Prior to the coming of Islam to India, Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism were the dominant religions. Hinduism lost its simplicity. Many philosophical schools appeared. Two different sects, i.e., Vaishnavism and Saivism also appeared within Hinduism. In course of time Sakti worship also came into existence. Common people were confused on the way of worshipping God. When Islam came to India, the Hindus observed many ceremonies and worshipped many Gods and Goddesses. There were all sorts of superstitious beliefs among them. Their religion had become complex in nature. Added to these, the caste system, untouchability, blind worshipping and inequality in society caused dissensions among different sections of the people. On the other hand Islam preached unity of God and brotherhood of man. It emphasised monotheism. It attacked idol worship. It preached equality of man before God. The oppressed common people and the people branded as low castes were naturally attracted towards Islam. It only increased the rivalry among religions. Fanaticism, bigotry, and religious intolerance began to raise their heads. It was to remove such evils, religious leaders appeared in different parts of India. They preached pure devotion called Bhakti to attain God.

Bhakti means personal devotion to God. It stresses the Union of the individual with God. Bhakti movement originated in South India between the 7th and the 12th centuries A..D. The Nayanmars, who worshipped Siva, and the Alwars, who worshipped Vishnu, preached the idea of Bhakti. They carried their message of love and devotion to various parts of South India through the medium of the local language. They preached among common people. It made some of the followers of the Vedic faith to revive the old Vedic religion. Saints like Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhwa gave their concepts of God and the individual soul.

The main principles of Bhakti movement were : (1) God is one, (2) To worship God man should serve humanity, (3) All men are equal, (4) Worshipping God with devotion is better than performing religious ceremonies and going on pilgrimages, and (5) Caste distinctions and superstitious practices are to be given up. The Hindu saints of the Bhakti Movement and the Muslim saints of the Sufi movement became more liberal in their outlook. They wanted to get rid of the evils which had crept into their religions. There were a number of such saints from the 8th to 16th century A.D. We shall deal with some of them here.