Chapter 2

Mysticism and the Bhakti Tradition

“There are those who, by meditation, behold the supreme Spirit in the heart with the help of their refined and sharp intellect; others realise it through the discipline of knowledge, and still others, through the discipline of action, i.e. Karma yoga.”

_Bhagwat Gita_

Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism in her _Practical Mysticism_ as “… the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in a greater or lesser degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment.” (3) It is a practical experience and not mere theory. Mysticism is the art of living perfectly. It is the art of knowing the entire world through a thorough knowledge of one’s own self. It may be described as a quest for, and the rendezvous with, the Supreme Soul. R.L. Singh opines in his article, “The Concept of Spirituality” from _Ethics and Epics_:

For having a correct conception of spirituality, the attempt should be made to decipher the nature of the inner life of a person which is underlying all the spiritual traditions and which also gives meaning and sustenance to the external observances, doctrines and dogmas of the conflicting traditions. (213)

Ego is the veil that covers up the Supreme Soul in each individual soul. Mysticism is that experience which helps one shed the veil of ego and selfishness and endow selflessness and generosity, leading towards godliness and the final communion with the Supreme. Mysticism helps one attain the supreme state where there remains no duality – the _Upanishadic_ state of ‘Tat twam asi’ or ‘AhamBrahmasmi’. It is a state of complete freedom from the bondage of physical as
Mysticism is a state that may be achieved in any field, when one crosses the physical and the mental boundaries of duality and achieves oneness in thought and expression – whether it is in Science, Technology, Music, Painting, Sculpting, Dance, or the like. To the lover, mysticism is a quest for, and the final union with, the beloved. To the man of action (karma yogi) it is the secret of perfect action; to the sculptor it is the pursuit of perfection and the summation of his skills in giving life to stone; to the scholar it is the search for truth and the finding of it; to the poet it is the right blend of rhyme and rhythm that culminates in the perfect expression of the poet’s emotions; to the pious, mysticism is the search for the Supreme and the journey back to Godhead which leads to a state of transcendental bliss (paramananda). It refers to the state of searching and finding; attempting and attaining complete self-mastery or realisation. It is the end of illusion and the dawn of enlightenment. To quote Sri Aurobindo from *The Synthesis of Yoga*, “Every such form [of human activity] tends towards a harmonised complexity and totality which again breaks apart into various channels of special effort and tendency, only to unite once more in a larger and more puissant synthesis.” (5)

Mysticism is the central element in all religions; it is in fact the highest expression of religion. Margaret Smith says in *An Introduction to Mysticism*, “…mysticism, going beyond religion, aspires to intimate union with the Divine, to a penetration of the Divine within the soul and to a disappearance of the individuality, with all its modes of acting, thinking and feeling, in the Divine substance. The mystic seeks to pass out of all lower forms of reality to become Being itself.” (3-4)
All mystical experience surpasses human comprehension. Sri Aurobindo, in *The Synthesis of Yoga*, remarks about mysticism thus, “…transcendent Bliss, unimaginable and inexpressible by the mind and speech, is the nature of the Ineffable. That broods immanent and secret in the whole universe and in everything in the universe.” (594)

It is not easy for any human being to undergo the ultimate mystical experience of an all-time union with the Supreme, and since the experience is beyond the mind and speech, it is very difficult for those chosen few who have had that experience to express it within the ken of human language. Mystical experience is such an abstract occurrence that it is highly improbable to express in concrete syntax. As Lalitha Sinha words it in her *The Garden of Love*, “In most religious traditions the mystical experience is established as ineffable and inconceivable, precisely because it is a transcendental, other-worldly, and extra-ordinary experience.” (1)

In spite of the difficulty of a concrete expression of an abstract thought, poets and philosophers have tried to give voice to their mystical experience in words. In the opinion of William Johnston it is a journey of love and he expresses in the book titled *The Inner Eye of Love*, “Love is the motivation and driving force behind the mystical journey” (19).

Mystical thinkers have perceived the ultimate Truth in different angles and through diverse emotions in various paradigms. Hence, when they express this sublime concept in concrete terms, it happens to be not only multifarious, but also contradictory at times. For example, when we consider the Romantic poets, Wordsworth experienced Divine presence in Nature; whereas in Blake’s opinion, “Nature was a hindrance” and he was more impressed by “imagination”. Although all
mystical thinkers seem to be giving diverse views, there is no denial among the sorority of mystical thinkers that there is an underlying unity within this diversity. This element of unity is the basis of mystical realisation. All mystical experience thrives on this fundamental intuitive comprehension of unity or a sense of oneness in the universe. This knowledge is the ultimate source of all mystical thought and all thinkers of mysticism would echo the idea enumerated in the *Bhagwat Gita* thus:

There is true knowledge. Learn thou it is this:

To see one changeless Life in all the Lives,

And in the Separate, One Inseparable. (Ch 18)

Hence all mystics zero down to the concept of one divine life that is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient. They also highlight the transient and fleeting nature of all external manifestation and emphasise on the perennial and permanent nature of the spirit within.

Mysticism is defined differently by different writers and critics. Caroline F.E. Spurgeon remarks in her book titled *Mysticism in English Literature* that “Mysticism is a term so irresponsibly applied in English that it has become the first duty of those who use it to explain what they mean by it.” (1) An understanding of a mystic’s way of life helps in a better comprehension of the term ‘mysticism’. The characteristic features of a mystic arise from the fundamentals of realisation. In the western world, the Greeks were the initiators of the scholastic genre of pursuing mystical knowledge. “Mysticism is religion in its most concentrated and exclusive form. It is that attitude of the mind in which all other relations are swallowed up in the relation of the soul to God.” (42) mentions E. Caird in *Mysticism in Religion*. In his book *The Inner Eye of Love*, William Johnston points out, “…mysticism is a human experience limited to no
one religion: it is, I believe, the high point in man’s search for fulfillment, authenticity and self-realisation.” (61) He further ascertains, “…every religion has its holy books which are the source of its mysticism.” (43).

Matthew Fox propounds in his *Christian Mystics*:

Jesus was a mystic shaking up his religion and the Roman Empire; Buddha was a mystic who shook up the prevailing Hinduism of his day; Gandhi was a mystic shaking up Hinduism and challenging the British Empire; Martin Luther King Jr. shook up his tradition and America’s segregationist society….Deep down, each one of us is a mystic. When we tap into that energy we become alive again and we give birth. From the creativity that we release is born the prophetic vision and work that we all aspire to release as our gift to the world. We want to serve in whatever capacity we can. (3)

In her essay “The Nature and Meaning of Mysticism” from the book titled *Understanding Mysticism*, Margaret Smith iterates, “Mysticism is not to be regarded as a religion in itself, but rather as the most vital element in all true religions….” (20) There is consensus with regard to writers and scholars of Mysticism – that although Mysticism and Religion are closely related terms, they are not synonymous. The endeavor of all religions of the world is the union with the Divine, and the zenith of all mystical experience is Divine communion. All great religions of the world have their own unfathomable mystical conventions. Religion is only a path that leads to the Supreme Spirit. Tagore says in the *Gitanjali*, “The traveler has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end./ My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said ‘Here art thou!’” (23)
Poets of the mystical strain voice their opinion that ego is a crucial encumbrance in the spiritual odyssey. To refer to the Ego, the veil that separates the seeker from the Sought, Rumi sings, “I long to escape the prison of my ego.” (*The Agony and Ecstasy*) The shedding of the Ego is mentioned by Tagore in the *Gitanjali* thus: “My song has put off her adornments/ She has no pride of dress and decoration/ Ornaments would mar our union; they would come between thee and me; their jingling would drown thy whispers.” (20) Here ‘dress and decoration’ refer to the vain glory which enhances one’s ego and is an impediment in the path to self realisation.

Great mystics like Holy mother Mary, Robert Lax, St. Catherine of Siena, Francis of Assissi, Teresa of Avila, Gerard Manley Hopkins (Christian tradition); Jalalludin Rumi, Attar, Sai, Sanai, Moinuddeen Chishti (*Sufi* tradition) and Adi Shankara, Jayadeva, Andal, Meera Bai, Narayana Bhattathiri (*Bhakti* tradition) were blessed with mystical experience. They in turn, became the beacon lights for those who chose to follow the path of a seeker of the ultimate Truth. These mystics were really great in that they did not keep the secret of the ultimate experience to themselves. Instead, they shared it with the true seekers of the world in their own way. In this sphere, down the line of poets with mystical experience or an urge to experience the ultimate truth, we find the great poets – Kabir and Tagore. Kabir undoubtedly holds a prime position in the list of *Bhakti-Sufi* mystics from India; there may be a doubt regarding Tagore as he is known more as a nationalistic poet, dramatist, short story writer and novelist. In his book, *101 Mystics of India*, V K Subramanian lists out the lineage of mystics from India, beginning with the 2500 B.C. Sage Agastya down to the more recent poets and other mystics like Suddhananda Bharati and J. Krishnamurthy. He includes Tagore in the lineage and introduces the stalwart thus, “Rabindranath Tagore, the first Indian to get the Nobel Prize for
Literature, though a multifaceted creative genius was basically a mystic-philosopher-poet, who saw the universe with all its colour and beauty as the joyful expression and manifestation of God.” (195)

Most of these great mystics found poetry as the potent vehicle to communicate their thoughts and to express the inexpressible. There could have been many reasons for this – perhaps these mystics were basically poets and hence an inclination towards the art of poetry; perhaps the subject matter [mystical] demanded an excessive use of imagery and symbolism, and poetry formed the most convenient mode of expression; the rhyme and rhythm in poetry which gives the effect of ‘mantra’ also adds to the choice of poetry as a vehicle to convey mystical experience; and above all, the incomprehensible and abstract concept like the union with the Divine is difficult to be expressed in concrete prosaic terms, hence the choice of poetry. Such an elusive subject matter inevitably calls for the subtler poetic genre for self-expression.

**Mysticism in English Literature:**

Literature is the representation of life. In *An Introduction to the Study of Literature*, Hudson declares that Literature is fundamentally “an expression of life through the medium of language” (10). Hence literature may be seen to expose all the aspects of life including the concept of religion or spirituality. There is no denying the fact that mystical experience is beyond the scope of language and can be best expressed only through silence. Yet many great mystics have conveyed the indescribable and unexplainable experience through the use of words and symbols, generally through the medium of poetry.

It is believed that in England, 14th Century saw the peak of mystical expression with writers like Margery Kempe, Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, Dame,
Julian of Norwich, and the unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which is one of the richest treatises on mysticism in English. William Johnston has referred to this great work in his book *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing*. The book mentions that God is far above our knowledge and so hidden in a cloud of ‘Unknowability’. We can arrive at the supreme earthly knowledge of God only by emptying the mind of all created images and temporal affections. Another remarkable contribution to the subject of mysticism in English is Thomas a’Kempis’ *The Imitation of Christ*. William Law expressed the concept of Divinity in Duty. Law is renowned for his books – *The Spirit of Love* and *The Spirit of Prayer*.

Later, the 17th Century witnessed an upheaval of mystical consciousness that was revealed in the writings of Isaak Walton, Sir Thomas Browne, Robert Herrick, George Herbert and Traherne. A deep research into the concept of Mysticism in English literature brings one to the realisation that it is fundamentally based on different paths. In the words of Caroline Spurgeon as recorded in the *Mysticism in English Literature*, “We have grouped together our English writers who are mystical in thought, according to the five main pathways by which they have seen the Vision: Love, Beauty, Nature, Wisdom, or Devotion.” (42) There are further variations within these groups, based on the conception, interpretation and the method of approach. For example, Shelley and Browning are both poets who shared mystical strain and are known as love-mystics – to them, love is the ultimate link between God and man and the path to solve the mystery of life. To Shelley it came through intuition and imagination; whereas to Browning, it was knowledge.

The seventeenth century saw the dawn of mystical verse in England. The School of Donne was well-known for the verses with religious undertones and these
poets were known as Divine poets. The other poets of the School are - George Herbert, Richard Crashaw and Henry Vaughan. These poets were also known as the Metaphysical poets as they engaged in versification with a metaphysical tone. A brief study of these poets forms the basis for the study of mysticism:

**John Donne (1572 – 1631)** Death is perhaps the harshest shock that jolts man out of his slumber and makes him realise the true nature of the universe and the futility of mundane human endeavours. As it dawned to Siddhartha when he saw dead bodies strewn across the battlefield, and he started his odyssey towards the Eternal Truth; as Tagore embarked on his spiritual quest when he faced the sudden death of two of his children, his brother, and his wife - so was Donne jolted into the quest by his wife’s demise. His wife passed away in 1617 and he was left behind with the sole charge of seven children. This bereavement shocked him to the realisation of the meaninglessness of life and he embarked on his spiritual quest. He longed for God’s grace and wrote the *Holy Sonnet: Since She Whome I Loved hath Paid her Last Debt* to commemorate his wife’s death. To Donne, his wife was an embodiment of all virtues and when she went to heaven, he also directed his attention towards heaven, the seat of the Divine Lord. Thus his wife became instrumental in Donne’s spiritual quest. He chose poetry as the vehicle to convey his concept of mysticism. The concepts like the relationship between lovers, the body and the soul and sensual and spiritual love have found articulation in his metaphysical poems. His religious poems include, *Holy Sonnet, A Hymne to Christ; A Hymne to God, my God; A Hymne to God the Father; The Anniversaries* and *In My Sicknesse*.

**George Herbert (1593-1633)** Herbert subjected himself completely to the will of Jesus, his master in his journey towards spirituality. Prior to this surrender, he too
underwent strife, doubt and spiritual conflicts. The outcome of these conflicts between his soul and the Divine has been recorded in the form of verses. Herbert understood the importance of love for God-realisation. Some of his well-known works that convey his message of Divine love include – *Affliction, Paradise, Dullness* and *Death*. In his *Affliction*, Herbert expresses his concept of Divine love thus:

> Ah my dear God; though I am
> Clean forgot
> Let me not love thee, if I love
> thee not  

(ll.65-66)

**Richard Crashaw (1612 – 1649)** Crashaw is most known for his sensuous temperament that resulted in his mystical writings. Traditional Christian symbolism formed the fundamental around which he set his themes. He considered Herbert as his master in this. The most renowned mystical poem of his is *Prayer: An Ode*, wherein he conceptualises spiritual marriage and mystical death thus:

> Delicious Deaths; soft exhalations
> of souls ; dear and divine annihilations;
> A thousand unknown rites of
> joys and rarefy’d delights.

**Henry Vaughan (1622 – 1695)** Vaughan, like Crashaw, was also highly influenced by Herbert. He may also be called a nature mystic just like Wordsworth - nature was a symbol of God for him. He experienced mystical moorings even in common natural expressions like flowers and trees. His celebrated mystical poems include, *The Retreat, The World*, and *They are all gone into the World of Light*. Like all nature mystics, Vaughan also reveals an intense craving for perfection. Through
his poems, he expresses the concept of the fall of man and the veil that objects his view of the world he faces. Vaughan looks for God in Nature and expresses his view thus:

When yet I had not walk’d above
A mile, or two from my first Love,
And looking back (at that short space),
Could see a glimpse of His bright face;
When on some gilded cloud or flower
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
And in those weaker glories spy

Some shadows of eternity (The Retreat, ll. 7-14)

Vaughan’s poetry brings out his consciousness of sin and the need for spiritual illumination. Therefore, as mentioned in the Metaphysical Poets, “his poetry is full of antithetical terms like world and God, time and eternity, light and darkness, day and night, cloud and star.” (108) His mystic strain is obvious throughout his poetry. He is restless to tear off the veil of sin that separates him from God and to reach the realm of God.

William Blake (1757 – 1827) He was the first among the greatest poet-mystics of the Romantic Age. He conveyed his ideas not only in words but in form and colour. His mystical poem Jerusalem deals with death which leads to resurrection and to life in Unity. He says that when all return to God they will awake in His bosom to the life of Immortality. The most famous of his works are The Song of Innocence and The Song of Experience. They show the two contrary states of the human soul, namely, ‘good’ and ‘evil’. His perception of the spiritual realm is conveyed by
juxtaposing the image and the mystical concept. He tries to drive home the truth that ‘good’ as well as ‘evil’ is illusory. Blake’s *The Lamb* and *The Tiger* symbolise the two contrary states of the individual soul. They also signify the two contradictory aspects of the Divine – the lamb representing the benevolent and the tiger referring to the malevolent aspects.

**William Wordsworth (1770 - 1850)** He is unanimously acknowledged as a nature-mystic. He felt his oneness with the Creator in his contemplation of Nature. The Life in Nature brought him ultimate bliss and peace. In his *Prelude* he writes:

> With bliss ineffable,
> I felt the sentiment of Being spread
> O’er all that, lost beyond the reach of thought
> And human knowledge, to the human eye
> Invisible, yet liveth to the heart. (Book Second: *School Time*)

His earlier poems reveal him as a pantheist. We notice a shift towards theism only in his later phase. In *Christian Mysticism*, W.R. Inge refers to Wordsworth as “the greatest prophet of contemplative mysticism.”(305) The fundamental disposition in his poems is contemplative. The mystical element is persistent in his later poems especially in *The Prelude*, *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*, and *Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey*. In all these poems he emphasises the ‘wise passiveness’ which is essential for spiritual growth. His mysticism is deeply rooted in his conception of Nature. For him Nature is a manifestation of an active principle which resides in the mind of man. He communicates with Nature through his senses which feed his soul. Therefore, without exaggeration, Wordsworth describes Nature
as, “The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being” in his poem *Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey*.

The language of the poem shows the authenticity of a vivid and live experience. Wordsworth’s mystical intuition is communicable unlike that of some mystics because he is essentially a sensuous poet and his “mysticism is grounded and rooted actually in the senses”, says A.W.Garrod in *Wordsworth*. (105) His experience blessed him with a new perception, a heightened awareness of things in contrast to the temporary suspension of the bodily functions. He is able to “see into the life of things” and feels a “Presence” of God in Man and Nature. So, to Wordsworth, the God in Man is same as the God in Nature.

**Robert Browning (1812 – 1889)** Browning, the mystic poet, believed and looked for a perfect spiritual world. He considered sacrifice as the essence of Love that rules the universe.

In *Pauline*, he describes the quest and longing of the human soul for God:

What is it that I hunger for but God?

My God, my God! Let me for once look
on Thee

As though nought else existed: we
alone.

And as creation crumbles, my soul’s
spark

Expands till I can say, Even

from myself
I need Thee, and I feel Thee and
I love Thee.

In Browning’s opinion, the sensuous world of beauty is pale before the Eternal beauty of God’s face. This world, with all its freshness and beauty is only the herald of the other world, the world of Eternal Beauty. The joys of this world are but ‘the treacherous thorns’.

**Gerald Manley Hopkins (1844 – 1889)** Hopkins’ poetry reveals his Orthodox Catholic belief. He is therefore known as a devotional poet of dogmatic Christianity. His early influences were that of George Herbert and Christina Rossetti. He wrote the poem *Nondum* before his conversion to Roman Catholicism. The following lines of the poem indicate that even when he was struggling with his belief he was deeply conscious of God’s hand at work behind all manifestations of Nature. Real poetry sprouts from spiritual struggle. In Hopkins’ case his sublime poetry comes from the dark night of his soul. His devotion to dogmatic Christianity makes him revolt against God who allows sinners to prosper when the true servant of God undergoes failure, frustration, and creative sterility. This revolt is vividly portrayed in the sonnet *Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord*. He says:

```
Thou art indeed just, Lord
If I contend
With Thee; but, sir, so what I plead
Is just.
Why do sinners’ ways prosper? and
why must
Disappointment all I endeavour end?
```
The poem ends with a request for God’s grace. The poet asks to send his roots rain so that he can come out of his poetic barrenness. To Hopkins, God is the comforter and the Lord of life. Some of his finest poetry is an outcome of his contention with his God. Though he began writing as a sensuous poet like Keats, he soon set out to make an inward journey. He generally takes up Nature, Man and God as the themes for his poetry. An analysis of his poems makes his readers call him the greatest mystic poet of England.

Francis Thompson (1859 – 1907) Even though Thompson regarded himself as a very poor sort of mystic, his poems are poems of divine love. His mysticism is Christian in motive and in inspiration though it assumes forms akin to nature mysticism. He uses images and symbols common to all forms of faith.

The Hound of Heaven is the best known of Thompson’s poems. Many consider this as his masterpiece. His reputation as a mystic mainly rests on this poem. In Mysticism, Evelyn Underhill calls him “the greatest mystical poet of our modern times.” (135) Caroline Spurgeon opines in Mysticism in English Literature, “through all that he (Thompson) writes there breaths the spirit of mystic devotion and aspiration.” (149) The Hound of Heaven is the most famous of his works for its poetical beauty and mystical content. A. N. Dhar comments on the poem thus,

Christian mysticism conceives of the Love-Chase as the necessary corollary of the principle of divine grace. Thompson’s poem confirms this…. Notwithstanding the literary echoes and borrowings, and howsoever old the theme, Thompson’s poem remains his achievement, a record of his personal experience…. No other poem in the whole range of English literature, or utterance of an individual mystic, has
rendered the theme of Love-Chase so vivid and authentic. The poet and the mystic have collaborated here in producing a masterpiece. (143)

The poem shows his soul’s purgation leading to illumination. It also indicates the foolishness of loving the creations of the Supreme, excluding the concept of God. The ‘sight and insight’ poems from his *New Poems* confirm a maturing of Thompson’s insight as a mystic poet.

After this brief introduction to the various mystical poets in English literature, the scholar chooses to delve deeper into the analysis of the nature of a true mystic. A mystic is an individual who attains a state of awareness that is far more sublime to that of ordinary human beings. Since it is an abstract conception, it is next to impossible to describe the state of mystical awareness, in words. Nevertheless, the mystic poets have employed the genre of poetry to express the inexpressible and to share a glimpse of the higher realms of mystical experience. It is a well-known fact that mystical experience is beyond the scope of language and can be best expressed only in silence. Yet many great mystics have tried to convey their indescribable and unexplainable experience by the use of words and symbols through the medium of poetry - both as a powerful expression of their emotions as well as to benefit the other seekers.

India has also seen innumerable mystics who have shared their mystical experience for the benefit of mankind. The Indian subcontinent has been the seat of religious upheavals for centuries. The seed of religion can be found as early as the age of the Indus valley civilisation. In the present-day India, on the geographic front, from Kashmir in the north to Kanya Kumari in the south, and spread across from Dwaraka in the west to Bengal in the east - India has represented a wide range of religious
expansion and diversity. On the time line, across the ages – right from the Vedic age down to the modern day, we have witnessed an ever increasing growth and development of religion. The *trīka* philosophy of *Śaivism* in Kashmir; the *Gandhara* school and the hymns of the *Vedas* from Punjab; the *Upanishads*, epics and the *puranas* from the *Aryavarta*; the great spiritual seeker Janaka from Mithila; the inspiring spiritual gurus – Gautham Buddha and Vardhamana Mahavira at Magadha, to name a few. In more recent times, Orissa gave birth to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu; Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa brought light to Bengal; this spiritual light was taken forward by Swami Vivekananda from Almora to Colombo to America, back to Kanyakumari. Nepal was the seat of both Brahminical as well as Buddhist religions; on the Dravidian soil the Vishnava *Alwars* and the Shaiva *Nayanmars* made their presence felt; Karnataka witnessed the emergence of the *Lingayata* cult and great saints like Allama Prabhu, Basavanna and Akka Mahadevi, were instrumental in bringing about a change from the earlier orthodox way of worship. They brought in the new concept of realising God through rapturous music. Maharashtra woke up spiritually to the songs of Tukaram and Namdev. Other medieval saints of the North include – Kabir, Ravidas, Nanak, Meerabai, Tulasidas, Surdas and many others. Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, Krishna Consciousness, and the *Sufi gharana*, were some of the radical groups that brought about a revolution in the field of religion in India. Tracing the history and development of religion in the Indian subcontinent is an extensive area of research in itself which is beyond the scope of the present study, but a peep into the realm is essential for the study of Kabir and Tagore in the paradigm of the *Bhakti* tradition. As mentioned in the preface to Vol. IV of *The Cultural Heritage of India*, 
…all creatures should be permitted to follow their own lines of approach in this [spiritual] matter, provided they do not transgress the rights of others…. To the Hindu mind, Truth presents itself in diverse ways, the validity of each of which is always admitted; and similarly truth presents itself also to the Christian mind and the Islamic mind, the Confucian and the Taoist mind, and the mind of the Buddhist, through their various sects and schools. (xvi)

Hence over the years seekers of Divine communion have chosen their own paths and have treded on, being a precedent to those who chose to follow.

The *Bhakti* Movement is one such benchmark in the history of India. It is a movement that spread its wings pan India during the medieval period. It was a Hindu religious movement that paved the way for a novel thinking that God was not the private property of the priestly class alone and that the lower class people and even women, who were not treated on par with men, could think of chanting and meditating upon the Absolute; it also brought out the realisation that Sanskrit was not the only language to communicate with God. The *Bhakti* Movement, like the Islamic *Sufi* Movement, promoted the expression of devotion to God through love, aiming at Divine communion. This Movement found its way across India and the *Bhakti* saints taught that the people of the so-called ‘lower birth’ could shed all inhibitions and set aside the heavy burdens of orthodox rites and rituals and not fear their ignorance of Sanskrit (the so-called language of the Gods) and could very plainly exhibit their irresistible love for God. Thus the proponents of the *Bhakti* Movement took the ordinary population closer to God-realisation or at least to the path leading to realisation.
A brief account of the mystics of the Bhakti tradition is essential to see Kabir and Tagore in this paradigm. These mystics sang out the most musical and mystical compositions. The mystics of India cover various categories. Some of them established a philosophy or religion (like Patanjali, Sankara, Ramanuja, Gautama Buddha and Mahavira); some expressed their mystical experience by composing an epic (sages like Valmiki and Veda Vyasa); some engaged in the composition of devotional lyrics and plays and gave vent to their mystical experience in musical notes (like Tyagaraja Swamigal, Dikshitar, Mahakavi Kalidasa and the numerous other Bhakti poets).

The mystics of the Bhakti tradition include the Alwars (Nammalwar, Periyalwar, Tirumangai Alwar, Kulashekhara Perumal, and others); Nayanmars (Tirujnanasambandhar, Manikkavachakar, Appar, Sundarar, and others); the revolutionary saints of Northern India (Tulsidas, Surdas, Kabir, Vidyapati, Chandidas, Sant Raidas, Jayadeva, Chaitanya, Vallabhacharya) the Bhakti saints of Maharashtra (Ramdas, Gnaneshwar, Tukaram, Namdev); the mystics from Punjab (Guru Nanak, Guru Amar Das, and others); the sadhus from Andhra (Annamacharya, Bhadrachala, Narayana Teertha, etc.); saints from Karnataka (Devara Dasimayya, Allama Prabhu, Basavanna, Kanakadasa, Purandaradasa); the musical stalwarts of the South (Swati Tirunal, Syama Sastrigal, Dikshitar, Tyagaraja, Papanasam Sivan, Pattanam Subramania Iyer, and others); the great Tamil mystics (Agastya, Avvaiyar, Tirumoolar, Arunagirinathar, Kamban, Ilango Adigal, Tiruvalluvar, Abhirami Bhattar, Appayya Dikshitar, Vedanta Desikan, and more); mystics from Kerala (Poontanam, Narayana Bhattachari, Ezhuttachan, Narayana Guru, Vilwa Mangalam, and the like); Sankaradeva from Assam; Bhima Bhoi and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu of Orissa; Ramprasad Sen from Bengal. The Bhakti tradition was also studded with
women mystics like Andal, Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Akka Mahadevi, Meera Bai, Lalla Ded, and many more, hailing from different parts of India. This chain of mystics that can be traced back to 2500 B.C. (Agastyar) can be sketched down to the more recent past with mystical gurus like Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, and the like.

The Bhakti Movement primarily promoted the belief that moksha or salvation was attainable by everyone. The roots of this Movement can be traced back to the seventh century Tamil Nadu and it slowly spread towards medieval and northern India as well. Within the Movement, there were distinct groups, primarily on the basis of the attributive (saguna) and formless (nirguna) nature of God. The saguna bhaktas extolled God with attributes and form; whereas the nirguna bhaktas composed verses in praise of a God beyond all attributes or form. Despite their difference of opinion regarding the attributive nature of the Almighty, both the branches of devotees were singular in their focus on a private and personal relationship with the Divine and their inspiration for complete surrender in devotion and the ecstasy of Divine love. Given their conviction in personal devotion, the poet-saints of the Bhakti Movement observed a critical stand against the meaningless orthodox rites and rituals as advocated by the priestly class. Thus they also lashed against the traditional hierarchy of caste system that was eating at the roots of the medieval social stratification. Many of these poet-saints, particularly in the northern part of India, themselves hailed from lower castes and were denied access to temples. Another common characteristic of the Movement was the use of vernacular or regional common man’s language as opposed to Sanskrit, the language of the privileged. This practice also paved the way for an intense inner mystical devotional relationship with the Divine which could be attained by any individual, irrespective of caste, creed, colour, language or gender.
The *Bhakti* Movement was considered unorthodox because it was initiated as a rebellion against the social inequalities and the rigours of orthodox rituals, which, the *Bhakti* saints deemed not obligatory for salvation. With the passage of time this ‘unorthodox’ Movement became ‘orthodox’ and continues to be a significant religious path in India. There were two major sects of *Bhakti* mystics – the *Vaishnava* and the *Shaiva* schools of *bhaktas*. It was a Movement which spread across the entire Indian subcontinent over a period starting from the 6th Century (in south India) down to the 17th Century (in north India). The fundamental element of the Movement was the expression of intense devotional love for the Divine. It also advocated communal harmony and tolerance amongst the otherwise conflicting sects in the name of religious ideologies.

Perhaps the earliest of the *Bhakti* poets was *Andal*, who had intense love for the Lord and propagated the same to all the people around her. She was a fifth century *Alvar* poet of Tamil Nadu who is a renowned name in the Indian religious firmament. The term ‘*Alvars*’ refers to the mystics who were “immersed” in the intoxication of the Divine, the mysterious Supreme Spirit. Tradition mentions twelve *Alvar* saints who were affiliated to the Hindu *Vaishnava* tradition. They brought about a revolution in the orthodox approach to religion by affecting a renaissance in the path of devotion. The Tamil speaking region of south India, during the historical period between the fifth and the ninth centuries, owed a drastic change on the religious front, to the *Alvar* saints. They propounded devotion through love and themselves composed devotional songs, pouring out the love of a devotee for the Divine Beloved, *Vishnu*. They instigated all seekers of the Divine – irrespective of caste, sect, or gender – to develop love for the Divine and to enjoy the frenzy of Divine love. Their poetry was
a rare combination of passion and philosophy. They thus developed a hitherto unknown religious path – the one of bhakti (love of the Divine).

To commemorate the impact of Andal as it is felt on the religious life of the Tamil population, the month of Margazhi (December-January) is still celebrated. Songs from her Tiruppavai are rendered in temples as well as households in remembrance of Vishnichittar’s daughter, Andal, who made a significant contribution to the Alvar tradition. She composed the collection of songs called Tiruppavai or the ‘Song Divine’ as an offering to her lord Almighty, Sri Ranganathar. In these songs, Andal imagines herself to be one of the gopis and cries out her longing for the Lord. The collection comprises thirty stanzas and expresses the intense longing and craving of the gopis for the Divine Lover (Krishna):

“Maragatha manimaya chela…”

It’s Margali month, moon replete and the day is proper
We shall bathe, girls of Ayarpadi prosperous
Will you move out? (Tiruppavai)

Andal’s love songs have an intrinsic bearing upon the literary horizon of the Bhakti tradition. Besides this, these songs also greatly influenced the sphere of dance. Bharatanatyam, the state classical dance of Tamil Nadu, finds its origin in the erotic (madhura) songs expressing the love-play of Krishna, as sung with devout energy by Andal. It is believed that Andal showed the people of kali yugam that Hari naama sankeerthanam is the prime upayam leading up to the anushtanam of prapatti at her Lord’s feet to gain moksham. Thus her poetry has a long-standing import on the religious life in South India, particularly in Tamil Nadu.
A brief outline of Andal’s *Tiruppavai* is significant in this context. The thirty stanzas of the *Tiruppavai* are set in clear divisions dealing with different aspects. The central idea, theme and the purpose of the composition are provided in the first five stanzas. Andal calls upon all her friends and neighbours to sacrifice all luxuries and live a life of austerities in the month of *Margazhi*. She ensures the devotees that through sincere prayers; one could call upon Divine grace in the form of rain, in turn leading to prosperity. In order to be absolved of one’s sins, Andal appeals to the devotees to offer fresh flowers to Lord Krishna.

Andal then appeals to society as a unit and refers to the collective participation in devotion, in the next ten stanzas of the poem. Here she describes nature in a beautiful and picturesque manner – she sings about the birds chirping, herds of cattle with bells around their neck, the sound of the temple conch, beautiful flowers, the sound of churning butter milk, and such other typical sounds of the rustic backdrop. In these stanzas, she sings in praise of all the avatars (incarnations) of Vishnu and rushes to each home in the neighbourhood, waking up the other girls in order to accompany her to the pond for a bath and a visit to the temple.

The next five stanzas elaborate on Andal and her friends’ visit to the temple of her chosen deity (Sri Ranganathar). She wishes to express her devotion by reciting the *suprabhata* (morning song) in order to wake the Lord from His Divine sleep. Andal and her friends steal in through the temple gates by appeasing the temple guards. Once inside the temple, they invoke the Divine parents of Lord Krishna and beseech them to wake Krishna and Balarama. Finally they reach the altar of Neela Devi, the Divine consort.
After the *darshan* of the Lord, Andal devotes the last nine stanzas of her song divine to the glories of the Lord. Finally, she realises that the Lord is pleased by her devotion and has showered His grace. Then, like an ordinary girl in front of her beloved, she demands various ingredients she requires for the *pooja* (prayer). She asks her Divine Beloved to get her flowers, white conch, milk, ghee, butter, lamps, jewellery, and rich costume.

In the last stanza, as is typical of many saint poets of the past like Kabir, Tulasidas, and Surdas, Andal also identifies the author of *Tiruppavai* objectively and mentions that the daughter of Vishnuchittar is devoting the collection of songs to her chosen deity. She sings that she is offering the thirty *pasurams* (stanzas) in the form of a garland, woven with devotion for the Lord, in order to invoke his blessings. Thus singing the glories of her Divine Beloved, Sri Ranganatha, Andal experiences her ultimate union with the Divine Lord.

Another woman *Bhakti* poet who sang in northern India was **Meerabai** (1498-1546 A.D.) There is also a common belief that Meera is a manifestation of Radha. She is one of the pioneering poets of the *Bhakti* Movement, who occupies a very significant position on the Hindu religious front. She introduced the passionate religious fervor in the North. She was born in 1498 at Kurkhi in Rajasthan as the daughter of Rana Ratan Singh, a Rathor from Merta. The Rathors were great devotees of Lord Vishnu. Meera, bereaved of her parents at a very tender age, was raised by her grandfather, Rao Duda. Even as a small girl of four, Meera manifested deep devotion for Krishna. *Karnaparampara* (hearsay) holds it that when she was just four, once Meera was with her mother and saw a marriage procession passing by the palace gates; enamoured by the charm and beauty of the groom, she innocently enquired of
her mother as to who would be her groom, and to this question, her mother
unwittingly remarks that Lord Krishna himself would be her groom. Soon after this,
her mother passed away, but with Meera also grew her desire to marry her Krishna.
She was convinced that only the Lord of Brindavan would be her husband – as seen in
this song translated by Subramanian in his book Mystic Songs of Meera, “Mere tho
Giridhar Gopal, dusuro na koi, Jaake sar mor mukut, mero pathi soi…” (34)

As was a custom with the royal families of Rajasthan during those times,
Meera was also given private tuitions at home and was taught a wide variety of
subjects. She learnt both fine arts and scriptures, and also skills like driving chariots,
horse riding and weapon-weilding. Along with these worldly lessons, Meera also
enjoyed the benefit of a serene and spiritual ambience which led to her unsurpassable
love for Krishna, her divine consort. There is hearsay that when Meera was a small
girl of four or five, a saint (believed to be saint Raidas) gifted her with a statue of
Lord Krishna. Guru Raidas initiated her to Shabd or Nada Yoga. Meera was instantly
in love with the idol and developed a deep attachment towards it. She would bathe the
idol ceremoniously; adorn it in royal attire and converse with the idol as if it had life.
She was drunk in the frenzy of divine love and imagined the idol to be a close friend
of hers.

Meera’s name is so very well blended with that of Krishna that they are
inseparable. Meera is the quintessence of love, devotion, and renunciation. Her life is
an example of sacrifice and selfless love and devotion to the point of marvel. Inspite
of being born into the royal family, Meera left the comforts of the palace and opted
for a life of sacrifice and austerities – ‘Tyaga, Titiksha and Vairagya’. (np Swamy
Sivananda) She was a gentle princess who left the luxuries of the royal life in order to
walk the thorny path towards spiritual awakening. She opted for a life of renunciation - one of abject poverty, leaving behind all the riches and luxuries of life.

Her spiritual journey was extremely perilous and challenging as there was high resistance from within the family but her ideals and convictions stood by her and helped her continue with her resolve. She moved with ease through the various trials and tribulations and came out victorious in her love for her Giridhar Gopal. It is her undaunted spirit and indisputable courage that protected her from all the perils that she had to face and helped her in bearing all the persecutions silently and with the necessary mettle and girth. Although her family and the society targeted her with bitter criticism and sarcastic remarks, she could endure it all like a perfect Stitha Pragna.

Meera’s songs do not exhibit very high literary value in terms of dexterity of language or rhetoric, but they are beyond excellence in terms of genuineness, dedication, and devotion. She made use of simple regional language and did not exhibit her scholarship through her lyrics. Meera’s mystic songs are understood, appreciated, and sung by people of all walks of life alike. Her language of love is powerful enough to cut across the boundaries of time, space, gender, caste, and any such divisions that the human mind can think of. Her songs abound in the qualities of romance and philosophy simultaneously. They posses extraordinarily beautiful lyrical quality and charm, that extend a smoothening effect on the listeners.

Meera was deeply in love with her Lord, Giridhar Gopal, and she expressed the intense passion of her heart in simple language so that even the common man of her times could understand the import and the message. Her songs depicted Anuraga and Ragatmika Bhakti. She was so deeply immersed in Divine love that she did not
worry about any criticism leveled against her; neither was she swayed by conventions and ordinances laid down by the society or religion. She danced in frenzy and was not engaged in the conventional ritualistic method of worship. Her love for her Giridhar Gopal, which sprouted at a very tender age, grew with her and she was completely blinded in his love. To her, Krishna was her be all and end all – friend, husband, Guru. Immersed in the ocean of *prema bhakti*, Meera was inebriate in the intoxication of Divine love and danced shamelessly in public, forgetting herself and the bodily consciousness. She inspired the common devotee of her times towards the spiritual odyssey on the *Vaishnava* path. As Swami Sivananda stated in *Lives of Saints*:

Mira wafted the fragrance of devotion far and wide. Those who came in contact with her were affected by her strong current of *Prem*. Mira was like Lord Gauranga. She was an embodiment of love and innocence. Her heart was the temple of devotion. Her face was the lotus-flower of *Prem*. There was kindness in her look, love in her talk, joy in her discourses, power in her speech and fervour in her songs. (340)

Meera’s undaunted, pointed focus was always on her Lord whom she endearingly called ‘Giridhar Gopal’. Like Andal who wanted to unite with Sri Ranganatha, Meera pined for Divine communion with her Giridhar Gopal. Her song has been thus translated by Subramanian in his book titled *Mystic Songs of Meera*:

*More to girdhar gopal*

*More to girdhar gopal, doosro na koi*

*Jaake sir mor mukut, mero pati soi,....*

Mine is Giridhar Gopal, and nobody else

My husband is the one who wears peacock crown, Oh Lord
The one wearing shankh, chakra, gada, padma and wearing a necklace

Father, mother, relatives, brother, I have none

My family name and fame are lost, what shall be done now

Continuously watering the plant of love with tears

Servant Meera mad with her love for her Lord, cares trifle for anything else

Mine is Giridhar Gopal alone and no one else. (34)

The following bhajan of Meera’s demonstrates the intensity of her love for her Lord and the extent to which she gets intoxicated in that love. It is an explicit expression of the portrait of Meera’s life and her aim in life. The lyrics are very obviously emanating from a soul that is drunk deep in the intoxication of Divine love.

Aisi Lagi Lagan, Meera Ho Gai Magan...

Aisi lagi lagan, meera ho gayi magan

Wo to gali-gali hari guna ganne lagi

Meera rani divani kahane lagi

Aisi lagi lagan, meera ho gayi magan (Subramanian, Mystic 48)

The medieval period in the history of India was a time when the territory of the woman was confined to the four walls of her house; the list of her activities would not go beyond the daily chores of the household; and her Lord was her husband. It was during such times that Meera, the princess bhakta from Merta, Rajasthan, crossed the threshold of her palace and stepped out on the streets singing and dancing in the frenzy of her ‘Giridhar Gopal’.

Meera’s life was exemplary with a unique strength of mind due to the loss of her parents at a tender age, coupled with the compassionate influence of Rao Duda’s wisdom. Hence at a very young age Meera had resolved on giving herself in marriage
to Krishna. She was married by the age of fourteen, to the Rana of Mewar with the assurance that he would permit her to continue her undivided devotion for her Krishna.

As it is not new that every seeker has to face the rough seas, so did Meera too. A lot of tribulations met her in her chosen course of *sadhna*. Her forgetting herself in the presence of her Lord, talking and singing to the image, moving carelessly with other *Sadhus*, and not attending the regular chores of a woman of her times, accrued the resent of some women of the family who left no stone unturned to pass on the impression to her husband also. But the unperturbed Meera did not ‘mend her ways’, instead, with each passing day, her devotion to her Lord Krishna continued with more and more fervor. As a true lover, she lost herself in her love and became unmindful of the world when she sang, in Subramanian’s translation, thus:

> Meera has lost herself in joy,

> …The Rana sent a snake in a basket…it turned out to be a *Saaligram*

> …a cup of poison…turned out to be nectar… (143)

Meera bore all the atrocities upon her physical self with great ease and compose as she had one-pointed devotion to her Lord and surrendered completely to her *Giridhar Gopal*. But later a time came when her relatives pronounced a ban on her worship. At such a juncture, Meera wrote to her guru Tulasidas asking him to advice her on further action. It is believed that he guided her to abandon those who came in the way of her Divine Love. He further instilled in her undivided love for Lord Krishna and Meera left the comforts of her palace and her family – the way Vibhishana deserted his brother Ravana; Bharata turned away from his mother Kaikeyi; Prahlada spoke against his father – for a larger good, Meera forsook her relatives. She understood that all other relations of this material world were
insignificant and that it was only divine love and one’s intense craving for a communion with the Divine that served as an anchor for the soul. Meera realised the permanent in this world of transience and sang: “Maim Girdhar ke ghar jaaon…” meaning,

I shall go to Giridhar’s house!
Giridhar is my true love!

…
I please him in whatever I can!

…
I cannot live without Him even for a moment!

… (Subramanian, Mystic 139)

In her ultimate appeal to her Lord, Meera sang to Him to show her the path of salvation and not to drag her back into the drab of births and re-births. This one song of hers also highlights the futility of mere rituals and the power of Divine love in comparison to sanyasa (officially initiated renunciation):

“Bhaj man charan kanval avinasee …”, the translation of the lines being:

O Mind! Worship the feet of the Immortal Lord!
Whatever exists between the earth and the sky will Perish!
What is the use of pilgrimages and fasts?
Why commit suicide at Kasi?
Do not be proud of this body, it will soon merge with dust!
This phenomenal world is like a game of dice
Which vanishes at dusk!
Why wear the saffron robe and wander as an ascetic?
Yogis who do not realise the secret truth,
Come back to be born again!
With folded hands, this helpless woman appeals:
O dark-hued Lord, I am your servant!
O Giridhar, Lord of Meera!
Cut off this bondage of births! (Subramanian Mystic 195)

Meera went to Dwaraka to unite in Divine communion with her Lord and legend claims that she entered the sanctum sanctorum of her Lord at Ranchod and the doors shut behind her and later when they opened, only Meera’s veil remained, draping the idol of her Lord – like Andal, Meera was also blessed with the Divine communion. Historians and scholars assign the year 1546 A.D. as the auspicious time which recorded this great mystical union on the Indian soil. Different mystics have adopted different attitudes towards their chosen deities – some saw God as a child, some treated God as a Lord, some saw their beloved in God, some saw God as a friend. Meera’s devotion was of bridal disposition where she sang songs, some filled with the pain of a separated lover seeking her beloved, and some with the adoration of a newlywed for her beloved husband describing the bliss in the love they shared. In some songs, Meera surrenders herself in complete admiration:

… Meera’s Lord is Giridhar!
At His lotus feet,
Meera offers herself in sacrifice! (Subramanian, Mystic 223)

V K Subramanian reports in his 101 Mystics of India, “Andal, Mahadevi Akka and Meera can be considered the Trinity of women-mystic saints of India, whose bridal mysticism produced great devotional poetry” (73).
Jana Bai from Maharashtra is another poet-saint who ranks among the foremost women mystics of India. She is also a representative of the double marginalized section of society – as she belonged to a low class family. Her life as a servant at the house of a tailor named Damasheti (father of the great saint Namdev) was perhaps instrumental in making her realise the spiritual light. Her chosen deity was Vittala and she could feel His all-pervading presence in and around her. As she carried on her daily chores, she sang the glories of her Lord and also invited people to join her in singing. Thus the pathways of Pandharpur resounded with the elated mystical songs of Jana Bai, and many other saints, who thronged the place. Even today, in Maharashtra, Jana Bai’s songs are recited with the same fervor as they were during her life time as early as the 14th Century A.D.

Lal Ded (also known as Lalla Yogeswari), a famous poet-saint of Kashmir, is believed to have been born in a village near Srinagar in about 1335 A.D. She was a victim of domestic violence – having been married off at the age of twelve and being ill treated by her mother-in-law. She ran away taking refuge in the lap of Nature and took recluse in the shelter of mountain caves. In her opinion, the body was the abode of the Lord and she taught mankind to look within oneself for the Divine light. She highlighted the fact that renunciation from worldly life as a route of escape from troubles was a wrong path to choose. She proclaimed the importance of shedding of the ego, which was the cause of all troubles, and the significance of meditation as the door towards constant awareness of God. Her doctrine was to consider the body as the temple for the worship of the Lord. The songs of Lal Ded, known as vaaks, exhibit her intense Bhakti or devotion to her chosen deity (Siva), through the apt use of beautiful imagery and the dexterous application of Kashmiri poetry.
Melpathur Narayana Bhattatiri (1560 AD), a great scholar-devotee-poet, composed the famous Srimad Narayaneeyam, a devotional hymn comprising one thousand and thirty six verses. He wrote this hymn as a prayer to Lord Guruvayoorappan to alleviate the suffering of paralyses. He sat in front of the sanctum sanctorum of the Lord and wrote a canto (dasakam – a set of ten verses) per day and completed writing hundred cantos in hundred days. Legend has it that his guru, Trikandiyur Achuta Pisharodi, was suffering from paralysis and unable to see his guru suffer, Melpathur voluntarily took the ailment upon himself by Āvāhana (Invitation, invocation). He realised that he could be cured only by divine intervention and so made arrangements to be carried and left at the shrine at Guruvayoor. There he offered his song divine – the condensed Bhagawatam in the form of Narayaneeyam.

Even to this day there is a common belief that a sincere devotional and earnest recital of this hymn at the shrine of the presiding deity of Guruvayoor is a panacea to all paralytic ailments. The Narayaneeyam is known as the “Gospel of Guruvayoor” and the last phrase of the opening sloka of Srimad Narayaneeyam - “Hantha! Bhagyam Jananaam!” – is the quintessential phrase of Guruvayoor. These words have been inscribed at the entrance of the temple gates also.

Srimad Bhagawata Mahapuranam has been condensed in a pithy manner without losing the essence of ardent devotion, by Narayana Bhattatiri. Since its author was cured of his self accrued paralysis, it is believed that reciting the Narayaneeyam is a panacea for paralytic impairment or loss of motor activity of the nerves. This hymn occupies a prime position in Sanskrit bhakti literature owing to both extreme literary merit as well as devotional fervor. It is recited by devotees as a renowned religious text in various bhajans and festivals.
The ‘Narayaneeyam’ may be termed as the magnum opus of Melpathur Narayana Bhattatiri, for which he is remembered to this day by scholars as well as devotees. The work derives its name out of two reasons: 1) it deals with the glories of Narayana, who is the resting place (Ayanam) of all Jivas (humans) and 2) it is the composition by the poet Narayana. The one thousand thirty six verses in various Sanskrit metres are divided into hundred cantos of approximately ten verses each. Every canto ends with a verse that is sung as an offering to the Lord to cure the poet of the ailment that crippled him. For instance:

“Vathalayadhipa Namosthu Nirundhi Rogan.” (canto 6) Meaning, “O Thee, the indwelling spirit of this Cosmic Form, my salutations! May my ailments be eradicated!”

“Ananthabhuma mama rogarashim Nirundhi Vathalayavaasa! Vishno!” (canto 8) Meaning, “O Thou of incomprehensible greatness! Deign to rid me of my ailments!”

(Narayaneeyam)

This unique work combines three distinct characteristics:

1. It is a literary masterpiece, a great poetical work, at par with the compositions of any of the classical Sanskrit poets
2. It is a hymn of rare devotional fervor having several distinctive features
3. It is an exposition of Vedanta with a dominance of devotional teachings
4. (philosophical outlook)

Since the Narayaneeyam is a condensed version of the Bhagavata, an understanding of the former depends on an understanding of the latter and its subject
matter. Being a *Mahapurana, The Bhagavatam* has an elevating theme and the same is reflected in the *Narayaneeyam* too. Through an elaborate and highly poetical treatment of the *Bhagavatam*, Melpathur expresses the deep devotional fervor and implication thereof. The *Bhagavata* philosophy of devotion is clearly envisaged in the *Narayaneeyam*. No wonder, Melpathur was himself blessed with the Divine vision which he describes in the last canto entitled “*Bhagavante Keshadipaadam*”, which describes the Lord “from head to foot”. The Divine vision is the ultimate any devotee can think of and Bhattatiri was able to achieve it through his nonchalant devotion to his Lord.

*Jayadeva*, the great poet from Orissa composed the lyrical dance-drama, ‘*GitaGovindam*’. The work is rich in Romanticism and poetic aesthetics. The thematic concept is ‘Sringara’, infact *Vipralamba Sringara*, wherein, the initial pangs of separation and the final bliss of union of the divine couple Krishna and Radha is expressed. The poet experiences the bliss of witnessing the divine communion of the couple and wishes that they are in joyous togetherness. Jayadeva addresses Krishna variously like Maadhava, Govinda, Keshava, or Hari, according to the scene depicted in the verse and hence he named the work *Gita Govindam*, like *Bhaja Govindam*. The entire song is about the most cherished *Rasa krida* involving the ecstatic Radha and the most benevolent Krishna. Radha, the source of His creative power or the *lila shakti* is celebrated in the song. The fundamental idea of *Gita Govindam* is that Radha transforms the glory of Krishna as *prema ananda*, the ultimate level of bliss.

In order to reach the layman and to make them realise the ultimate truth and the final state of permanent bliss through the communion with the Lord, Jayadeva brings Radha closer to our nature. Through a very vivid description of the romance
between Radha and Krishna, Jayadeva is pointing out the ultimate aim of all humans, that is, the realisation of the Supreme or the Divine communion. At the physical level the song is just a romantic rendering of what transpired between Radha and Krishna. But on the spiritual echelon, Radha stands for all human beings or the entire Nature that craves for the ultimate bliss in the form of the final communion. Nature recognises the Lord or the ‘Parama purusha’ to be the Ultimate and pines for the Divine communion. On the other hand, the Lord Himself, as is deemed fit, would never stay at a place or with one for long. But when they are together, there is ecstasy to the greatest height that is represented by the merry singing and dancing of the two, accompanied by all the other Gopikas too. Thus the unseen Lord plays with the seen Mother Nature. The rendering also highlights the fact that the Divine must be shared by all, and that no one can hold Him for themselves.

The theme of Gita Govindam is Sringara or Madhura bhava. Jayadeva dramatises the sacred love-play (Rasa lila) of Lord Krishna and the cowherd maid, Radha. Viraha tapam, or the pain and agony of separation from the lover are depicted in verse form. The plot of the poetic construction is set in a garden and the time covered is a single night. There are only three characters in the poetic work – Lord Krishna, Radha, and a maid (Sakhi) who acts as a messenger in the transfer of amorous messages between the divine Lord and His consort.

Jayadeva opens the Ashtapadi with the introductory sargam (verse) by offering accolades to Lord Krishna, singing in praise of his ten avatara
(incarnations): minasharira (fish), kacchapasharira (tortoise), shukara sharira (boar), naraharirupa (half-man, half-lion), vamana rupa (dwarf), bhrgupatirupa
(Parashurama), *haladhararupa* (plowman Balarama), *buddha sharira* (Buddha), and *kalki sharira* (Kalki). (1 to 4 *Ashtapadis* - 1st Sargam: “Samoda Damodarah”)

Pralaya payodhijale dhritavanasi vedam

Vihita vahitra charitra makhedam

*Keshava – Dhrita Meena sharira*

Jaya Jagadeesha hare

**Meaning:** “Oh Lord, in the form of a Fish! In the flood of dissolution you have held up the knowledge of the Vedas, like a boat, without effort. Hail! Hari, God of the world, Victory to Thee!” (*Ashtapadi*)

Towards the end of the invocation song, Jayadeva hails the Lord thus:

*Sri Jayadeva Kaverida mudita mudaram*

Srinu subhadam sukhadam bhavasaram

*Keshava – dhrita dashavidharupa*

Jaya Jagadeesha hare

**Meaning:** “Oh Lord, who took ten forms! Please listen to this song of Jayadeva. It bestows goodness and joy; it is the essence of life. Hail! Hari, God of the world, victory to Thee!” (*Ashtapadi*)

Jayadeva describes the erotic season of spring with artistic escalation. The scene is described where Krishna, playing the flute (*murali gana*) enchants the *gopis* and plays the *rasa lila* with them. The other *gopis* then narrate His love-plays to pining Radha, who is impatiently awaiting the arrival of her divine consort, at the banks of river Yamuna. Radha recounts the times that she had spent in the divine company of Krishna and expresses her sorrow at having been separated from Krishna due to her
jealousy for the other gopis. Krishna, who was playing and dancing with the other gopis, suddenly becomes disenchanted and looks for Radha. Now the Sakhi (friend) who acts as the mediator between the two, expresses Radha’s pangs of separation to Him. This is described in the “Aklesa Kesavah”, 5th and 6th Ashtapadi. The love lorn Krishna asks sakhi to convince Radha and bring her back to Him. The sakhi informs Radha about Krishna’s anxious message and pleads Radha to go back to her beloved Lord. Here, in the third sargam, “Mugddha Madhusudhanah”, 7th Ashtapadi, Krishna’s realisation of His mistake is portrayed beautifully. Jayadeva sings how Krishna realises that He should not have ignored His lovely Radha and is sorry that He got entangled with other gopis and spent some time with them.

Although the sakhi entreats Radha to go to her divine beloved, Radha is quite weak due to her intense longing and the pangs of separation - she is unable even to move. Now the sakhi comes back to Krishna and explains how weak Radha has become owing to viraha tapam (suffering due to separation). She now coaxes Krishna to go to Radha. When sakhi returns, unaccompanied by Krishna, Radha is taken aback and laments that the Lord has forgotten and forsaken her and is enjoying the company of others. This scene is described in the lyrical composition in its fourth sargam, 8th and 9th Ashtapadi called, “Snigddha Madhusudhanah”. Again, in the 5th sargam, 10th and 11th Astapadis “Abhisaarikaa Varnane Saakaamksa Pundareekakshah”, Sri Krishna appeals to the sakhi to pacify Radha and bring her to Him. In the following Ashtapadi (12th), 6th sargam called “othkkhantta Vaikunttah”, the sakhi elaborates on the woeful condition of Radha owing to the pangs of separation from her divine beloved, Krishna, and reckons to her inability even to move. She now requests the Lord to Himself go and meet Radha.
Jayadeva expounds how Radha loses her mental balance and blabbers like a mad person when she believes that her Lord (Krishna) is enjoying the company of other gopis and has forgotten his love for Radha. This is described elaborately in the seventh sargam, “Vipralabhdha Varnane Naagareeka Naaraayana”, 13th to 16th Ashtapadis. Finally, the Lord Himself comes down to Radha’s abode (kutir) at dawn. But now Radha is enraged at the delay and neglect on the part of Krishna and she shuns him away in the 8th sargam, 17th Ashtapadi, “KkhandithaVarnane Vilaksha Lakshmipadi.” saying “Yaahi Maadhava”.

Sakhi, who is a neutral observer of all this play, and also the mediator, passing their messages to each other, now openly criticises Radha. In her opinion, Radha should not have driven Krishna off when He finally came to her doorstep. She extends a friendly advice to Radha that when Krishna comes around the next time, she should be more calm and composed and behave well. Now Radha also realizes her mistake and repents for her own behavior in the 9th sargam, 18th Ashtapadi, “Kalahaantharitha Varnane Mugddha Mukundah”.

Ultimately, in the 10th sargam, 19th Ashtapadi, “Radha Varnane Mugddha Maadhavah”, Sri Krishna comes back to Radha and tries to console her and please her with endearing words of romance. The sakhi here points out how kind Krishna was to His lady love. She further persuades Radha to shed her inhibitions and to go to the abode of the Lord and please Him and enjoy the bliss of divine communion.

In the eleventh sargam, Ashtapadi 20 to 22 - “Saanada Govindah”, Jayadeva describes the visit of Radha to Krishna mandir (abode). She is thrilled to receive the Lord’s darshan. Now the amorous couple is described as they enter the divine abode in unison. Jayadeva sings further in romantic description that Krishna does alankara
to Radha, whose veil is crumbled and displaced in their physical union. These are the concluding verses of the *sringara rasa kaavyam* where the poet exclaims, “*Swadheena Barthrukaa Varnane Supreetha Peethaambarah*” in the twelfth *sargam* 23rd and 24th *Ashtapadis*. These lines signal the close of the rendezvous of the *jeevatma* (Radha) with the *Paramatma* (Krishna). After their divine communion, Radha wakes up in the morning, all disheveled and unkempt, and entreats her divine beloved to re-do her make-up, ornaments, and dress. The Lord willingly complies to her wish.

At the outset this appears to be a romantic tale of the love and union of Lord Krishna and His divine consort Radha; but it has a deeper philosophical purport. The poetic work of Jayadeva deserves a higher level of interpretation. It has an allegorical implication and a deeper interpretation. Radha in these songs is not only the mythological consort of Krishna; she represents the individual soul that is in an earnest amorous quest for the Supreme Soul, and is craving for the everlasting bliss (*paramananda*) of divine communion. *Sakhi* represents the guru who makes the individual soul realise supreme knowledge and crave for union with the supreme. Jayadeva’s *Gita Govinda* itself assumes the role of the guiding light in this direction. In these songs, the experience of divine love has been delineated in the most aesthetic manner and the songs have been offered as a dedication to Lord Krishna. Through these amorous songs the readers are led to both physical as well as metaphysical pleasures.

The songs of Jayadeva’s *Ashtapadi* demonstrate deep inner import relating to human behavior and the individual’s relation with the Supreme. They reveal the dangers of false pride and ego (*ahamkara* and *mamakara*). Through the amorous play
of Krishna and the *gopis*, Jayadeva highlights the existence of God in all forms of life (Radha realises this). Principles of community life, importance of unity, significance of community prayer, transient nature of human relationships, oneness of all, the secret and the purpose of a divine incarnation, and the delineation of Godly principles form the basis of this collection of songs.

The *Ashtapadi* is not a mere rendering of amorous narration; it is rather an austere interpretation of devotional fervor (*bhakti laya bhava*). In the manner that Radha is separated from the Lord due to her ignorance and is unable to move back inspite of being reminded by the *sakhi*, in a like manner, the individual soul (*jeevatma*) loses contact with the fulcrum of the Supreme Soul (*paramatma*) and gets entangled in the world of illusion (*maya*). Thus entangled, the individual soul forgets its own origin in the Supreme Soul. The guru (*sakhi*) shows the true path and tries to make the *jeevatma* realise its true nature and the impending need for divine communion. The guru initiates the seeker to realise the true nature of happiness and not to be entangled in the mesh of the mundane physical world. Divine grace, or *Bhagwat Kripa*, requires the receiver to be open and with a clear conscience. Jayadeva’s *Ashtapadi*, like all other *Kaavyas* and *Puranas*, throws light on the ideal way of life that would lead through divine love, to Divine communion.

This *amara kaavyam*, therefore, is the tale of love between the *jeevatma* and the *paramatma*, with focus on the weak and immature nature of the individual soul that is unable to realise its folly of moving away from the radius of the Divine. Ultimately, when the guru leads the individual from darkness to light, he becomes aware of the mistake and sheds the ego in order to unite with the Supreme. *Nayika nayaka bhavam* or the *gopika bhavam* is employed in the narration of this great workj
of art as it gives voice to the bhakti layam. A devotional rendering of the Ashtapadi is done as an austere offering to the Lord – performing a complete Ashtapadi recital (Poorna Ashtapadi Bhajan) is considered on par with performing Radha Kalyaanam.

A complete study of the Bhakti poets would make the project colossal and hence a brief survey of a couple of poets has been conducted here by way of introduction to bhakti literature. This brief analysis expounds how all these Bhakti poets have contributed in their own manner to the literary, religious, spiritual, as well as social spheres of human life. Their compositions have been recorded for the benefit of posterity by their disciples and followers. Each one has extolled the importance of love for the Divine and explained how one can attain union with the Divine through love. Many of them left home and wandered through various lands, eagerly seeking out spiritual light and enlightenment. In their spiritual odyssey, they shun the mundane levels of rites and rituals and open new vistas of divine love and craving for the spiritual communion, leading from darkness to light. Their teachings break the barriers that divide our world and through their precedence, they handhold the spiritual seeker in the divine journey of love and devotion. These poets elevate us to ecstatic heights of spiritual experience through their powerful songs filled with passionate love, powerful imagery, outstanding literary and artistic insight and a thorough knowledge of the ancient myths and legends. Most of their songs express highest levels of devotion and philosophical content. Devotion (Bhakti) and knowledge (Gnana) are effortlessly mingled in their songs thus leading a true spiritual seeker to the state of supreme bliss (Paramananda). The rich lyrical quality and conceptual splendour of these Bhakti poets is beyond compare. These great poet-seers give us the simplified version of the deepest philosophies underlined in the Vedas, the Upanishads, The Brahmasutras and The Bhagwat Gita. Some of these mystics draw
their comparison of divine love in human love and through amorous descriptions draw
the attention of the common man towards the Divine Beloved. In this line of mystics
fall the two great mystic-poet-philosopher-seers Kabir and Tagore. The following
chapter will bring to light some of the mystical and spiritual elements, the visions
expressed in their poems, and the non-sectarian concept of religion as propitiated in
their poems, forming a base for the study of the concept of Divine love as envisaged
therein.