makes the movement's social content testable and memorable rather than abstract.

4. The movement's civilisational function deserves more curricular weight than it currently receives. A decentralised, vernacular, priest-independent religious current is structurally harder to suppress or capture than a movement organised around fixed temples and a formal priesthood, which is one reason historians credit the Bhakti movement with helping popular Hindu devotional practice endure through centuries of political upheaval in the medieval period. This is a [substantive](#) historical claim about institutional resilience, not merely a sentimental one, and it belongs in a curriculum that claims to teach how Indian civilisation actually persisted.

5. The syncretic dimension is real and specific, not a generalised claim about tolerance. Kabir's poetry stated explicitly that Hindus and Muslims alike could reach the same spiritual end; later Sufism absorbed and extended Bhakti-style devotionism; and the **Guru Granth Sahib** institutionalised this [syncretism](#) by including hymns not only from the Sikh Gurus but from a wider set of Bhagats, among them Hindu Bhakti saints alongside Muslim Sufi figures such as **Sheikh Farid**. Any curricular retelling that omits this specific, textually documented syncretism is not simplifying the movement, it is misrepresenting it.

6. NEP 2020's rhetorical commitment and curricular delivery are two different things, and conflating them is the central error to avoid. The Policy's stated intent to root education in Indian civilisational heritage is a real textual commitment worth taking seriously, not dismissing as empty. But a policy document is not self-executing; it requires specific textbook revision, teacher training and syllabus redesign to become a classroom reality, and the test of NEP 2020's seriousness on this particular theme is whether the connective, pan-Indian, caste-critical version of Bhakti history actually reaches students, not whether the policy document contains the right words.

7. There is a second, sharper risk beyond simple omission. Curricular reform driven by a general instinct toward asserting “Indian ethos” carries a specific danger with a movement as genuinely radical as Bhakti: that its anti-caste, anti-ritual, cross-religious content gets softened or selectively retold into a more comfortable, homogenised civilisational narrative, rather than integrated in full. A movement whose central historical achievement was letting a barber and a Brahmin address God on equal terms cannot be taught accurately while quietly dropping the caste critique that made it radical in its own time.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

Akka Mahadevi: 12th century, Lingayat/Virashaiva tradition, Karnataka; walked to Kalyana for philosophical dialogue with Basavanna; admitted to the Lingayat order

Basavanna and Allama Prabhu: founders of the Virashaiva Lingayat movement; established the Anubhava Mantapa (“hall of spiritual experience”) at Kalyana, an open assembly across caste and gender

Namdev: 1270-1350 CE, Maharashtra, devotee of Vithoba (form of Vishnu) at Pandharpur; associates included Janabai (maidservant) and Chokhamela (Dalit devotee), part of the Varkari tradition

Kabir: commonly dated 1440-1518 CE in modern scholarship (an older tradition holds 1398-1518); stated caste was irrelevant to spiritual attainment; syncretic Hindu-Muslim appeal

Guru Nanak: 1469-1539 CE; founder of Sikhism; doctrine of Ik Onkar (one Supreme Being); opens the Mul Mantra of the Guru Granth Sahib

Guru Granth Sahib: contains hymns of the Sikh Gurus and of a wider set of Bhagats, including Hindu Bhakti saints and Muslim Sufi figures such as Sheikh Farid; langars in gurudwaras admit all without caste distinction

South Indian antecedents: Tamil Alvars and Nayanars, roughly 6th to 9th centuries CE, among the earliest Bhakti expressions, predating the movement’s better-known medieval northern phase

National Education Policy 2020: approved by the Union Cabinet on 29 July 2020; replaced the National Policy on Education, 1986 (as modified in 1992)

WATCH THE TRAP: DO NOT WRITE THAT “THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT” BEGAN IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY OR LASTED ONLY SIX CENTURIES; ITS FULLEST ARC, INCLUDING THE TAMIL ALVARS AND NAYANARS, RUNS FROM ROUGHLY THE SIXTH TO THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY. THE “OVER SIX CENTURIES” FIGURE IN THIS EDITORIAL REFERS TO THE MOVEMENT’S MOST INTENSIVELY STUDIED CLASSICAL PHASE, NOT ITS FULL HISTORICAL SPAN.

THE DEBATE

The live curricular tension this editorial raises: has NEP 2020’s “Indian ethos” language actually translated into substantive reform on pluralistic movements like Bhakti, or does it remain a stated aspiration without institutional follow-through? NEP 2020 was approved in July 2020, and curriculum and textbook revision at NCERT and State levels is a slow, multi-year process; it would be premature to declare the policy a failure on this specific theme only a few years in. At the same time, the absence of a connected, cross-referenced treatment of Bhakti as a single pan-Indian movement predates NEP 2020 by decades, which means the burden falls on the Policy to demonstrate it is actually correcting a pre-existing gap rather than simply restating good intentions that prior policies also expressed without full delivery.

The second, sharper tension: the risk that politically motivated curricular retellings could flatten the Bhakti movement’s genuinely syncretic and caste-critical character rather than restore it. A movement whose historical substance includes an explicit rejection of Brahmanical ritual authority, a documented Hindu-Muslim devotional syncretism institutionalised in the Guru Granth Sahib, and social circles that deliberately crossed caste lines, does not sit comfortably inside every version of “Indian civilisational heritage” that political actors might prefer to teach. The test of good faith curricular reform is not whether Bhakti gets more space, but whether the space it gets preserves this specific, uncomfortable content in full.

Balanced verdict. Both concerns can be true simultaneously: NEP 2020’s civilisational language is a genuine opening that previous policy frameworks did not offer with the same explicitness, and it remains untested on delivery, with a real risk that the delivery, if and when it comes, could sand down exactly the content that made the Bhakti movement historically significant. The correct response is neither uncritical praise for the Policy’s language nor premature dismissal of its intent, but close attention to what NCERT and State textbook boards actually produce over the coming revision cycles.

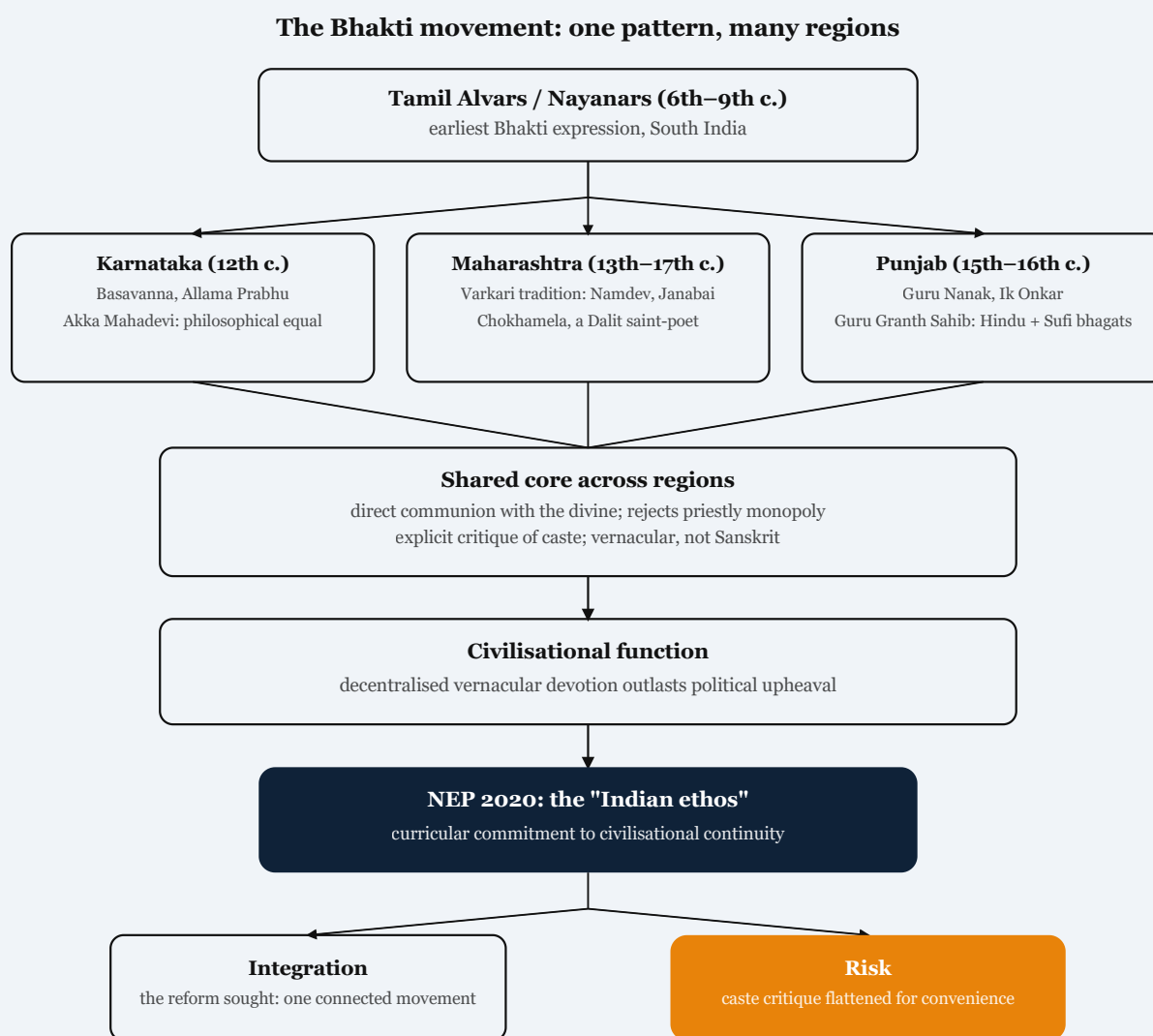
HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable pattern: **a stated policy commitment to a value is not the same as a delivered institutional outcome, and the gap between the two is where the real work of evaluation lives.**

Policy documents routinely commit to values that are broadly popular and difficult to oppose in principle, rooting education in civilisational heritage, promoting inclusive growth, strengthening [federalism](#). The test of whether such commitments matter is never the strength of the document’s language but whether the specific downstream institutions, textbook boards, regulatory bodies, implementing agencies, actually produce outcomes consistent with the stated value, and whether those outcomes preserve the full, sometimes uncomfortable content of what was promised rather than a convenient, partial version of it.

Apply the same test to other values-laden policy commitments: environmental policies that commit to sustainability without binding enforcement mechanisms, federalism-strengthening reforms that leave discretionary power with the Centre, and social justice provisions that commit to representation without addressing the structural barriers that prevented it in the first place. In every case, the accurate evaluative question is not “does the policy say the right thing” but “what does the implementing institution actually produce, and does it match the commitment in full or only in convenient part.”

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS



The same pattern recurring independently in Karnataka, Maharashtra and Punjab across five centuries is the evidence that Bhakti was a civilisational current, not a series of local cults, which is what makes NEP 2020's "Indian ethos" mandate worth teaching as one movement rather than a state-by-state trivia list.

TAKEAWAY BOX

A movement that let a barber and a Brahmin approach God as equals is not being taught accurately if the curriculum keeps the names and drops the equality.

Akka Mahadevi, Basavanna, Allama Prabhu, **Anubhava Mantapa**, Kalyana; **Virashaiva Lingayats**; **Namdev (1270-1350)**, Varkari tradition, Janabai, Chokhamela; **Kabir (1440-1518)**; **Guru Nanak (1469-1539)**, **Ik Onkar**, Guru Granth Sahib and its Bhagats including **Sheikh Farid**; **Tamil Alvars and Nayanars** (6th-9th century) as the movement's earliest phase; **NEP 2020**, approved **29 July 2020**.

does a state have an obligation to teach a historical reform movement's full, uncomfortable social content, including its critique of the very social hierarchies still present today, or is some editorial simplification for school-age students always defensible, and where is the line between simplification and distortion?

UPSC has repeatedly examined the Bhakti and Sufi movements, their social significance, and their contribution to regional literature; this editorial adds a live policy dimension by connecting the movement's teaching to NEP 2020's stated civilisational goals.

"The Bhakti movement is best understood not as a set of individual saints but as a single, pan-Indian, caste-critical reform current." Discuss, and examine whether current curricular practice reflects this understanding.

Source: The Bhakti Movement Beyond Our Textbooks: Testing NEP 2020's Promise of Indian Ethos — Ujjyari.com
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KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Pavan K Varma argues that the Bhakti movement, a pan-Indian, six-centuries-long, multilingual reform movement that fused devotional fervour with an open social critique of caste, ritualism and priestly authority, is taught in Indian schools as a scattered set of individual poet-saints rather than as the integrated civilisational upsurge it actually was, and that the National Education Policy 2020's stated commitment to rooting education in Indian ethos will remain rhetorical until this specific gap is closed.



SUPPORTING

- The movement's geographic and linguistic reach was genuinely pan-Indian and largely untaught as a single phenomenon: from Akka Mahadevi and Basavanna's Anubhava Mantapa in twelfth-century Karnataka, to Namdev and the Varkari saints of Maharashtra, to Kabir, Ravidas and Guru Nanak in the north, each tradition wrote in its own regional language, which is precisely why students encounter the names without encountering the pattern connecting them.
- The movement's social content was not incidental devotion but an explicit, sustained critique of caste hierarchy and Brahmanical ritual authority, visible in the Anubhava Mantapa's inclusion of a wandering ascetic woman as an equal interlocutor to its founding thinkers, in Namdev's inner circle of a barber, a gardener, a potter, a maidservant and a Dalit devotee, and in Kabir's explicit statements that caste is irrelevant to spiritual attainment.
- The movement also had a documented civilisational function, that of helping Hinduism's devotional and popular core survive centuries of political upheaval during the medieval period precisely because a decentralised, priest-independent, vernacular movement of this kind could not be dismantled by conquering any single centre of ritual authority, and it later produced genuine Hindu-Muslim devotional syncretism through Sufism and through the Guru Granth Sahib's inclusion of both Hindu Bhakti saints and Muslim Sufi figures such as Sheikh Farid.
- NEP 2020's language of rootedness in India and Indian traditions is a genuine policy commitment, not an empty phrase, but a policy commitment is not the same as a delivered curriculum, and the gap between the two is exactly where this editorial's argument sits.



COUNTER

A defender of the status quo could argue that individual-saint teaching is not a failure but a reasonable pedagogical choice for the school level, since Kabir, Guru Nanak, Tulsidas and

Surdas are taught with real depth in language and literature curricula, that connecting them into a single pan-Indian movement is a university-level historiographical synthesis better suited to undergraduate history courses than to school civics, and that NEP 2020, approved only in 2020, cannot fairly be judged on curricular outcomes that take a full generation of textbook revision cycles to materialise.

→ **WAY FORWARD**

Treat integration, not addition, as the actual reform: rather than inserting a new stand-alone chapter on 'the Bhakti movement', restructure existing chapters on Kabir, Guru Nanak, Mirabai and the regional saints so each explicitly cross-references the others and names the shared pattern, a pan-Indian, vernacular, caste-critical devotional upsurge running from roughly the eleventh to the eighteenth century; require NCERT and State textbook boards to preserve the movement's genuinely syncretic and caste-critical content in full rather than editing it toward a more homogenous or majoritarian retelling; and treat the Anubhava Mantapa explicitly as a case study in early Indian deliberative practice, since a twelfth-century open assembly that included women and lower-caste participants debating spiritual and public questions is precisely the kind of indigenous institutional precedent NEP 2020 says it wants students to know.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

The Bhakti movement is often taught through isolated figures such as Kabir or Guru Nanak rather than as an integrated pan-Indian reform movement. Discuss the movement's significance in medieval Indian history and examine whether the National Education Policy 2020's emphasis on Indian civilisational heritage has translated into curricular reform on this theme. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

The Bhakti movement is one of the longest continuous reform movements in world religious history, running in its full arc from the Tamil Alvars and Nayanars of the sixth to ninth centuries through to the northern Indian saints of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and expressed in nearly every major Indian language. Pavan K Varma's essay in Hindustan Times argues that Indian schooling teaches its individual figures, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Mirabai, Tulsidas, without teaching the movement that connected them, and that the National Education Policy 2020's promise of curricula rooted in Indian civilisational heritage has not yet closed this specific gap.

BODY

The movement's substance supports the claim that this is a significant omission rather than a minor curricular quibble. In twelfth-century Karnataka, Basavanna and Allama Prabhu founded the Anubhava Mantapa, an open assembly at Kalyana where men and women of every social background debated spiritual and public questions; it was here that Akka Mahadevi, a wandering ascetic, was admitted as an equal to the Lingayat order after a philosophical dialogue with Basavanna.

In Maharashtra, Namdev's circle around the Varkari cult of Vithoba at Pandharpur included Janabai, a maidservant, and Chokhamela, a Dalit devotee, modelling in practice the social equality the movement preached. Kabir's poetry stated outright that caste was irrelevant to spiritual attainment and that Hindus and Muslims alike could reach the same spiritual end; Guru Nanak's doctrine of Ik Onkar, one formless Supreme Being, and the Guru Granth Sahib's later inclusion of hymns from both Hindu Bhakti saints and Muslim Sufi figures such as Sheikh Farid, extended this syncretism institutionally.

Historians credit the movement's decentralised, vernacular, priest-independent character with helping Hindu devotional practice survive centuries of political upheaval in a way a more centralised, temple- and priesthood-dependent religious structure could not have. NEP 2020's stated aim, rooting education in Indian ethos and civilisational heritage, is a genuine textual commitment, but Varma's point is that intention without curricular execution leaves the policy's promise unfulfilled specifically on this theme, and there is a second, sharper risk beyond mere omission: that where the Bhakti movement is retold, its caste-critical and syncretic content could be selectively flattened rather than integrated, producing a more comfortable but less accurate civilisational narrative than the one the movement itself actually offers.

CONCLUSION

The disagreement is not about whether the Bhakti movement deserves a larger place in Indian education, on which there is little real dispute, but about whether NEP 2020's aspirational language has yet produced the specific curricular integration this movement requires, given how easily its genuinely radical, egalitarian content could be either omitted for convenience or retold in a way that mutes its critique of caste and its documented syncretism with Islam. The more defensible reform is integration of existing material into a connected narrative, paired with a firm commitment to preserving the movement's full social content, rather than treating either its inclusion or its accurate retelling as settled questions.

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