ABSTRACT

In the present thesis an attempt, however, has been made to give an account of some aspects of North Indian social and religious life during 16th and 17th centuries on the basis of the contemporary Nirgun bhakti literature. The general plan of treatment which has been followed in this work is as under:

Chapter I deals with the origin and development of the Nirgun bhakti thought. Attempt has been made here to trace the emergence of Nirgun bhakti thought in the Vedas and to describe its further development through various stages viz. Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Shandilya Bhakti Sutra, Puranas, Shankaracharya, Nath Panth and the medieval Nirgun bhakti schools.

Chapter II describes the emergence of the various schools of the Nirgun bhakti thought viz. Kabir Panth, Bishnoi Panth, Nanak Panth and Dadu Panth, during 15th and 16th centuries and their further development by the later Nirgun bhakti saints during the 17th century. Besides, it also attempts to solve the problem regarding the foundation of Kabir Panth.

Chapter III deals with the literature of the four aforementioned Nirgun bhakti schools. This literature was in the form of poetic verses, composed in the vernacular languages.

In the Chapter IV and V an attempt has been made to describe various facts of social and religious life, in its manifold aspects, as reflected in the literature of Kabir Panth, Bishnoi
Panth, Nanak Panth and Dadu Panth. Most of the Nirgun bhakti saints depict in their poems what they saw and felt and thus, their works constitute invaluable sources for constructing India’s socio-religious history during the period under review. All possible attempts have been made here to thrash the grain from the chaff and to study the contemporary Nirgun bhakti literature with the sole purpose of collecting the relevant data. However, some important aspects of social life in those days have either been left out or have been treated very briefly owing to the paucity of information.

Besides, all efforts have been made to check up the data collected from the vernacular literary sources by an analytical and corroborative comparison with the contemporary foreign travellers accounts and the Persian chronicles.

Chapter IV deals with the castes, professions and untouchability especially in the Hindu society. It also discusses slavery and food of the people high and low during this period. Various types and designs of costumes of men and women of different social gradations, both amongst the Hindus and Muslims are also described. Besides, it also throws a flood of light on the toilets and ornaments of both the sexes of the communities. It also deals with various kinds of games, sports and the pastimes as were prevalent in those days. More emphasis has been placed here on throwing additional light on the pastimes, particularly those popular among the masses. An attempt has been made here to describe the festivals of both the Hindu and Muslim communities. Marriage ceremonies particularly of Hindus are also mentioned in
great detail. This chapter also describes the prevailing system of Hindu education—primary, secondary and higher. Along with some superstitions, prevalent in the contemporary society, it also discusses in considerable details, the elaborate references have been made to the prevalence of certain almost universal social features like Purdah, prostitution and Sati. Various household and the professional activities in which women were engaged in the 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries have also been referred to.

Chapter V deals with the different religious systems and beliefs followed by the people in this period. First of all an attempt has been made to describe various practices of Hinduism such as idol worship, sacrifice (yajna), animal sacrifice, alms giving, fast, pilgrimage and the last rites of a Hindu are dealt with great detail in this chapter. Besides, their belief in rebirth and transmigration of the soul is also discussed. Hinduism embrace in its arms various sects which belong to its different religious systems. Compositions of Nirgun bhakti saints contain good information about some Saiva and Vaishnava sects which are described in considerable detail in this chapter. These sects are Yogis or Nath Sampradaya, Lingayat or Jangama sect, Aghori Sampradaya, Sanyasi sect and Bairaga Sampradaya. Besides it also deals with Jainism of which various references have been found in the Nirgun bhakti literature.

This chapter also attempts to describe the fundamental principles and other beliefs and practices of Islam which includes the witness to faith (repeating the holy kalima), prayer (namaz),
fasting (*roja*) pilgrimage (*haj*) and their belief in the *Quran*, *Hadith* and the Prophet.

Attempt is also made to critically evaluate the minds of various *Nirgun bhakti* saints like Kabir, Jambhoji, Guru Nanak and Dadu Dayal with reference to their scathing poetic remarks on various fundamental Islamic practices.

Besides it also attempts to describe the mystical side of Islam i.e. Sufism which was popular in the Indian sub-continent. It deals briefly with the five major *Sufi* order in India during 16th and 17th centuries. Along with some practices of *Sufis* this chapter describes the *Sufi* concept of four stages and their four corresponding stations.