

Chapter 1

On Devotee and Deity: An Introduction to Bhakti Literature

While taking a historical glance into the cogent voices of medieval India, one would arrive at that weird ground occupied by numerous mystic saints and devotees, where Bhakti (Devotion) stood as a dynamic weapon. According to the words of Satish Chandra in his book *History of Medieval India*:

The Bhakti movement which stressed mystical union of the individuals with God had been at work in India long before the arrival of the Turks. Although, the seeds of Bhakti can be found in the Vedas, it was not emphasized during the early period. The idea of the adoration of a personal God seems to have developed with the growing popularity of Buddhism. During the early centuries of the Christian era, under Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha began to be worshiped in his 'gracious' form (avalokita). The worship of Vishnu developed more or less at the same time. When many of the holy books, such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, were re-written during the Gupta times, Bhakti was accepted, along with *jnana* and *karma*, as one of the recognized roads to salvation. (190-191)

The Bhakti poets therefore preached and conveyed their ideas to their favorite deity directly. In the book *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism?* P. Govinda Pillai denotes:

Among the multifarious, religious, philosophical, social and political movements which contributed to the formation of India and her culture, the Bhakti of the medieval period (fourteenth to seventeenth centuries) was undoubtedly the most pervasive and persistent. (3)

The Bhakti movement was therefore a stirring idea that constructed a significant space along with an array of unique poetic faces to the notions of Sanskrit scriptures. By trans-creating the early epics and legends such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, almost all the modern Indian languages, except Tamil, were given a new form and style (Pillai 3). Being a revolutionary countercultural movement, it accepted general public from all divisions of the society. The movement violated the existing medieval norms and conventions of religion, caste, gender and community and invited people from every caste and creed. The poets of Bhakti literature always showcased a basic nature for complete attachment and perfect submission to their God. The unending quest for eternal freedom can be identified as the nucleus of Bhakti movement. In the book *History of Medieval India* Satish Chandra points out, “The development of popular Bhakti took place in South India between the seventh and twelfth century” (190). Shahabuddin Iraqi in his book *Bhakti Movement in Medieval India: Social and Political Perspectives* says that:

The bhakti age in South India is said to have lasted from the sixth century to the end of the Vijayanagara empire. In the earlier phase, a number of bhakti saints, endowed with poetic and musical talents, wandered from place to place, singing hymns in praise of different deities, and drew their followings from among the common people. (103)

The Bhakti literature is highly significant in the study of Indian literature because it brought about a new space with the vernacular languages and can be identified as an ‘other’ of the mainstream Sanskrit literature written by the elite class. It can also be identified as a major counter-cultural movement because while the main philosophical rudiments of thought were firmly designed for the elite class, Bhakti as a progressive movement emerged to become a normative lifestyle for a considerable sect of people,

especially to the non-elite class, in its pan Indian scene. The significance of the particular tradition was that it helped to bring the idea of God within the range of all public segments of Indian society regardless of their caste, creed or social ranks. By continuously challenging the rites, rituals and spiritual notions of the medieval culture, the Bhakti movement fashioned a diverse genre of dissent against the class-caste obstructions, communal strategies and gender concerns. Accordingly, the idea of Bhakti movement got spread to a larger communities of common people who were previously kept away from the fixed fabrics of Sanskrit and other high class clutches. Prof. Avadhesh Kumar Singh in his book *Revisiting Literature, Criticism and Aesthetics in India* points out that, "...distinctions such as caste, learning, beauty, family, wealth and profession among others that had plagued Hindu society for long are removed..." (300). The biographical details of Bhakti poets showcases that most of them initially had an intuition of sense of wonder, the vital crave for freedom and deliverance, personal devotion, spontaneity, impulsiveness, communal worship and so on (Rajagopalachary and Rao 1).

The historical origin of the movement can be certainly traced from the comments of historians and critics such as Satish Chandra, P. Govinda Pillai, Shahabuddin Iraqi, Hiran Gohein, Manager Pandey and so on. Shahabuddin Iraqi in the Introduction to his book *Bhakti Movement in Medieval India: Social and Political Perspectives* notes that Bhakti movement started from AD 9th century with the birth of Adi Sankara and was continued by a number of Hindu devotees and religious reformers up to the twentieth century. Adi Sankara tried to bring the scripted Vedas and Upanishads into the dominion of knowledge (Iraqi 15). According to the findings of Iraqi, during the Sultanate period (Muslim rule), the Indian society was absolutely packed with several anomalies such as tough and rigid caste system, blind rites and rituals, polytheism, untouchability,

discriminations based on economic status (*chaturvarnya*), etc. The Bhakti poets such as Kabir, Surdas, Mirabai, Ramananda lived during these periods. The elite status of the society was entirely under the monopoly of Brahmins. The extensive discontent and hostility against the prevailing communal evils was the foremost reason behind the development of Bhakti movement. Even though spirituality and devoutness were the major themes of Bhakti, the literary verses proved to be an inspiring and thrilling melody of the subaltern in their diverse manifestations of revolt as well as resistance. Through charmingly constructed linguistic diction, a seemingly conservative phenomenon became a sturdy weapon against the conventional social hierarchies of many religious customs and injustice. This makes Bhakti movement on par with the European renaissance struggles as it resulted in great advancement in the societal value system to directly impact a range of social circles like arts, politics, culture, literature, religion and so on. On one side the movement as a whole expresses the beauty and reality of human life, an intense desire and passion for freedom and autonomy, a rebellion against the caste hegemony and so on whereas the on the other side the movement exposes the entire falsehood of the world, and detachment from the worldly life. The Bhakti poets were in the forefront to raise their voice against discouraging evil practices such as Sati, adultery and infanticide. They also encouraged people in the ban of liquor, tobacco and all other kinds of drugs.

The term Bhakti is derived from the root word 'bhaj' and the suffix 'ktin'. Kannada writer C. N Ramachandran in his article, "Bhakti as Celebration of Life" marks that 'Bha' means 'to serve' or 'to share or 'to participate' (Ramachandran 31). It helps a devotee to serve, share and participate with the divine experience. K. S. Narayanachar in his article "Nuances of Bhakti in the *Ramayana*" defines Bhakti as:

Bhakti, accordingly to the highest traditions of philosophical and religious thought in India, is living for God and living in God, in thought, feeling and deed. God-union, which *Vedantins* call *Sayujya*, and which in the *Summum Bonum* of all philosophical and religious endeavor, is described by Sage Yajnavalkya as a fulfilled experience of union between the lover and the beloved, that knows nothing of other external or exterior aspects and of nothing higher or superior in taste. (17)

Even though Adi Shankara and Ramanuja followed the *jnana marga*, it is generally found that *jnana* when matured or clearly developed becomes devotion and vice-versa. K. S. Narayanachar asserts that according to Ramanuja, Bhakti can be considered as a form of love that is constant and valiant. According to Ramanuja, Bhakti is a species of wisdom and knowledge, and that which overflow and develops into pure love (Narayanachar 18). The four *purusharthas* are Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. Bhakti is regarded as the complete manifestation of these four stages and is the fifth *purushartha*. Also, Bhakti is the epitome of nine *rasas*. They are *Shringara* (love/beauty), *Hasya* (laughter), *Karuna* (sorrow), *Raudra* (anger), *Veera* (heroism/courage), *Bhayanka* (terror/fear), *Bibhatsa* (disgust), *Adbutha* (surprise/wonder) and *Shantha* (peace) described in *Natyasastra* and treated as the tenth *rasa*.

The movement had its impacts on the minds of large groups of Indian folks from the early sixth century onwards. Being a mass communal reformation strategy, the movement attempted to establish a society deeply rooted in the principles of egalitarianism. Bhakti as a counter-cultural movement influenced various fields such as literature, fine arts and music at one level. It has also contributed to the process of unification and integration on a pan Indian level, as it opposed the social issues of caste

and gender. Sanskrit was used as major language of ‘knowledge’ which was inaccessible by the common man. Vedas, Upanishads, epics and so on were mostly written in Sanskrit and was kept as a secret from laymen. The use of vernacular languages by the Bhakti poets demystified the above mentioned ‘knowledge’ and helped the general public understand them. As mentioned earlier, the movement spread on a large scale and later became a pan Indian movement by fourteenth century when its threshold spread to North India (Rajagopalachary and Rao 2). This tradition helped to create a seminal account of spiritual literature in the forms of hymns, songs and melodies and was sung across by several poets in their own languages. American poet and translator Andrew Schelling in his book, *The Oxford Anthology of Bhakti Literature*, defines Bhakti poets as those who “stands with the bravest poets across our planets” (xvi). He also remarks:

Their songs have migrated not just across India, but also into Europe and the Americas. They are collaborators in the effort to find the dimensions of the human heart and mind, and to readjust the world we live in – to wrench or crack it open – so we might drop old prejudice. (xvi)

The songs of the Bhakti poets have later appeared in the European and American continents in translated forms. Those songs filled with immense love, dedication, adoration, humanity, freedom, autonomy and quest for the Self attracted people across the world. Later several translators from various parts of the world worked on the interpretation of Bhakti songs and Bhakti cult.

Instead of portraying a silent reflective attitude towards any particular God/deity, the Bhakti verses showcased a kind of ardent, unyielding and existentialist approach to the personal experiences of devotee. Schelling further explains that there is no doubt that the Bhakti roots trace the old difficult and intimidating hunger for deep human

autonomy, an intellect on the unfathomable and curious secrecies of the mortal world and the very brave conviction that every human being holds certain kind of deep passionate distinct relationship, warmth, love or affection with that mystery. He points out that there are several similar cases in Native American vision quest music, the Afro-American gospels, the blues, and labor protest songs and especially in the experimental and the liberation impulses found in international modernist and postmodern poetry (Schelling xiv). He further explains:

What sets the poets of Bhakti apart from their classical Sanskrit or Tamil predecessors – transforming them into a prominent *counter-cultural* force – is their resolve to match life and poetry. To live by what they sing, no matter the stakes. Some bhakti poets gathered around themselves ‘communities of dissent’ in their own lifetimes. As much as they drew from the traditions of India – both the so called ‘Great’ and so called ‘Little Traditions’ – the passions give speech in their poems were designed to shatter any fetters of belief what would limit the ferocity of experience. (xv)

The Bhakti cult was a counter-cultural movement against the social atrocities of medieval period. It was not organized into a particular period, specific location, or a group of leaders. Instead, it evolved and continued all over the medieval Indian sphere with various hues. The songs of Bhakti matched the lives of common man with poetry. Those lyrics stood for social enlightenment. They drew sources and themes from the Indian traditions and cultures.

The Hindu revival happened after the decline of Jainism and had rented several Jain practices and precepts even though opposed the non-Vedic religion tooth and nail. The *yagnas* never returned. Even though the *varnasrama* system came back with the supremacy of Brahmins in the later stages, the early pioneers inscribed sameness of each

person before the Almighty. The pioneers of Bhakti chanted Vedic mantras in several forms and Epics and *Puranas* were considered as basic texts. There were notable poets who translated these Sanskrit texts into the vernacular languages or either composed its adapted versions. These new versions were created to suit the new social milieu and hence the modern Indian languages were formed.

In the Northern regions, the Guptas were Vishnu devotees. The Chalukyas followed the attempt and brought this to the East and Deccan regions. They brought it up to Venkatom and today, Tirupati Venkateswara temple of Lord Vishnu is a famous pilgrimage centre.

Saivism too has a Northern connection, especially Kashmir. It is said that the Vedic deity Rudra merged with the Himalayan tribal deity to form Lord Shiva. The early Nayanars and Thirumoolas believed that Shiva resided at Kailas and came to the South to visit Agasthya to finally settle there to write and propagate his *Thirumantras*. Some other Nayanars, Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Appars claim that Lord Shiva appeared before them at Himalayas and asked them to carry out his mission in the South. However the Bhakti movement of the South was quite different from that of the North where they gave emphasis to intellectual aspects. In the South, it was emotions, not intellect that played significant role in the dances, songs and so on of the Alvars and Nayanars (Pillai 55-58).

In short, Nayanars are the devotees of Shiva. It is said that there are sixty three Nayanars and among them five or six are the famous ones. The earliest of the Nayanars was Thirumoolar, who claimed that he belonged to the abode of Shiva, Mount Kailas. His poems often offer a special outlook on human body and soul. He did not believe that the soul would survive the body. He sticks to the materialist concept that when the body

dies, the soul too becomes dead. He on no account opposed the practice of temple worship but always reminded that Shiva not only resides inside it, but everywhere outside. For him, nature itself was Shiva and Shiva was nature. Nayanar began his task at the period when the Saivites were divided and practiced according to several sections like *Kapalikas*, *Pasupathas*, etc. His' was the initial effort to marginalize such sections and put forward a monotheistic Saivism with many rational ideas.

Karaikkal Ammaiyar was one among the renowned women Bhakti poets of Tamil. She is often compared to Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai. She had portrayed her relation with her beloved lord as almost parallel to that of two lovers. She often loses herself in ecstasy and trances while she composes her lyrics, singing or dancing. She called herself '*pey*' which means lunatic (Pillai 62).

Appar belongs to the second generation of Saivites. As per *Periya Puranam*, he belongs to the caste of Vellala (below Brahmins but above untouchables) and was from Tanjavur. He was born to a Saivite family but later lived as a Jain. There is a tale that describes how he returns to Saivism. The story is that he had suffered a stomach illness and had severe pain. His sister prayed to Lord Shiva and her true devotion cured him. Hence, Appar returned to his family beliefs of Saivism. His influence converted the Kanchi monarch Mahendravarman 1 to Saivism. From then, the entire Pallava Empire became monopoly of Saivism and the Nayanar doctrine. His admirers called him by the name *Thirunavukkarasu*. His Bhakti philosophy is classified into two genres – Nirguna and Saguna (Pillai 62-63).

Sambhandar was a contemporary figure of Appar. The Pandyas of Madurai region were won over to Saivism by the efforts of Sambhandar. A notable characteristic of Sambhandar is that he always held his head high and did not bow even to Lord Shiva.

He claimed to be a part of his God and that he was born with that consciousness. His poems in praise of his Lord are hardly a humble devotee's intense longing for ultimate salvation (Pillai 66).

The next notable Nayanar is Sundarar. The *Thevaram* collection contains almost 1000 verses of Sundarar. His chief texts are the combinations of his objective and subjective experiences and problems. He also produced the book *Tiru-thondar-tohai*, which means a collection of stories of devotees (Pillai 67-68).

Manikkavachakar, meaning the 'speaker of gems' is the next prominent Nayanar. This name was conferred upon him by his admirers. He believed himself to be Lord Shiva who appeared in the form of a human being to find out his potential devotee and shower his blessings upon the devotee. His two books – *Thirukaviar* and *Thiruvachakam*, which deals with his values and hymns admiring Shiva, have survived more than a millennium. Most of his verses need the value of solitary meditation. This meditative mode also points to the decline of Bhakti from a popular movement to an elite exercise for individual salvation. He appears at the end of Bhakti movement, ninth century (Pillai 71).

Nandanar, is the 'untouchable Saint' of the Nayanar creed. He was born in a *Pariah* family unit of untouchables in lower Kaveri basin. Because of being inferior in caste, he was not able to enter temple, see the Shiva idol and worship. It is said that Shiva himself asked the granite structure of his vehicle, (bull) to move aside, so that Nandanar could see him. The legend of Nandanar joining the *Sivalinga* in the lime light of the deity's prowess and disappearance may be a subterfuge after eliminating him by means of worse tactics by the casteist Hindus. He was both a rebel and martyr to his cause (Pillai 76).

The Alvars, Vishnu devotees, were mainly twelve in number. They are placed in between the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries by historians. The verses and hymns that the Alvars sang are contained in Nath Muni's *Nalayira Prabandham*. They were of both high castes and low caste. Tiruppan Alwar was an untouchable and Andal was the only woman member out of them. The Hindu tradition mentions about some supernatural legends behind the birth of several Alvars. Thus, Poygai Alwar is said to have sprung from a lotus flower and Puttalvar from a *madhavi* flower. Periyalvar was born from a red lotus in a well and Andal was discovered as a baby lying in the flower garden of Periyalvar. The supernatural stories still continue based on the birth and lives of Alvars.

The Bhakti tradition is so vast and diverse and henceforth it is difficult to approach every literary work using the same tool of analysis. A. K Ramanujan in the Introduction to his book *Speaking of Shiva*, points out that critics of Bhakti literature, like V. Raghavan, identify the movement as a powerful outbreak against social hierarchies in the early Indian society. Ramanujan points out, "...bringing the high to the low, esoteric paradox to the mass in the street, transmuting ancient and abstruse ideas into live contemporary experiences; at the same time, finding everyday symbols for the timeless" (39).

Ramanujan clearly points out the demystification nature of Bhakti literature that could transgress the boundaries of epistemological hierarchies and thereby serve a high philosophy in the plates of the common man where they can enjoy the beauty, taste the essence and digest the philosophy. He also emphasizes on the cross cultural interactions of Bhakti poets by the means of travel. He says:

Both Kabir of Hindi region, and Caitanya of Bengal, were inspired by southern precedents. Chronologically from seventh century on, century after century, bhakti movements have arisen in different regions and languages, spanning the

whole Indian sub-continent, in Tamil, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, Assamese, and Punjabi roughly in that order. Like a lit fuse, the passion of bhakti seems to spread from region to region, from century to century, quickening the religious impulse. Arising in particular regions, speaking the local spoken languages, it is yet inter-regional – both ‘parochial’ and ‘universal’. (39-40)

In fact, Bhakti was not a fresh notion to the Indian tradition. It is as old as Hindu religion. But when set in the milieu of sociopolitical and economic magnitudes it has much more dimensions than that of a simple religious practice. In short, one could say that it deals with caste, gender and regional language. But apart from that, in other circumstances Bhakti movement can be recognized as an Indian response against the Islamic invasions as well as their religious styles. Especially in the Northern part of India, the movement flourished during the Sultanate period. But, the interesting part is that several liberating styles and principles of life between the Muslim saints and Hindu saints accordingly created a religious harmony during the later periods. Because of the participation of Sufi saints, the Islamic concepts had significant roles in spreading liberal ideas. The two basic notions of Islam that highly inspired Bhakti saints are Unity of God and Equality of human beings (Iraqi 109).

The Bhakti poets emphasized upon monotheism and according to them Ram and Allah were one Supreme head. They considered Bhakti as superior to knowledge and hence it was only through Bhakti that one could attain complete salvation. They denied all kinds of rites, rituals and other religious customary practices considering them as pointless dogmas and believed in a nameless and shapeless God. The mind of the devotee should be totally purified, and this purification could be achieved through one’s own moral deeds. Harmony, Morality and Non-Violence were their central focus.

Unification of God by spiritual means is the basic idea of these two movements. It does not have much to do with a strict institutionalized sector of religion. In the Introduction to the book *Bhakti Movement and Literature: Re-forming a Tradition* M. Rajagopalachary and Damodar Rao points out that the emotion of Bhakti locates in two levels – public and personal. The initial one, the public sphere of Bhakti gets associated with spiritual gatherings, festivities, agitations, turmoil and other such activities. Spiritual *bhajans*, grand ceremonials or celebrations like *Kumbhamela* or *Rathayatra*, *Brahmotsavams*, religious carnivals at local temples of small villages and *Jataras* celebrating village deities are certain instances for the manifestations of Bhakti in public cultural sphere. These gatherings and celebrations naturally become the meeting points of pan Indian and local ethnicities. On the other side, in personal spheres, Bhakti is conveyed in the form of hymns, songs or poems composed of the extreme devotion for a deity or deity's personae by expressing the devotee's intense love or surrender to God in various ways. For instance, the relation concerning the devotee and the deity might be of a lover and beloved, servant or master or of a guide and benefactor. The Bhakti movement entirely captured all these traits and displayed them at both these levels (2).

Within the Indian public sphere, Bhakti becomes a social movement of protest against caste, class hierarchies, religious or gender inequalities. Christian Lee Novetzke mentions in his essay "Bhakti and Its Public" that historically no other single communal movement has cohered on the subject of Bhakti and its sentiments. On the other hand, one could easily find several religious communities, rites, rituals, bodies of texts, and so on that makes Bhakti a stirring principle. Numerous academic scholars mention about Bhakti movement as composed of a unified, if heterogeneous, fields of texts and practices produced and maintained in south Asia over the last two millennia (257-258).

The book *Viraha Bhakti*, written by Friedhelm Hardy narrates certain significant traits found between the devotional texts of South India, especially of Tamil and the *Bhagavata Purana*, which he mentions as ‘opus universale’ – a devotional manuscript composed in South India during A.D 10th century and later found throughout the Indian subcontinent by the beginning/end fifteenth century (489-491). It is interesting to note that a single piece of text can work as a modal for Bhakti in the case of its public appeal and reception over several centuries later. Apart from the philosophical discourse that the Bhakti movement had put forward and the charismatic poetic verse that many poets composed, there developed a strong sense of Bhakti (as devotion/ritual) throughout India. Rituals performed at temples especially by the Brahmin community had an impact on the beliefs and customs of the other communities including the Kshatriyas.

The popularity of the text *Ramayana* and its different versions like *Adhyatmaramayanam Kilippattu*, *Ramavatara Charitra*, *Ramayanu*, *Saptakanda Ramayana* and so on including several folk forms of the story of Rama showcase a narrative outbreak of Bhakti into the minds of the people irrespective of caste, creed, geography and language. Many of these versions surpassed the boundaries of Sanskrit language and thereby helped the narrative to merge with the popular minds. Local stories claiming the presence of Rama in their towns and villages across India are plenty. For instance, a place at Tirunelli temple, in Wayanad district of Kerala is said to be the place where Rama once sat with grief of his father’s demise. There are three places in Rameswaram where the locals claim that Hanuman, the monkey God, jumped to cross the ocean while a temple at Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu and Jataayuppura at Chadayamangalam in Kollam district of Kerala is considered as the place where Jatayu, the demi-God bird in the Hindu epic *Ramayana* fell after a fight with Ravana. This shows that the narrative has transgressed the traditional geographical boundaries and

started living along in different geographical locations. It is interesting to note that the text has been accepted and well received by the elite public especially the Brahmin community who had command over Sanskrit over a period of time.

Christian Lee Novetzke points out in his article “Bhakti and Its Public” that by the end of Gupta Empire and during the reign of Pallavas and Pandyas in the South, there occurred a sudden upsurge in the constructions of large temples funded by royal wealth. These helped to create ‘an abode’ or home for the religious deities and loci for public worship. This social system provided several rituals and practices associated with devotion including the visual contact with a divine deity (darsan) and offering devotional goods like flowers, leaves, milk products, etc., to the worshiping deity (pooja). These devotional techniques were thus followed in individual homes and the later transformations of the societal economy of worship and devotion could easily connect several significant relationships in the growth and development of vernacular literature that bears the themes of devotion. These regional writings and its sudden developments paved the way for the production of more texts in vernacular languages all over India. In the midst of these cross currents of vernacular literature along with its wide spread popularity and the sudden openings for the public spheres of devotion, the rudiments of devotion on its public performative expressions could be easily found in the forms of dramas, classical and Sufi dances, theatrics and musical melodies, hymns songs and so on (259).

As a result of Bhakti movement and its widespread acceptance all over India, writers started writing in the vernacular languages and a perfect basis was set for the establishment of contemporary Indian languages. The mainstream literature moved away from the early tradition of these languages giving way to a vibrant and autonomous way of new thought process. Thus, it can be argued that the Bhakti poetry

to a great extent could free itself from the formalisms of ancient Indian poetics, medieval feudalistic culture and from the themes of majestic royal courts. The compositions can be read as expressions in the common man's language with humanistic sentiments. The cultural consciousness, philosophies and feelings conveyed in Bhakti literature are more strictly associated with human culture and civilisation of the medieval period and that of ancient ethnicity of Indian culture and literature.

The Bhakti wave was evidently recognized as a movement that opposed feudalism and communal structures of medieval India. It portrayed the anti-humanistic dogmas of medieval society in their numerous features and forms. Apart from that, the movement also conveyed the spirits of revolt and dissents against the elites. The influence of this rebellion and its continuous resistance against the feudalistic medieval culture were not articulated in any forms of arts or literature until the popular folks found its manifestation in Indian devotional poetry. The themes, beliefs, principles and the widely held expressive designs of Bhakti poetry were completely independent from the poetic forms, designs and guidelines of Sanskrit or any other medieval imperial and classical languages.

Manjari Pandey in his work "Bhakti Poetry: Its Relevance and Significance", points out that the literature hence created for the masses were not only important in the relations to its forms and themes, but also appeared diverse from the set-ups of former traditionalist literature written in elite languages such as Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit or Apabhraṃśa. The spirit of these poetical texts finds its origins from the common life style and practices of general masses. These verses are exceptionally dissimilar from that of classical Sanskrit poetical versions. Regional literature entered into a new sector of advancement and expansion. Poetry was liberated from the shackles of formalism and feudal structures and entered into common people's culture. They are normally more

advanced form of folk literature or folk culture. The poetic composition charms of Bhakti verses stems from the spoken and indigenous ethnicity of rural village songs of suburban India. Its musical formulae are much similar to that of Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, medieval Tamil or Malayalam. This was the very initial phase in the Indian history where the spoken language of general folks harmonised much closer to the poetic language. For the first time, the artificial gap stuck between the so called literariness of orthodox poetic language and sheer impulsiveness of everyday language was joined. The originality and uniqueness of subject and format of Bhakti poetry are not so easy to be described in the conservative critical context. An additional critical construction which is completely liberal from the orthodox archetypes and the continuing lyrical conducts is greatly necessary for the comprehensive examination, explanation and critical assessment of the devotional poetry of common masses (129-130). He quotes:

Free from Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit and Apabhramsha, literatures in regional language entered into a new phase of growth and development. Consequently, Indian literature and culture broke the shackles of feudalism and seem to have headed towards a more creative, peoples culture. Bhakti poetry, liberated from the formalism of ancient poetics, feudal culture and from the courtly atmosphere, is an expression of people's culture – their emotions in their own languages. Cultural awareness, ideologies and sensibilities expressed in the Bhakti movement and its literature are more closely related to culture and society of its own times than to ancient traditions of Indian culture and tradition. (129)

Therefore, it is much more essential to evaluate the previous historical background from where the cultural or ideological movement initially evolved and later spread in search of its original source for the central idea. Pandey is of the opinion that Bhakti has

altogether become a social and political movement when the intellectual arena of a society started thinking in a new way because of the impact created by Bhakti literature.

He remarks:

It has often been seen in the history of cultures and idea that a certain idea remains in the historical process as an abstract concept and when it finds a conducive social context, it takes the form of comprehensive movement. The concept of Bhakti have been very old as an idea and an emotion but it evolved as a widespread cultural movement only in the period between 12th and 17th centuries. (131)

Bhakti as a movement had several manifestations in the society. The meaning of Bhakti varies for each sect of people. Some people read, recited and got delighted in Bhakti songs merely to guarantee themselves a heavenly abode after their demise. Several others practiced these compositions for their individual growth in this world whereas various others explored Bhakti literature as an exact method of devotion. There are many others who considered devotional poetic compositions as an honest desire to hold back the traditions i.e. to summon Bhakti literature as an ideal period in the socio-cultural history of medieval India. There occurs slight variances for those people who in the name of Bhakti movement as well as Bhakti literature take some researches on the social and cultural norms of medieval era in their poetic works. They later recognized several practical relations in them and celebrated these works and organised lists of names of foodstuffs, attires, ornaments, etc., dominant in those ages. For a scholar of cultural studies on history, the poems act as a cultural artefact that provide them with ample illustrations on the medieval life, culture, attitudes, ideas of gender formations, caste hierarchies, relationships between the human and the divine, servant and the master, king and the public, soul and body, etc. Pandey quotes:

Some of them read bhakti literature only to ensure a place for themselves in heaven. Others use Bhakti literature to progress in this world as well as in the other. Some of them see Bhakti literature as a traditional form of worship and yet others, with a desire to give the present a semblance of the past, summon Bhakti literature as a golden age in the cultural history. (131)

Several narrative poems draw a clear picture on physical objects of the past; for instance, attire, ornaments, food, furniture, architecture, geography and so on. Thus it can be argued that literature of Bhakti act as a cultural material, like several other early poems, that preserve the pastness of the past.

On the other hand, there are several modernist thinkers who completely neglect this aim. Several narrative poems draw clear picture on physical objects of the past; attire, ornaments, contexts of Bhakti literature; and discuss only about its contemporary status and relevance. Some critics fail to identify that the present is always connected with the past and the future; thus without going much deeper into the actual context of a literary text it is very difficult to draw parallels in the present. Studies on Bhakti literature clearly showcase the historical and political nuances of the time. Therefore, a mere close reading of the text might be a reductionist approach.

It is necessary to analyse and interpret the aesthetic and artistic excellence of Bhakti poems and the growth and development of an extensive pan Indian social movement with respect to the socio-cultural scenarios as Walter Benjamin observes that it is not sufficient to examine a literary text as an experience of the past but significant to examine a literary text that should be understood or examined considering its historical as well as present relevance (Pandey 132).

As mentioned earlier, the Bhakti poets considered their regional language as the best mode to express their emotions and opinions, rather than depending upon the very

aristocratic and ornamented languages such as Sanskrit (*Devabhasha*), Persian or Arabic. As a result, these languages lost their leading communal status. The poets wrote in vernacular languages that could be easily accessed by the general masses regardless of their class, caste or gender. For instance, the language used by Kabirdas was a combination of several languages of common usage. He chiefly used vernacular Hindi, borrowing many words from several other dialects such as Awadhi and Braj. These poems cover various aspects of human life and can be considered as a call for pure loving devotion to God. In some verses he used Bhojpuri too. On the other side, Tulsidas wrote his *Ramacharitamanas*, the retelling of the Sanskrit *Ramayana*, in the vernacular Awadhi dialect of Hindi, which is popular in the Awadhi region of present day Uttar Pradesh. Another Bhakti poet Surdas used Braj dialect of Hindi (Braj bhasha), which, during those days, was considered as a plebeian language. The poems of Surdas helped to raise the status of Braj dialect from an unrefined language to a refined one. Janabai, the Marathi female poet wrote her verses (*abhangas*), in typical Marathi language. In South India, Bhakti poets like Cherusseri, Ezhuthachan, Poonthanam, et al. could create a new form and dialect and to a great extent liberate Malayalam from the clasps of Sanskrit. In one of the passages of saint Gyaneswar's Marathi translation of *Bhagavat Gita*, Arjuna asks Lord Krishna to advocate his words in simple and intellect Marathi language rather than using decorated Sanskrit. This shows there was a clear demand for the demystification of ideas and craving for knowledge in the minds of general public.

The poetic forms of Bhakti literature have much resemblance to that of folk literature and folk culture. This convention can be traced in the songs and ballads of pan Indian villages. Their musical forms are identical to the vernacular language styles and far different from that of Sanskrit. This could be the first time in Indian history, where

the language of poetry began to travel nearer to the side of spoken language rather than decorated poetic dictions.

Apart from these, there exists a very strong relation between Bhakti movement and literature as well as with the socio-economic changes taking place in the medieval period. The procedure of creation of nationalities arose with the concurrent course of the breakdown of feudalism that directly led to the development of a universal movement encompassing the growth of people's culture. This was the outcome of the continuing dissolution of feudal system and the ongoing advancement of farmers and other laymen. They possessed a strong sense of revolt which took form among the lower class (Dalits). They found their whole literary and cultural expression in saint sahitya works. These people who were illiterate because of their poor social status found the best podium to express their creativity and talent in their regional languages. Otherwise, only the upper-class had the chance to enjoy the cultural and literary spheres of the society. The growth of vernacular languages marked a fresh start of the new literary as well as sociocultural upsurge in the medieval era (Pandey 133-134).

It is very difficult for a historian to have a crystal clear image on what India was during the medieval period. This is because many of the Indian kings never paid attention to record a history of their time chronologically. Thus, India's sense of history was very well merged with the many early narratives including the great epics and legendary tales. Several writers of Bhakti and Sufi tradition during this period drew their poetic inspiration from these narratives. Several Sufi saints fashioned beautiful love poems centered on ancient myths and folk tales by blending them with the contemporary period. One such beautiful work is the epic poem *Padmavat* (1540) written by Sufi poet Malik Muhammed Jayasi. The poetic composition is an allegoric literary work that narrates the legendary story of the Delhi Sultan Alauddin Khilji's passionate yearning

for the beautiful Padmavati, the queen of Chittor. Here, Khilji and Padmavati's husband Raja Ratan Singh are both real characters of medieval period whereas Padmavati, the protagonist heroine is a fictional character. Apart from the main thread, the poem also focuses upon the character Nagmati, Ratan Singh's first wife and her emotional separation from her husband after his remarriage with Padmavati. This situation is expressed in the poetic form 'Barahmasa' (a theme common in Sufi romances), the representation of musical modes and Indian seasons in color, painted by Rajasthani artists from a social viewpoint. There lies a very deep emotional depiction of communal life and culture in this account of parting. Her emotional experience of separation is depicted by accounting communal life and culture as the actual base. Another notable point where the poet had stated his anti-feudal perception was when he had intelligently described the Delhi Sultan Alauddin Khilji as a demon like character with all the major devilish shades that a man could possess. Here, Khilji seems to be a perfect archetypal figure of the medieval feudal system. Jayasi's interpretations on the medieval social order and the feudal system were far different from that of others who considered Khilji as the 'Lord of the World' (Pandey 134-135).

According to the findings of Shahabuddin Iraqi, the Sufis in Indian society always stood for a direct as well as natural approach towards religion. He opines, "For the Sufi's India was neither *Dar-ulharb* nor *Dar-ulIslam*, but Gods earth with all sorts of people" (84). The dual circles where these people find their best expressions were religion and language. They also conveyed their great respect and encouraged the multilingual and multireligious settings of India. Also, these people exposed their enormous adoration and respect to Hindi language and cherished the Hindu religious hymns written by our Bhakti saints. They also tried to study the local dialects of Indian people at those regions where they settled and always tried to communicate with the

Indians through our languages. Hence, they played a significant role in the expansion and advancement of Indian languages, including Hindi. Their ultimate faith in non-violence has been the spirit of Indian philosophy (84). Iraqi mentions that:

... the mystic attitude towards the Hindus and Hinduism was based on sympathetic attitude and adjustment, because they believed that all religions were different roads leading to the same destination. The belief in *ahimsa*, vegetarian diets, and giving equal status to all increased the area contact with Hindus. (Iraqi 86-87)

The portrayal of the legendary tales of Rama and Krishna which Surdas and Tulsidas had used are simply born out of the Sanskrit scriptures of ancient periods. According to these poets, both these epic characters are heroes who fought against vices and stood with virtues. They are extremely courageous and welcomed a peaceful social order. Therefore, these virtuous traits of their character make them eternal heroes. In the continuous rebellion against the socioeconomic hegemony and the breakdown of feudal system, the common people mark these legendary characters as their heroes. This might be the exact reason why both these epic personalities eternal. Lord Krishna and Lord Rama establish social order by destructing the oppressive devilish tyrannical rulers, Ravana and Kamsa and thereby establish a generous social order. Manager Pandey remarks that:

Tulsi's ramarajya expresses a public desire to replace the exploitive feudalistic political order. Through this imaginary egalitarian political order is influenced by the historical limitations of the age of feudalism, it has overtly expressed Tulsi's concern for public welfare and people's desire for freedom from feudalism.

(135)

The rebellion of characters such as Rama and Krishna can be treated as an open confrontation against the aristocratic hierarchies of the time. As Pandey points it out, by talking about breaking the existing political order, these narratives give way to a new rebellious idea of breaking the existing feudal societies of India especially related to caste-ism. These aspects not only show those changes of the medieval days but also admit the fact that these changes are the seeds for a new social change in the upcoming future. Through their verses Bhakti poets problematise various issues related to the existing sociocultural hierarchies and give food for thought for self-liberation. Their poems reflect a deep-rooted desire to replace the medieval society with the concepts of equality and humanity, which provides an inner inspiration and hope for the oppressed and maltreated even today.

Concept of rebelliousness while narrating human relationships during the medieval feudalism can be traced in the works of several Bhakti poets. Surdas' description of the Radha-Krishna love and Krishna's love for other Gopikas in Vrindavan, is all set unrestricted from the traditional ethics and standards of love and lust. This notion of uncontrolled love and elucidating its source in the form of earthly human relationships is a strong blow against the feudal systems of love and wedding. It is said that no love poet in Hindi is as great as Surdas. His lyrics are filled with the abundance of emotional beauty and action in the diverse periods of an individual's life such as childhood, puberty and youth. The gravity, diversity and humble completeness of simple human and princely customs of affection are found nowhere else other than in Surdas (Pandey 135).

P. Govinda Pillai in his book, *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism* elucidates that the study of Bhakti tradition as a movement of resistance and renaissance begins with the examination of the intellectual advancement that began in the South,

among the Dravidian culture, especially in the Tamil speaking regions. Bhakti emerged in Tamilakam after the expansion of Buddhism and Jainism which existed for almost three centuries. Hinduism had to face strong challenges from the part of Buddhist and Jain principles. Several strong rulers were the supporters of these religions. Scholars' opinion is that the movement must have blossomed during 6th century A.D. The period just preceding it was the period of 'Didactic Poems', the Tamil Sangam age. Even though these poetic verses such as *Chilappathkaram*, *Manimeghalai*, *Jeevaka Chithamani*, etc., were truly excellent in their construction, they never hide their religious intentions pointing to Jainism or Buddhism (51).

The later Buddhist scholars chose Sanskrit as the language for their discourses, avoiding Pali. On the contrary, the Jains opted local Tamil. Therefore, during these days Buddhism in the Tamil land became the religion of the elite people whereas Jainism added its reputation among common devotees. This can easily be noticed in the early Tamil literary work *Thirukkural/Kural* written by Jain saint Thiruvalluvar, who later became a Saivite Bhakti poet and a contemporary of Appar. It later spread into the North and flourished all over India as a pan Indian movement (Pillai 51-52).

The medieval period witnessed the emergence of several Bhakti scholars in almost all parts of India who were constantly struggling to abolish the blind religious practices of the period. Some of the leading supporters of the movement were Adi Shankara, Ramanuja, Appar, Nammalvar, Tukaram, Chokhamela, Eknath, Tulsidas, Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Andal, Vallabhacharya, Kabirdas, Madhava, Surdas, Ramdas, Guru Nanak, Shri Chaithanya, Lal Ded, Mirabai, Ramananda, Chandidas, etc. Their prime purpose was to request and encourage people to worship in the humblest possible method of love, harmony and devotion.

The Bhakti movement which began in the Tamil soil gradually gained its dominance during the early medieval period and achieved success through the poems of Tamil Alvars (Vaishnavites) and Nayanars (Saivites). There were a large number of Tamil poets who hailed from both higher and lower classes of the society and shaped a challenging sphere of vernacular literature that definitely established its own authority in the popular canon (Pillai 50-54).

Avula Meenakshi, in her paper “Veershaiva Bhakti Movement and Social Reform” clearly portrays how the Veerasaiva movement led by the Bhakti saints of Karnataka influenced the social renaissance. According to her the movement began with the Lingayat follower Basavanna (1105 – 1168), the founder of the movement who preached the philosophy of monotheism, centering on Lord Shiva in the form of ‘Ishtalinga’ (an oval shaped emblem that symbolizes Lord Shiva). The Anubhava Mandapa established by Basavanna helped in the origin of Vachana style of literature in Kannada. He and his disciples communicated their thoughts, ideologies and beliefs with the common people using Kannada language, the language of the common man of Karnataka. It shaped a regional literature of considerable status in India, which later attained the power of a classical tongue. He was an actual rebel against the medieval conventions by strongly rejecting the caste system. He allowed the so called ‘untouchables’ to enter into his own house and have their lunch. He also praised the historic challenge of a high class man marrying a lower caste woman. The major philosophy of Veerasaivite movement was based on the principle called *Kayakave Kailasa*, meaning *karma* or work is the only way to reach Kailasa, the abode of Lord Shiva. Avula Meenakshi writes:

Veershaivism is a socio-religious movement that decisively shaped society in medieval Karnataka and permanently changed the contour of popular Kannada

poetry. Its aim is the elimination of the barriers of caste and the removal of untouchability. The sanctity of family relations and improvement in the status of womanhood were upheld. It gave rise to a system of ethics and education at once simple and exalted. It sought to inspire ideals of social and religious freedom, such as no previous faith of India had done. In the medieval age, this was characterized by intercommunal jealousy; it helped to shed a ray of light and faith on the forms and hearts of people. It encouraged learning and contemplation of God by means of love and faith. The excess of polytheism was deplored and the idea of monotheism was encouraged. The movement tended in many ways to raise the nation generally to a higher level of capacity both in thought and in action. (47)

Meenakshi thus clearly identifies Veerasaivism as a socio-religious movement that challenged several mainstream cultures and acted as a powerful tool to question the existing issues related to caste, gender, social status, ethics, freedom and even the idea of God.

H. S. Shiva Prakash in his paper, “Here and Now: Poetics of Kannada Vachanas: An Example of Bhakti Poetics” portrays the Vachana movement of Karnataka, which blossomed during the 12th century by strongly challenging the societal hierarchy of the Brahmin community and their rigid feudal system. It had originated among the subalterns. Shiva Prakash traces it back to Basavanna by depicting the early Kannada poets such as Channiah, who belonged to a lower caste of the society and his contemporaries namely Kakkayya and Kettiah, who also came from lower sections. There was Desimaiah, a weaver by birth and Revanasiddha, a shepherd. Contributions by these poets were compiled widely under the leadership of Basavanna. This specific age of Kannada literature witnessed the rise of nearly two hundred and more Vachana

poets and among them nearly twenty were female poets. Their brave and courageous defiance of caste, class and gender discrimination and the 'sacredness' of age-old theological prescriptions, made them to enter into an unfit fight with the aristocratic sections (6-7).

The 13th century Marathi poet Sant Gyananeswar, a mystic poet and a spiritual leader and the founder of Varkari sect, is considered to be the early exponent of Bhakti literature in Maharashtra. Being in a period where the common man is completely denied of hearing, reading or writing holy texts, Gyananeswar, an elite Brahmin man, who had different conceptions regarding *prema bhakti* which is far different from the *Bhagavata Purana* concept of Radha-Krishna love. His erotic perception of the divine pair was uncommon to the Maharashtrian tradition (Iraqi 213). T. Shyama Krishna in his article "Sant Jnaneswar: A Pioneer of Reformist Bhakti Cult" mentions that, by composing eighteen chapters of *Bhagavat Gita* (Marathi), in Ovi metre, the poet broke the doctrines of sacred texts in Sanskrit language and distributed those works to the general public in their Marathi (143). His preachings were in simple Marathi language and devotional style. His works such as *Dnyaneswari* (a well written interpretation on *Bhagavat Gita*) and *Amrutanbhav* (*The Nectar of Mystical Experience*) are considered as the milestones of Marathi literature. He stuck with the Advaita Vedanta philosophy and emphasized on Yoga culture. His legacy inspired other Varkari poets such as Eknath and Tukaram. His choice of using vernacular Marathi language for his verses seemed to be a significant alteration from the then existing feudal structure of Sanskrit and the devotional literary ways of aristocratic Hindus.

The Maharashtra Dharma itself was a movement that originated for a better social life for the lower class people of the society. A major exponent of the sect was Gyandev, who became significant because of his portrayal of erotic love between Lord

Krishna and Gopikas of Vrindavan in his text *Gyanneshwari*, which is entirely different from the 'sacred ethical' love described in *Bhagavata Purana*. This evident portrayal of erotic love theme was a new wave to the traditions of Marathi poetry. It can be compared to the 17th century Telugu speaking devadasi poet Muddupalani's text *Radhika-Santhwanam (Appeasing Radha)* which also carries the theme of erotic love between Lord Krishna and Radha.

This legacy and tradition was later followed by many Bhakti poetic saints belonging to the lower classes of the society. They strongly challenged the religious monopoly of the Brahmins and took the spiritual leadership from them, which aimed at social freedom and liberation. Some eminent poets under this category includes Namdev (1269-1344) a calico printer, Eknath (1537-1599) a Brahmin and Tukaram (1609-1650) a Kumbi, who conveyed the ideas for simple worship approaches based on love and devotion.

Class, caste and gender issues were often problematized in the works of several Bhakti poets. Chokhamela, a Marathi Bhakti poet belonging to Mahar cast writes:

Experience liberation sharing meals together

Men women children all

He gives to each whatever they fancy

Lovingly fondling every face. (Chitre 166)

The idea of equality has been presented in a simple and beautiful way. Chokhamela subtly explores various nuances of caste and gender by pointing out that all are equal before God. The very experience of sharing a meal exemplifies the development of culture and civilization, where humans move from animalistic attitudes and share their food. It is clear that Chokhamela as in the famous speech of Martin Luther King Jr

proclaims his dream of a better world where irrespective of caste, creed and gender everyone live in this world harmoniously.

The Telugu Bhakti tradition also involves Vaishnavite Bhakti saints like Annamacharya (1408-1503). Palakurthy Dinakar in his article, “Annamacharya: Exponent of Pada Kavita in Telugu Bhakti Literature” points out that it was Annamacharya who developed the Pada Kavita – the devotional songs (Keerthanams) accessible to the general public. Pada Kavitas are actually a sub-branch of the folk tradition of Karnatic music. The classical section of Carnatic music targeted only the scholarly musicians whereas the folk branch of Carnatic music was intended for the general masses. Through his verses, he repeatedly argues and quarrels with his God, Lord Venkateswara. Annamacharya is recognized as not only an ardent devotee of the Lord, but also a strong social reformer who composes poems on themes like morality and righteousness. He strongly opposed religious dogmas such as spiritual sacrifice and untouchability and declared that a devotee and his relation with the God cannot be measured by determining his/her caste, color or socioeconomic status (136 -137). According to him, God has no special consideration or recognition to any devotee based on his social status or physical beauty. He remarks:

Annamacharya has a social consciousness unlike other *Carnatic* singers such as Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshithaar and Shyama Shastry who are considered to be the *Carnatic* trinity. He covered the whole range of literary reflections through his *keerthans*. (138)

Thummuri Sarath Babu in his essay “Bhakti and its Manifestations in Annamayya” also denotes that even though his hymns carry the essence ‘Sringara’ and ‘Vairgya’, the same hymns contains undercurrents of social reformation. He opposes feudal structure by pointing out that there is no difference between a king who sleeps in a silk mattress and

the peasant who sleeps on the plain floor. He reminds people about the inferior status and mortality of human beings, which is the crux of Bhakti-bhava (140). He writes:

It's like an elephant out of control.

It goes crazy again and again.

It's like mercury, never contained,

Always slipping away.

You live in me. (Rao and Shulman 53)

Annamacharya points out the very idea that God is within oneself. There is no point in searching God elsewhere. What one has in their mind is the reflection of God. The image of God depends upon the image the devotee carry in his/her mind. If the presence of God is within oneself, then it is explicit that God lies in everyone – irrespective of their caste and gender. Here, the philosophical doctrines, all of a sudden take a turn and become a political doctrine. The philosophy explains the God that a Brahmin carries within is the same God that a Sudra also holds in his heart – which means that there is no difference between a Brahmin and a Sudra. It is in this way that poets like Annamacharya take part in the literary revolution that later shook the entire roots of caste hierarchies in India.

Shahabuddin Iraqi in his book, *Bhakti Movement in Medieval India: Social and Political Perspectives* mentions the famous Bhakti saint Kabirdas (1440-1588), who provided new dimensions to the Bhakti movement in India. He never considered himself as either Hindu or Muslim. Instead, in his verses, he stated himself as a Kori (Hindu) and a Julaha (Muslim) and addresses his God as both Ram as well as Rahim. For him, mosque and temple were the same. He was never connected to any particular religious movement, but adhered himself to a universal religion and lived as a householder (*grihastha*) like the Sufi saints. All throughout his life, he practiced the Sufi ideology of

refusal (tark) not from the worldly life, but from the worldly desires, pleasures and materialistic life style. He encouraged the equal status between Brahmins and Sudras, Kabir resisted the medieval ideologies by strictly adhering to his statement that the superiority of a [wo]man is never measured by his birth, but must be decided by his worldly deeds and actions. Kabir is always mentioned for his blending of Indian Vedantas and Muslim Tasawwuf which he brought together effectively. Kabirdas strengthened the waves of Bhakti by incorporating Sufi thoughts of communal harmony and universal brotherhood. He tried to make people aware of the hypocrisies of the priests and their exploitation of people's religious sentiments. (Iraqi 144-145)

Kabir was also a strict critic of the Sultanate rule. Being the contemporary of three Lodi sultans - Bahlul Lodi, Sikander Lodi and Ibrahim Lodi, ranging the period from 1541 to 1526, he harshly criticized the Islamic government and its officials. He declared that 'There is no king equal to God' and 'To use force is tyranny though you call it lawful'. He always derisively talks about the Sultans who enjoys the glory and richness of court life and the other aristocrats, religious saints and chieftains who restlessly paid homage to and worshipped them. Exploitation and disorder in the state administration, particularly of the revenue department was a vital subject in the verses of Kabirdas. Because of his steady voice against the exploitation by revenue officials, Sikander Lodi maintained systems to check the mishandling and misconducts happening in the agricultural sector and ordered to measure the land appropriately and then fix the genuine rent. Sikandari gaz, the land survey form was thus established in the state. The sultan also strictly ordered that no one have the right to pressure the farmers for compulsory labor. Kabir's words carry his aggression and concern against the administrative powers that carried the actual responsibility of continuously exploiting the common public. The target set of Kabir were the money lenders, rich traders and the

Hindu and Muslim feudal land lords. According to him, this endless harassment makes the state a hell on earth. He was against the accumulation of massive wealth (154-155).

Pandit Jawaharal Nehru in his book *Glimpses of World History*, comments about Kabir as:

Kabir became very popular. His songs in Hindi are very well known now even in remote villages in the north. He was neither Hindu nor Muslim: he was both, or something between the two, and his followers came from both religions and all castes. There is a story that when he died his body was covered with a sheet. His Hindu disciples wanted to take it for cremation; his Muslim disciples wanted to bury it. So they argued and quarreled. But when they lifted up the sheet they found that the body for the possession of which they were quarrelling had disappeared and in its place there were some fresh flowers. The story may be quite imaginary, but it is a pretty one. (251)

Kabir's visions and ideologies constantly appeared in the verses of Dadu (1544-1603), a non-conformist and a contemporary of Akbar. Kabir's views on the monotheistic concept of God as a single being, irrespective of religion and caste can be seen reflected in the lyrics of Dadu.

Surdas, was a blind man and a strong devotee of Krishna. His language was Braja Bhasha, a Hindi dialect, spoken mostly in the Northern areas such as Agra, Delhi and Mathura. The western part of his hometown was Vrindavan, where Lord Krishna spent his entire childhood. Even though he was blind, he was able enough to recognize the voice of a person even many years after he heard it. He was a contemporary of Tanzen, the court singer of Emperor Akbar. The emperor himself was a huge admirer of Surdas. Tanzen too admired him and considered Surdas greater than himself. He was born in Delhi and lived his life in Delhi and Gujarat. His musical compositions are

known as *padas*. His guru Vallabhacharya, who advocated 'Pushti Marga' converted Surdas into the same. Being a strong disciple of Vallabhacharya, Surdas too looked at Krishna in the same way as his guru. Hence, for both of them Krishna was a flute-player, a shepherd and the lover of Radha and other *gopikas*. The absurd and irrational pranks of Krishna were celebrated by both of them (Pillai 101-102).

Guru Nanak (1469-1539) was alike Kabir, who rejected asceticism. He founded a new religion which helped in the unification of the labor class of Punjab. According to Nanak, a perfect society should give equal rights to all people to sit together, worship together and dine together. He possessed elaborate political views that entirely helped for a new spiritual renewal in the society. He was a strict critic of the administrative power and declared that the true king is God. It was God who had assigned some people on earth as emperors, kings and sultans to look after the people just like he created some other people to be traders, homemakers and even beggars. All these power structures are mere products of the Almighty. Nanak's vision on Kingship is parallel to the ideology of Sufi saints. For Nanak, a king shall not be a person who is always concerned with enjoying the societal powers and accumulating financial wealth and richness. History notes several circumstances where Nanak laments after witnessing the war between Afghans and Mughals under the leadership of Babur. The massive destruction of life and property was much painful for him. There are evidences to prove his statements after witnessing the great war of 1521. He states that the war was not only confined to the battlefield that killed thousands of men and animals, but also spread to the villages where many women and innocents were attacked. He further mentioned that it was the Pathans and Mughals who mainly contributed to the ruin of Hindustan. (Iraqi 168-169)

Nanak wrote:

More than the sacred waters of Ganga, Yamuna

And Tribeni mingled at the Sangam;
 More than the seven seas,
 More than charity, almsgiving and prayer
 Is the knowledge of Eternity that is the Lord.’
 Nanak says: He who has worshipped the Great Giver of Life
 Has earned more merit than those who
 Bathe at the sixty and eighty places of pilgrimage. (Singh 209)

Here, Guru Nanak celebrates the idea of spiritual divinity by portraying certain misconceptions of common people. He points out that those geographical spaces that are considered ‘holy’ are not as holy as God himself. For him, Ganga and Yamuna are mere places but the actual holiness lies within the heart of the being as God lies in the heart. Places of pilgrimage are just a shell not the actual life/divine. On a different level, he attacks the existing notions spread by the priestly class that God lies inside the temple. By attributing more merit to the one who directly worships God than through the mediators (priestly class), Guru Nanak is lighting the lamp of a subtle revolution against Indian feudalism.

Shahabuddin Iraqi remarks that like Kabirdas, Nanak also criticized the Muslim rulers of his period and openly called them human butchers. But at the same time, the disciples of Guru Nanak were in cordial relationship with the later Mughal ruler Akbar, who maintained a secularist attitude to all the people of his state. But this friendship was lost after the death of Akbar, especially after Jahangir came to the Mughal throne. Iraqi further observes that Nanak and his followers never believed in the system of idol worship, where God takes a physical shape. For them, God was omnipotent. Nanak’s teachings to his disciples proves that he asked them to be ideal men and live as householders depending upon their own labor (181-182).

A massive reformation by the Sikhs happened when they started institutions such as 'Sangat' and 'Pangat' which aimed at maintaining equal status and welfare by conducting programmes including mass dining. This movement made a reformative success in the age old societal conventions and promoted religious secularism based on liberal values. It helped in the promotion of a social solidarity among all the people of the society irrespective of caste, creed and gender. Moreover, in the writings of Nanak, women received a considerable space. They received respect and dignity (Iraqi 182).

During the 17th century, poets such as Prannath from Bundelkhand (the region is now spread across present Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh), emerged both as a spiritual leader and a social reformer. Prannath and his disciples had the parallel beliefs of Sikhs such as denying idol worship, mass dining irrespective of social and economic differences, and considering God of all religions is the one and the same. Like Nanak, he was against the Muslim rulers, but not against the Islam religion (Iraqi 225-227). Iraqi in his book, *Bhakti Movement in Medieval India: Social and Political Perspectives* remarks that:

The theory of the comparative universality of Hinduism with other religions like Islam and Christianity, as expressed in Prannath's *Kayamat Nama* and Ramdas's *Anandvanabhavana*, was, in its practical form, a political statement. It changed the nature and scope of their movements from reformist to revivalist. The infusion of a strong militant Hindu revivalism was also deliberately made to provide a favorable background for getting regional political independence for themselves and their political heads. (227-228)

Goswami Tulsidas is one among the renowned figures of Hindi literature. His magnum opus, *Ramacharitramanas* still enjoys the classical status. This text not only deals with Ayodhya king Rama, but also acts as a social and political testimony when the author

describes the protagonist as a brave warrior, a dutiful and loving son and as an affectionate brother. The text does not attribute any divine attitudes to Rama. He never describes him as God or incarnation of lord Vishnu. The poet therefore has to deal with politics, society, war and human relations. Tulsidas moves into all the above areas and presents Sree Rama as an ideal figure. His early verses portray carnal love or sensuous personal experiences. They also celebrates intense longing for love (Pillai 139).

It was during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that the Vaishnavite Bhakti movement spread all over the North East Indian regions. The most significant person of the movement in North East was Sankara Deva in Assam (Pillai 175). During his childhood days he was highly impressed by *Bhagavatha* – the great Vaishnava Purana. He began writing verses and hymns during these days. The constant reading of *Bhagavatha Purana* made him refuse the Saivite principles and accept Vaishnavism as the philosophy of his life. He infused some of the prominent Vedic thoughts into Vaishnavism. He used hymns and theoretical books to propagate his Vaishnavite cult (Pillai 178-179).

His followers, with their own distinct faith and methods of worship, were fast becoming a new community or sect in the far-flung areas of Kamarupa, the region which consists of present day Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and their neighbourhoods (Pillai 180). He never directly criticized the issue of caste. But by accommodating outcastes (Muslims and other lower castes) he frontally exposed his mentality on the topic. Sankara Deva and his followers submitted to the new religious and societal order and therefore the North Eastern areas were largely liberated from the chains of orthodox rituals and superstitions. By refusing the exercises of great intellectuals and scholars, human/animal sacrifices and the wide rites and rituals, they preached the uncomplicated way of Bhakti that appealed to them. They hence refused the scholarly Sanskrit of

Brahminic tradition which the ordinary public found difficult to understand. In addition to the above easier and striking thoughts, the beautiful lyrical music of Sankara Deva poems and hymns fascinated them (Pillai 185-186).

The role of Chaithanya in the Bhakti movement of Indian subcontinent is always outstanding. He used Sanskrit to write his verses which made him different from the other Bhakti exponents who expressed their teachings in vernacular languages. It was the magical ambiance of Gaya (where he reached during a pilgrimage) and the magic of yogi Eswarapuri that made him enlightened. His major methods of propagating Vaishnavism were by singing group songs and conducting parades and thus increasing the number of followers. He went to the Jagannath temple at Puri in Orissa and stayed there for a long time worshipping Jagannatha. It was his disciple Nityananda, who provided a philosophical base for his Vaishnavist principles. It was the same disciple who carried Vaishnavism to the Bengal lands. Chaithanya's Vaishnavism gave prominence to emotions rather than several philosophical ideologies. Both of them opposed caste issues. But Chaithanya never emphasized it like his disciple. But Nithyananda enriched this outlook and hence made it as a major propoganda of Vaishnavism. The psalms and hymns of Chaithanya are called as *Padavali*. Jayadeva (author of *Gita Govinda*), Vidyapati and Chandidas were the three major characters that attracted and inspired Chaithanya (Pillai 192-194).

Jayadeva was the court poet of king Lakshmanasena. His *Gita Govinda* is one of the finest and sweetest verses of Sanskrit. It frequently transgresses the intelligent and sensible limits writers generally adopt in their texts and titillates the compassion of the readers as well as devotees by the erotic images of relationship between Krishna and Radha (Pillai 195-196). Vidyapathi Takur belonged to the Mithila region of North East Bihar. He could handle Mythili (his mother tongue), Sankrit and the *Ababrahmsa* of

Bengali. His poetic genius gained him the title of Poet Cuckoo of Mythili (Pillai 197-198). Chandidas was the most favourite of Chaithanya. He never sang against caste system, but his daily affairs of life prove that his caste was never a matter for him. His love life provides lyrical insights of love, which never tend to recognize the societal barriers. He always equated and compared his love to the divine love of Radha and Krishna (Pillai 200-201).

The Bhakti movement of Andhra had no pioneers like those in Karnataka. As the Telugu etymology speaks, Andhra had the tradition of worshipping Shiva (Saivism) from 6th century CE (Pillai 215). The Telugu literature rose to fame with the works of Bhakti poet Nannayya, the court poet and a philosopher. This was the period when Buddhism was 'absorbed' by Hinduism and the former lost its spirit (Pillai 216). Hindu people were classified into Saivites, Vaishnavites, Veerasaivites and so on. It was a part of Nannayya's endeavour to restore the Hindu tradition. For this he started to translate the *Puranas* and Epics into his vernacular language (Telugu). This job was allocated to him by the king. Nannayya along with Narayana Bhatta worked hard to develop the syntax, semantics and grammar of Telugu (Pillai 218-219).

Tikkana was the next prominent poet after Nannayya. He was a diplomat, warrior, philosopher and a statesman. He used his diplomatic talents in religious issues too. He advocated the concept of *Harihara*natha—merging Hari (Vishnu) and Hara (Shiva) to unite the Vaishnavites and Saivites. It makes both gods as a single godhead. He translated *Ramayana* into Telugu with the name *Nirvachanethara Ramayana* and also fifteen chapters of *Mahabharata*. He uses 'Jana Telugu' – the language of common man. (Pillai 220-221)

Dadu, an Ahmedabad born Brahmin of sixteenth century, and his followers occupy a significant place in the Bhakti history of North India. He was a non-conformist *nirguna* bhakta and was too much dedicated to Hindu-Muslim brotherhood. Emperor Akbar, who was his contemporary was much attracted to and pleased with his teachings and principles. He only recognized God – *satguru*. He had great disapproval for the ‘human gurus’ who misread the original ideas of God. He openly claims that God and Allah are same, both his gurus. He was largely influenced by Kabir. He never valued the conventional scriptures and found them all distorted and corrupted by the so called ‘believers’. Hence, he himself composed his own compilation of holy theories from various religions and sources of Bhakti, which is known as *Panchavani*, the teachings of five various saints. It contains the aphorisms of Dadu, Namdev, Kabir, Ramdas and Mandas (Pillai 234-235). He was against the *swadharma* principle of Lord Krishna since he extolled the value and inevitability of labour. His spiritual ideas convey that the glory of life can be achieved not only by preaching and practicing spiritual ideas, but also when one lives for the humanity in general. This supports his idea which reflects caste and such religious discriminations and all other existing forms of inequality. His love and affection were not restricted to human beings alone, but embraced the whole universe (Pillai 236).

Several Marxist thinkers tried to explain Bhakti movement from social and economic perspectives. According to them the ideology of Bhakti is a complete submission of the individual as well as a rebellion. It was D. D. Kosambi, an Indian historian who first found the connection between Bhakti and feudalism in his text *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*. Dr. Irfan Habib, another Indian historian in his book *Agrarian Sector in Mughal India*, points out that by 14th century the villages and towns of India witnessed a great development with the

expansion of industry, trade and commerce. This resulted in the widespread expansion of artisan class. The rulers and the nobles of the society demanded the production of new goods and services which, even though indirectly, helped in the economic upliftment of artisans to a certain degree. New artisans adopted new professional techniques. The lower class people found their interest to take part in this social development so that they could produce new goods which would eventually help them to achieve a new social status and dignity in the caste hierarchy system. When this upliftment happened, the artisan class attained a self-development which resulted in the breaking of caste-class issues, especially in the Indian plateaus. This development among the artisans, in a way, helped the Muslim invasions to a great extent, because, the artisans of the urban areas were actually driving hard to attain liberation and autonomy from the manacles of feudal powers (Pandey 55).

Substantiating it with the theory of Carl Marx, the forces of production and consumption has a greater significance in determining the growth and development of a community. These factors and its fluctuations can considerably change the total character of a society. By pointing out this, Dr. Rekha Pande in her journal article *The Bhakti Movement – A Historiographical Critique* remarks, “Relations which human beings enter into during the process of social life possess a specific historical and transitory character. The distribution of relations essentially coincides with the production relations”. (Pande 55-56)

Hiren Gohain in his paper entitled “The Labyrinth of Bhakti: On Some Questions of Medieval Indian History”, points out that when trade and commerce improved and the market value of products grew, it provided a self-respect and autonomy for the artisans. It also gave them new courage to think highly about their small professions. It is quite worth to mentioning here that several prominent Bhakti

poets; for instance, Kabir, who was a weaver by profession, Ravidas, worked as a shoe maker, Dadu lived as a cotton-carder were artisans. All of them were honest in their respective professions and found satisfaction in gaining economic independence and autonomy. They mocked feudal powers and worked together for the advancement of the society (1970-1972).

The entry of Bhakti literature into the Kerala zone occurred during the beginning of seventeenth century. The early literature of Kerala was written in either Sanskrit or in a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam. The major themes of these texts were carnal desire, prostitution and so on. Many texts appeared with themes and stories borrowing from the great epics and Puranas, but none of them were composed in the vernacular language, Malayalam. The medieval Kerala society itself was facing a great moral decadence because of the extreme feudal structure, continuous wars between the local kings, superstitious rites and ritual and so on (Pillai 238-240).

Professor Udaya Kumar in his article *Self, Body and Inner Sense: Some Reflections on Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan* says:

Caste provided the primary grid for differentiation in nineteenth century Kerala. Clothing, jewellery, hairstyle, naming, food – all these constituted an elaborate sign system that had as its basis the system of caste differentiation. The spectacle of the body in public spaces was regulated through a system of distance pollution – the sacredness of the space and purity of the body being dependent on restrictions of access to other bodies in terms of visibility, touch, hearing, and clearly specified distances. (Kumar 248)

Udayakumar points out the idea of ‘pollution’ that prevailed in early Kerala society. This was purely based on caste system. The idea of untouchability cannot be merely

restricted to the idea of ‘touch’; it was extended to the idea of what should be seen or heard in between the upper class and the lower class.

P. Govinda Pillai in his book *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism* points out that the Bhakti poetic tradition in Kerala began with Cherusseri Namboodiri who lived in the early fifteenth century. Cherusseri’s melodious verses of his *Krishnagatha/ Krishnappattu* in simple Malayalam language brought a poetic beauty of vernacular language for the first time in Kerala. The entire work contains the story of Lord Krishna from the very beginning from his childhood, to adolescence and youth. The magnificent musical composition of *Krishnagatha* in a delighting lullaby meter and the poet’s intense devotion for Lord Krishna makes the text an exceptionally popular Bhakti work (Pillai 239).

Pillai also talks about the Niranam poets of early Malayalam literature who tried to free the language from the bounds of Tamil. History says that two of these poets hail from Niranam in today’s Pathanamthitta district whereas another hails from Vellangallur in present Thrissur district. Bhakti was the common aspect that brought these three poets together under the same title. The Kannassa poets also had parallel intentions. Pillai quotes, “Not only did they part company with the Manipravalam language style, but also its carnal themes to set in motion the Bhakti movement which was brought to its final form by Thunchath Ezhuthachan” (Pillai 239-240).

Some critics remark that Ezhuthachan used the ‘Kilippattu meter’ to compose his poems because of the reason that he was born as a Chakkala Nair to the Sudra community, who was denied of writing scriptural texts, which came under the complete authority of Brahmins (Pillai 241). Ezhuthachan tried to incorporate the principles of Dharma and Bhakti in his text *Adhyatmaramayanam Kilippattu*. He intelligently used several Sanskrit words in his works blending it with Malayalam, which makes

Ezhuthachan a master in the semantic sphere. As per Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Rama is a perfect ruler and a devoted son. But when it comes to Ezhuthachan's text, the character Rama is portrayed as the perfect embodiment of Lord Vishnu. He makes Rama a perfect entity of true devotion and repeats the term Lord Rama again and again in many situations. In short, because of the reason that the 'Kilippattu meter' was largely used in the folk songs of Kerala, Ezhuthachan's works of art can be recognized as a pure product of the folk tradition (Pillai 242-243).

He was followed by Poonthanam Namboodiri (1547-1640), who penned the splendid lyrics: *When the young Krishna is playing in your heart/ why should one have another kid?* (Pillai 246). Even though Poonthanam was a Bhakti poetic follower of Ezhuthachan, his composing style and diction were quite different from that of the elder. He used simple colloquial Malayalam to describe his devotion to the Lord. Even though he was born as a Brahmin, he critiqued the Brahmin supremacy and their customs. He sharply ridicules and mocks the Brahmins for their 'feudal foolishness' of their caste hierarchy and for portraying themselves as the supreme God (Pillai 246-247).

Poonthanam writes:

Some Brahmins, filled to bursting with their rank,

Think Brahma himself not up to their mark.

Some of high caste, greedy for wealth and fame,

Perform the sacred rites only in name. (Nambisan 61)

Arundhati Subramaniam in the Introduction of her book *Eating God: A Book of Bhakti Poetry*, explains how a Bhakta/Devotee is born in a medieval society. According to her findings, the aristocratic language Sanskrit was never suited to all the classes of society, particularly to those spiritual minded people who hailed from the lower strata of the medieval social system. Sanskrit was never found healthy and flexible with their

interpretations of religion and God. Hence, this new medieval group of spiritual section comprised both men and women, irrespective of gender, caste and economic and social status. They include artisans, potters, weavers, basket makers, cobblers, musicians, palanquin bearers, milkmen, priests, tax-collectors, plebeians, boatmen, scholars, pariahs and princesses. They had nothing similar in their characters and lifestyles (xi-xii).

Moreover, they lived during different periods at different geographical regions from east to west and north to south, in the great Indian subcontinent. Arundhati remarks:

They were incendiary dreamers who refused to be mere worshippers, anarchic visionaries who refused to be mere inheritors. They were less god-fearing than god-possessed, less content to receive an ancient wisdom than impatient to express their own tempestuous interiority. It was a strange condition, this bhakti, this unappeasable lust, this clamorous yearning, this greed. (Subramaniam xii)

It is to be noted that Poonthanam is from Brahmin community and his criticism of caste hierarchies should be viewed as a criticism from within. Kerala has seen several such examples in later centuries – the revolutionary life and works of Sri. V. T.

Bhattathirippad is just one example.

Henceforth a true Bhakta/Devotee, with a new social and religious outlook was born. By singing in his/her own vernacular language of the heart, they quickly found a place in the socio-political sphere and became a powerful leader and spokesman of the time. Bhakti poets had the peculiarity of demanding their needs to God through their lyrics. Through their devotional compositions they beautifully sang, grieved, cursed, enjoyed and even celebrated their happiness, joy, love, lust, desires and even their hunger and sorrows.

A.K. Ramanujan in his book *Speaking of Siva*, describes a true devotee as a person who is not content to worship God in a particular word, name or by performing a

specific rite or ritual. Theology should never give any detailed explanation for God. The only thing that matters is that the devotee must possess the Supreme God and vice versa. A perfect devotee can sing songs, compose lyrics, perform dance, paint pictures, build monuments, etc., to embody God in all likely ways that he could (29-30).

To conclude, the relationship between God and the devotee is spiritually intense. God could be supreme, sublime and immortal. Apart from that according to Bhakti poets' God also possess the characters of a family man. Therefore, God can be treated in a way one treats his/her beloved as a member of one's own family. So to communicate with God, they choose local vernacular homely language that speaks from the bottom of the heart, avoiding standardized Sanskrit. Often, their devotion gets mixed with eroticism. The Bhakti fervor got exposed with the use of *Madhurya Bhakti*, *Shringara bhava* or sometimes sexual love and carnal desires. These features contribute to the Bhakti poems making it the richest poetry in the medieval period.

The Bhakti saints continuously revolted against the entire regulations of all institutionalized religions. The kind of spirituality which the Bhakti poets emphasized was based on the divinity of human spirit. This philosophy was quite different from that of the modern thinkers such as Tagore who believed that humans are born as sinners and therefore has to live his whole life in regret. Caste discrimination based on feudal hierarchy seemed to be the most crucial issue of the medieval period. It was never confined to the sphere of socio-religious but broadened into the areas of trade, economics and commerce. The Bhakti poets condemned and criticized the exploitation of peasants and laborers by the feudal powers. Thus they strongly opposed the outlooks and perceptions of medieval feudalism. They strongly believed that the individual can communicate with God or be one with God without the help of any priestly class. Thus,

their attitude can be considered as a protest against the existing social norms which was propagated mainly by the upper classes.

Even though being religious leaders and social reformers, these saints led happy domestic lives with their family. Tulsidas, Namdev, Ravidas and so on are some examples. They earned their daily livelihood without accepting any presentations and charity from their followers or begging. Instead, they worked hard and attempted to raise the quality and dignity of labor. At the same time, the Bhakti saints like Kabirdas or Surdas always kept a fine distance from the ruling class (monarchical power) because of the reason that they criticized and doubted the honesty and generosity of the rulers. They also warned their disciples not to get too connected with the rulers and wealthy people. These instances make clear that the protest of Bhakti leaders were not only limited to the religious issues but also encompassed the socio-political, economical and administrative levels of the society, making many Bhakti saints enter into the sphere of politics.