The Indian literature, in the pre-medieval times, witnessed a diversified growth owing to a huge number of poets speaking out their selves. This flourished further in the medieval times which in a way laid the foundation for the contemporary and modern Indian literature (Paniker, 1997). The literature written/spoken in the vernacular languages like Sanskrit, Tamil and Kannada gained a huge momentum through the saint-poets, who as a part of the religious movements like Bhakti, triggered the socio-religious transformations.

In Kashmir, this trend started with Lal Ded, the first Kashmiri woman poet, and later, it was carried forward by Sheikh-ul-Alam, Rupa Bhavani, Habba Khatoon, Arnimaaal and others (Ahmad, 2011). Outside Kashmir also, the trend of voicing the self through poetry had started long back, in the 6th century when Ammaiyaar, a woman poet from South India, came to the forefront as a socio-religious poet. As the
movements spread from South to North and other parts of India, a huge outburst of saint-poets like Narsi, Meera, Surdas, Tulisidas, Akka and Kabir was witnessed (Singh, 1934). Amongst them, Kabir emerged as one of the strongest voices which shook the then existing social and religious norms and tried to establish a free society. “Sheikh Noor-ud-din and Lal Ded in Kashmir, Ameer Khushrau, Bagat Kabir, Guru Nanak, Dara Shiku in the Indian sub-continent preached the same philosophy of *sulhikul* (amity of all religions) rooted in the soil of religious morality universal to all religions” (Gauhar, 2009, p.146). Lal Ded, Sheikh-ul-Alam and Kabir belonged to the three major religious sects—Shaivism, Rishism and Bhakti, respectively. Through the mystic orientation, all of them transcended the cultural, religious and social barriers.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Mysticism has existed as a powerful domain since ages. The way people have resorted to spiritual means and sought a higher refuge has been explored in the Chapter. There are various ways that a person can take on to in order to reach the Supreme abode. With varying religious traditions, the ways to seek God also vary. However, the Ultimate destination remains the same. The Chapter discusses the origin and the types of Mysticism and reveals the ways Mysticism is practised in the three major religious traditions—Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. No doubt, the ways and practices followed by the seekers of these respective cults differ from one another, but at the end, all of them preach the same lesson: the oneness of God. The three areas of concern in the present study—Shaivism, Rishism and Bhakti—also lead us to the same belief. Shaivism as a religious sect of Hinduism believes that Shiva is the Supreme Self. The followers of Shaivism see Shiva as the immanent as well as the transcendental being and follow various practices like yoga and Pranayama to attain salvation. Contrary to this, Rishism comes up as a school of Islamic thought which rests on certain principles like celibacy, vegetarianism, non-
violence and universal brotherhood, all ultimately leading to the control of desires and thereby, enabling a seeker to gain self-awareness and reach the Supreme Self. In addition to Shaivism and Rishism, the school of Bhakti has also been studied which reveals that the best means to reach God is through love. The Bhaktas value intellect also but more importance is given to love, for they believe that it is only with pure love that one can attain a union with the Supreme. They see God as a lover and therefore, pine in separation till the union is achieved. However, all the three domains ultimately lead a seeker to the sought or end in a union of the self with the Self. This journey of the self was taken up by the three medieval poets Lal Ded, Sheikh-ul-Alam and Kabir also. The next three Chapters reveal their respective faiths and tendencies and also the paths they took to reach the ultimate abode. They also reveal the themes carried in their poems.

Lal Ded’s poetry as studied in Chapter 2 reveals the life she lived and her Shaivist beliefs as a mystic make her a highly complex intellectual. Her poems bring into foreground many aspects like her Mysticism along with her social orientation as a poet. As mentioned earlier also, she was a proponent of the Kashmiri Shaiva tradition and practised all the concepts of the tradition on ground. She saw Shiva as the be-all and end-all of her existence. Her journey towards him started with uncertainties and difficulties but she overcame every hurdle that came in her way whether at the religious or the social level. She made the Supreme message comprehensible to all through her poetry by employing examples from daily life. She spoke about the continuity of the Self and self through metaphors from ordinary existence. This gave her a space and place among masses. Lalla was an ardent aspirant of truth and travelled from the darkness to illumination. She reached the other shore of her life and
left the ever relevant lessons for entire humanity in the form of her poems called
vaakhs.

Her poetry, in addition to the mystic ethos, is packed with messages directed
at the society also that existed then. Be it social imbalances, social evils or religious
orthodoxy, she makes a say for all. The hollow religious practices, the ostentatious
garb that authorities wore in the name of religion and the plight that the poor had to
pass through was brought into limelight by Lalla. Her verses, therefore, have a
contemporary bearing also for such evils and imbalances exist even today and it is this
contemporary relevance that her poems carry which makes her a subject of study in
the 21st century.

Sheikh-ul-Alam, on the other hand, emerges as a mystic, preacher and social
reformer. As is revealed in Chapter 3, he was not a man of ordinary faith but from the
very childhood was bestowed with extraordinary qualities. The way he gave up this
world and took refuge in a cave in order to realize his actual self shows the dedication
and love he possessed for his God. For him, all worldly relations were futile and that’s
why he detached himself from all chords. However, upon achieving the actual
knowledge, he made a transition from seclusion towards the society which proves his
dedication towards the masses. According to him, the best way to serve God was to
serve His people. His transition, therefore, from solitude to society is a remarkable
aspect of his—as a lover of God, as a poet and as a human being too. The Sheikh
comes up to us as a proponent of the Rishi tradition which upheld the principles of
non-attachment and a purity of life. He, however, changed its meanings and took the
tradition into the public domain. He emerged as a missionary and his poems dwelled
upon all themes ranging from world as a community to its mortality. He preached
non-violence, universal love and a respect for all creatures. An important aspect that
gets revealed from the study of his poems is the way he acted as a source of empowerment for women of that time. In a highly patriarchal society, where it was nearly impossible for women to come out of the bounds and voice their selves or participate in any of the religious matters, Sheikh-ul-Alam opened doors to them and provided them a platform to come out and serve the humanity as men do. So back in the 15th century, we see a poet voicing, practising and encouraging women emancipation. Sheikh-ul-Alam was, therefore, not only a saint-poet but also a reformer and missionary. We still look up to his verses for the prophetic connotations they bear and which hold true in the 21st century also.

Kabir was an amalgam of different traditions—Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam. However, the way he carried himself in the society was an answer to all those who differentiated on the basis of color, caste and religion. As discussed in Chapter 4, unlike Lal Ded and Sheikh-ul-Alam, Kabir didn’t leave his family. He adopted the profession of weaving and raised his family like any other normal person but through his poems, taught us that any bonds that a person shares in this world cannot interfere with the bond that one shares with the Supreme. Therefore, what was needed was a pure heart, full of love for the entire humanity. The life he lived, the environment that he was a part of and the way he endured all the hardships he came across, prove his extraordinary mettle as a poet and a person. Kabir’s poems are mystic as well as revolutionary in nature. He was a Bhakta by belief and through his Bhakti, he challenged all the evils that prevailed in the medieval Indian society. He sought God through pure love calling himself a beloved of His, and at times, taking on to the status of a yogini (wanderer)—in Bhakti, even male devotees address themselves as yoginis, which otherwise is a feminine term. From a mere seed to a huge tree, God to him was embedded in everything. For him, all that was needed was a pure perception
as the world was full of Maya. The illusive nature of things robbed man of his capabilities to see larger truths. Through his poems, therefore, he consistently preached the essential nature of world and the means to reach it. In addition to this, his poems reveal the spirit of defiance also that he possessed. Be it at the social or the religious levels, Kabir, through his poems attacked the orthodox cult very forcefully. He broke away from all the norms, challenged fundamentalism and highlighted the role of humanity in understanding divinity. Kabir, therefore, wasn’t only a saint-poet but a revolutionary and a reformer too and it is this aspect of his that grants him immortality and respect from all sections of societies.

The critical analyses of these three poets reveal many facets of their poetry. The most important thing that we get to know is that in spite of the different approaches to God, all of them ultimately united at a larger point and they used the vernacular poetic medium to communicate their thoughts. They addressed the masses in the local linguistic jargon which gained them huge support, then and now also. For instance, talking about how the local language helped poets like Lalla, Gauhar (2009, p. 152) writes:

Lal Ded was not an activist of any dogma but her verses created more influence than a preacher, priest or an activist could create…the idea she propagated through her piercing, thoughtful, and commonly intelligible vaakhs proved effective tools of revolution. She used common man’s language, the dialect which rural peasantry used and to which common housewife was acquainted…people were fed by Lal with indigenous thought contained in local container. Hence both thought and art fascinated the general mind.

The same holds true in case of Sheikh-ul-Alam and Kabir. The Sheikh “protected the Kashmiri language from the danger of extinction and widened its colloquial sphere” (Gauhar, 2009, p.146). Kabir, too, in order to take his message across, spoke in varied
local dialects of Hindi. The study reveals that language, therefore, served as an important tool for making an impact and all the three poets took instances from the ordinary life to preach the higher truths.

Lalla, Sheikh-ul-Alam and Kabir intersected on the thematic grounds too. They were all humanistic and social reformers in tone and expression. For Lal Ded, a common spirit pervaded everywhere and every individual was a reflection of the Divine. According to Sheikh-ul-Alam, all beings had a common origin and therefore, caste, colour, creed and religion were nothing but worldly distractions. In tune with them both, was Kabir who proclaimed himself as “a child of Allah and Ram at once”. Their poetry, therefore, aimed at teaching people the essence of higher spirit. Belonging to the middle ages, all of them embarked upon a journey of self to the Self, rectifying the social anomalies on the way.