INTRODUCTION

The bhakti movement as a cult of devotional love for God was first popularized in the South India by the poet-saints who flourished between the seventh and the twelfth centuries and then in Northern India during the fifteen and the sixteen centuries by the bhakti saints who were the followers either of the Saguna or the Nirgun path of bhakti. The former means the worship of a personal God in a spirit of love and the attainment of liberation (moksha) through it while the latter emphasizes mainly on the impersonal concept of God and gives the monothestic view of the ultimate Reality through the knowledge or jnana.

Scanning the vast treasure of the Nirgun bhakti literature. We come across various socio-religious practices that must have deeply hurt the minds of bhakti saints and the evidence of which is found in many of their sayings which show their dedication and concern for the society. The Nirgun bhakti saints developed a belief system or at least tried to infuse their belief into the society that dared to challenge various religious and social doctrines of the period. They seem to show their sympathy to the mindless religious and social rituals that ignores the essence of the religious doctrine.

The period from 16th to 17th centuries had the same ancient religion of Hindu society divided into four major classes which was considered to be divinely ordained. However, various professional groups who later turned out to be distinct class of the society. Through the information gathered from the Nirgun bhakti
literature we find mentioning of these various professional groups besides the four major four-fold division of the Hindu society. The literature gives us informations about various social activity undertaken by these professional groups.

Untouchability which was deeply rooted in the society, seems to have great impacts on the mind of the *Nirgun bhakti* saints who describe them as miserable people on the earth. The society of the period seemed to be less concerned about the conditions of the so-called untouchables. The system of slavery was another significant feature of this period and on various occasions slaves of various kinds are described thoroughly by the *Nirgun bhakti* saints.

Interestingly the literature is also enriched with detail accounts of life style of the people of the different strata of the society, which included their food habits, costumes, toilets and ornaments, games and amusements, marriage, superstitions and education.

There are numerous instances about *Purdah* system among the women mentioned by the *Nirgun bhakti* saints in their sayings. It existed both among Muslims and Hindus. It was supposed to be status symbol for the affluent classes of the both the society. The evil of prostitution had also its firm root in the society and though this practice has been condemned on various occasion in the literature of *Nirgun bhakti* saints we find it thriving in the society all the time. However, the custom of *Sati* was also prevalent in this period which shows the element of compulsion attached to the
practice of Sati. Besides women are shown to play a central role in the household activities by the Nirgun bhakti literature.

In the period of 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries we invariably find the existence of 33 crore gods and goddesses and like their ancestors the Hindus of this period also believed in the triple deity viz. Brahma (Who was believed to be the creator of Universe), Vishnu (The protector of mankind) and Siva (The destroyer).

Nirgun bhakti literature and other literary evidences reveal the popularity of the belief and worship of the Avataras of Vishnu in the 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries.

The literature also unfolds various rites and rituals associated with Hindu religion. We find mentioning of sacrifice (yajna), animal sacrifice, alms giving, fast, pilgrimage and last rites were prevalent in the period of 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries. Nirgun bhakti saints have also referred to the theory of rebirth and transmigration of the soul. Besides they have given historical accounts of various sects like Yogis, Lingayats or Jangamas, Aghoris, Sanyasis and Bairagis. The literature also provided us the informations regarding Jainism and Islam. Sufism have also been dealt by the Nirgun bhakti saints in good detail.