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RESEARCH ARTICLE



THE RELEVANCE OF BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD: AN ANALYSIS OF POONTHANAM'S *JNANAPANA*

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ABSTRACT



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The Bhakthi movement emerged as a socio-cultural movement that addressed the masses. It originated in South India and gradually spread to North India. Poonathanam Namboodiri and Thunchathu Ezhuthachan were the cult figures of the Bhakthi Movement in Kerala. Poonathanam's *Jnanapana* contains many spiritual and philosophical ideas that help the ordinary man attain salvation. By exploring various ideas from the Upanishads, this Malayalam poem shows how an ordinary man can gain freedom from the cycle of Karma. Divided into twelve sections, *Jnanapana* imparts knowledge on how one can lead a peaceful life in this world. The momentariness of happiness, the meaninglessness of pride, and the importance of fulfilling our duties are exemplified in this concise work of wisdom. Ultimately, he advocates devotion to Sri Krishna as the solution to all the world's problems. This paper examines the contemporary relevance of the Bhakthi movement and *Jnanapana*.

Keywords: *Bhakthi, Salvation, Karma, Liberation.*

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Originating in South India during the 6th Century, the Bhakthi movement gradually spread to North India. The Alvars and Nayanars of Tamil Nadu, the early proponents of the Bhakti Movement, propagated the Vaishnava and Shaiva cults, respectively. The Bhakti movement emerged as a socio-cultural movement in South India, offering an alternative means of worship. The bhakthi cult advocated innocent and unconditional devotion to God, irrespective of religion and caste. It spread to North India in the medieval period, and many saints, including Surdas, Kabirdas, Thulasidas, and Mirabai, propagated the Bhakti cult in North India. The Bhakthi saints, through their writings, expressed their ultimate belief in God. Though the Bhakthi saints belonged to different religions, their writings transcended the principles of conventional religion and encompassed everyone and everything around them.

It was a movement that addressed the masses; it transformed ordinary people's perspectives on religious beliefs. S Rukmini says:

The esteemed philosophical schools only changed the thoughts, but the Bhakti Movement changed the entire perspective of a human. It went beyond artificial beliefs and rituals, encouraging people to have complete faith in the Almighty. The Bhakti Movement in India produced a rich body of literature centered on devotion, spirituality, and faith, including numerous devotional hymns and chants. (3)

Though the Bhakthi tradition had its origin in South India, there was no trace of a Bhakthi cult in Kerala during the 6th and 7th centuries. It was in the sixteenth Century that the Bhakthi cult began to gain

prominence in Kerala. The Bhakti cult found its supreme literary expression in Malayalam in the works of Poonthanam Namboodiri and Ezhuthachan. *The Mahabharatam* and *Adyatma Ramayanam* of Ezhuthachan are popular as religious texts and literary texts even today. Some of the saints wrote about Sri Krishna, the presiding deity of Guruvayoor, and the names include Melpattur and Vilvamangalam, alias Krsna Lilasuka. *Ramacharitham* by Cheeraman is one of the first works in the Kerala Bhakthi Movement. Adi Sankaracharya is another prominent figure in the Kerala Bhakthi tradition, as he advocated the Advaita philosophy. He wrote in Sanskrit, and his writings captured the essence of the Vedas and Upanishads.

This paper aims to analyze the contemporary relevance of Poonathanam's *Jnanapana*, a seminal work that blends Bhakthi with the principles of the Upanishads. The paper aims to examine how a 16th-century poem by a vernacular poet in Kerala remains relevant to the turbulent life of the 21st Century. Poonthanam, hailing from Kerala, was an ardent devotee of Sri Krishna, the presiding deity of Guruvayoor temple in Kerala. He used his vernacular poetry to express his deep devotion to Sri Krishna. To popularise Krishna Bhakthi, he used the mother tongue, Malayalam, rejecting the popular notion that one should use Sanskrit or Manipravalam when writing poetry. His major works include *Santhana Gopalam*, *Sri Krishna Karnamrutham*, *Nootettu Hari*, and *Kuchela Virutham*.

Poonthanam's *Jnanapana*, a verse in Malayalam, is a repository of spiritual wisdom that can guide all human beings on earth along the path to liberation. It is divided into twelve sections; each section deals



with different aspects of worldly life. *Jnanapana* is unique among Poonthanam's works because it discusses how a human being can attain salvation after completing his Karma in this world. Though it is not directly based on any Hindu religious texts, such as the *Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana* or the *Bhagavatha Purana* throws light on the mortal life of human beings on earth. The work is written in simple language; it discusses the insights human beings need to acquire to lead a happy, peaceful, and meaningful life. The work remains relevant today because the philosophical ideas it presents apply to every man, irrespective of caste, creed, gender, or nationality. It describes the importance of Karma: the whole world operates according to Karma and its results.

The poem *Jnanapana* opens with an invocation to Sri Krishna: "Krishna! Krishna! Mukunda! Janardana!" (3). The section that follows, titled "Kalaleela" -play of time, tells us how time is beyond the comprehension of ordinary human beings. The opening verse in the section addresses human beings' ignorance of the past, present, and future. His use of the words "today," "tomorrow," and "yesterday" is remarkable. These words convey profound meaning, as they speak of the various births a man undergoes. We are not aware of our previous births and the life after our death. Though we know that everything is momentary, we fight with each other. Our body is corporeal, and we do not know when we will die. Only the soul stays eternal. When talking about the transient nature of a man's status, he says that within two days an ordinary man can be transformed into a man of high status.

Moreover, the same energy can transform a king into a poor man. P. Govinda Pillai says:

Poonthanam huffs at those addicted to creating wealth and enjoying worldly pleasures. Though a Brahmin himself, he sharply ridicules those Brahmins who are so proud of their caste identity and pretend to be the God Brahma. He expresses contempt for those overwhelmed by self-importance. (246)

'Adhikaribhedam', which means the difference between authorities, describes different types of men living on earth. Some people comprehend things when they experience them. Some others never understand, even though they see things. However, some others realise that what they have seen is not true. This third category understands that the Supreme Knowledge is Brahman, and they can attain liberation from the cycle of Karma.

In the section titled 'Thatvavicharam'-contemplation on philosophy, he explains how we can get liberation from the material world and attain salvation. He describes how Karma imprisons us. Moreover, he describes two kinds of people. One group knows that everything contains the same energy. Another group has no idea of this oneness. The last stanza of the section seems to resonate with the essence of the *Isavasya Upanishad's* santi mantra, which states that oneness is the ultimate Truth in the universe.

Om poornamadah poornamidam
Poornaath poorna mudachyate
Poornasya poorna madaaya
Poorname vaava sishyate
Om Shanti Shanti Shanti (2)

This Santi mantra of the Upanishads encompasses the spirit of all the Vedas and Upanishads. It means



that the invisible is the Whole; the visible, too, is the Whole. From the Whole, the visible universe of the infinite is taken out. The Whole remains the same, even though the infinite universe has come out of it.

Unlike many of his works, which are directly based on *the Bhagavatha Purana*, this work draws on many spiritual and philosophical ideas from the Upanishads. Poonathanam had deep devotion towards Sri Krishna of Guruvayoor. After explaining the ancient wisdom, he asks all to have strong devotion to Sri Krishna, who will save us from the trials and tribulations of material life.

The sections 'Karmagathi' and 'Jeevagathi' deal with the chain of Karma that acts as a barrier to the soul's attainment of salvation. He says that breaking the chain of Karma is impossible even for Brahma, the God of Srishti. Karma - good or bad is a chain, whether it is made of gold or copper. Neither good deeds nor bad deeds let us escape from the whirlpool of Karma. Regarding Jiva or the soul, he says that it takes different forms in different births. Before coming to the world in human form, it would have gone through the lives of plants, insects, and animals. The chariot metaphor in the Katha Upanishad explains the relationship among the soul, body, and senses in the completion of our Karma. "Know the Jiva to be the master of the chariot; and the body to be the chariot; know the intellect as the charioteer and the mind as verily the bridle. The senses they say are the horses; and the sense objects are the roads; The Self, associated with body, senses and mind, is the enjoyer – so say the wise ones." (Katha Upanishad)

The whole universe exists because every action has an equal and opposite reaction. The section titled

'Karmagathi', the Direction of Karma, in *Jnanapana* is dedicated to describing how each of our actions leads to the results that we have to undergo. Man cannot escape from this cycle of Karma if he does not understand the secret behind life and death. Only if he is aware of the supreme knowledge can he escape from the cycle. The supreme knowledge is the knowledge about Brahman, who is oneness and who stays within everyone.

Two sections, "Bharatha Mahima" and "Kalikala Mahima," are dedicated to describing the glory of Bharatha, our motherland, and Kaliyuga, respectively. In "Bharatha Mahima," he glorifies our motherland, Bharatha Khanda, saying that we are blessed to be born in such an auspicious place. "Kalikala Mahima", the next section deals with the benefits of being born during Kalikala, the last of the four yugas, Kritha, Thretha, and Dwapara being the first three. The specialty of Kaliyuga is that we can attain salvation through namajapa, i.e., chanting the names of Sri Krishna, the easiest way to attain liberation from all Karmas. When these two sections are read together, a philosophy of life evolves that makes our miseries less and earthly life better. The combination of the time and space is favourable to all who strive to gain freedom from the chain of Karma. In the section that follows, he argues that it is fortunate to be born a man because only a man can have devotion to Sri Krishna. As stated in the previous sections, the soul has undergone various births. The poet asks us to make use of the situation and get liberation from the cycle of Karma.

In "Samsaaravarnana," which means "description of the material world," he describes how different people behave in it. Some of them do not fulfill their



duties to their family, wife, and children, whereas others do not show respect for great people. Some people boast of being scholars without any scholarship; some others are proud of their Brahmanical origin. Some people, in their quest for material wealth, reject Truth. Truth is the ultimate Brahman. Very few people realize this ultimate Truth. *The Taittiriya Upanishad* describes Truth as follows.

He performed tapas; Having performed tapas,
He created all this whatsoever (We perceive).
Having created it, He entered into it. Having
entered it, he becomes the manifest and the
unmanifest, the defined and the undefined,
the housed and the houseless, knowledge and
ignorance, Truth and falsehood, and all that
exists. Therefore, it is called existence. (35)

The poet discusses the various bad deeds committed by human beings in this world. They accumulate great wealth but cannot find happiness. They pursue more material pleasures and dedicate the rest of their lives to it.

The last two sections of the poem portray the meaninglessness of our expectations and ambitions. He says that all books and all philosophers emphasise one fact: we have to focus on ourselves, our souls, and the freedom we can attain by chanting the names of Sri Krishna. *Jnanapana* is a repository of spiritual knowledge that remains relevant today, as it concerns the right attitude to life. The poet advises us to choose a pious, pure life so that our lives become meaningful. We will be liberated from the series of birth and death. In this competitive world, where people strive for material pleasures, Poonathanam's words remain relevant. *Jnanapana* is a literary masterpiece, a treasure trove of knowledge,

and, above all, a guide for all who strive for liberation from the tribulations of the material world.

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