CONCLUSION

Indian poetry until the sixteenth century, was highly representative and was popularly sung or chanted. It played an intensely radical role in the medieval Indian society. But after the coming of the English language and literature in the nineteenth century, it began to distance itself from the larger socio-cultural concerns, and to create for itself, a personal idiom more occupied with emulating the English poets in their creation of beauty, romantic sentiment and in fetishising the Indian nation. This in general was the face of Indian English poetry in its pre-Independence phase, with the exception of Rabindranath Tagore and Sn Aurobindo, who wrote in line with the mystic tradition of Indian poetry, looming large upon the scene.

In its post-independence phase, in the twentieth century, Indian English poetry departs from its earlier romantic and classical leanings, to become more self-questioning, at times cynical, witty, and in its vision, more metropolitan. It is far more sophisticated and complex as we have discussed in chapter six. It shows considerable maturity and depth, but tends to become limited and self-generating in its predominant preoccupations with the urban and metropolitan India. In so far as it, (a) represents only a part of Indian reality, and (b) is largely detached from contemporary art forms of the folk and regional cultures, it performs an immense disservice to itself and to the once glorious tradition of Indian poetry. It misrepresents, and fails to communicate. But before we go any further into that, we must first take a look at what it is we find in the continuous tradition of Indian poetry. From that, the answers should emerge.

The Indian poetic tradition beginning from the Upanishads until the sixteenth century Bhakti poetry, is characterised by a shared aesthetic temperament, a continuous system of semiotics, a shared response to
seasons, landscape and topography and the common pool of religious ideology, faith and mythology, from which it draws its colour image thought, form, etc. Thus the semiotics of the collective poetic conscious of the Indian is symbolised by metaphors of the following variety: the inverted thousand-petaled lotus dripping elixir and the sky—as supra-conscious states, allusions to the bumble bee hovering amongst fragrant flowers (the “white jasmine” in Nammalvar, the “lotus” in Kabir and the “flowering forest” in Nanak.) The sun-moon swan-pearl sea-water-milk metaphors, allusions to vedic gods, and theology, (A surpassingly beautiful reference to bees in the Chandogya Upanishad reads like this “Verily, yonder sun is the honey of the gods. Of this the sky is the cross-beam the atmosphere is the honeycomb; the particles of light are the brood” The hidden teachings [i.e. the Upanishads], are the honey producers. Brahmin is the flower. These waters are the nectar.”) and lastly, the fabric of agrarian and wildlife bird-animal images evoking the beautiful, the sensuous, the silent, the erotic, and the sublime mysteries in nature/experience.

Besides the collective Indian poetic conscious other factors like a shared concern with social reform, the mystic desire to transcend physicality and a preoccupation with the inner world further distinguish the face of Bhakti and establish it firmly in the family of world mystic poetry. As Sisirkumar Ghose puts it, mysticism and poetry are both forms of homecoming: “Between ‘I am a body’ and ‘I have a body’, lie light years of space-time-consciousness. To turn the prison into a temple, such is the creative effort of poet and mystic alike.” (Mysticism. Views and Reviews 4)

Bhakti poetry is also characterised by its similarity of themes. If in tenth century Karnataka, the Lingayat poet Basavanna (a Shudra) merges the concept of temple with the human body: “My legs are pillars/the body the shrine / the head a copula of gold”; then in the fifteenth century, Pipa the disciple of Ramananda is saying the same thing: “In the body, the Lord is present / The body is His temple / In the body the pilgrimage / of which I am a pilgrim.” Similarly, the aggression with which they debunk idol-worship—be it Basavanna, or Kabir, or Nanak or even Tagore writing in
the nineteenth century, speaks of a shared ideology which contributes to the continuation of the tradition

The other bonding factor of the tradition was its use of the vernacular language for composing religious verse thereby flouting the established norm of composing religious literature in Sanskrit. This decision of the first line of Vaishnava and Shaiva saint-poets, who were Brahmin priests of eighth century Tamil Nadu was implemented with the following motives:
(a) to relax the rigidity surrounding the Hindu religion and to enable transparency; (b) to popularise the role of devotion in temple worship by lending their songs for community singing, thereby inducing larger participation and, (c) to ultimately stall the exodus of the lower classes into Jain and Buddhist faiths.

Implementation of the above mentioned measures not only created an egalitarian environment, it also generated a general zeal for reform and established both Vaishnava and Shaiva Bhakti as forms of worship parallel to the ritual-based worship of the Brahmins. The movement had been initiated by far-sighted Brahmin saint-poets, but it also witnessed the emergence of spiritual and poetic genius from among the Shudras and the skilled-worker classes. Inspired by the divine instinct which saw no discrimination between one man and another, the Bhakti movement, (the movement of the mystics), retained the same spirit of catholicity and the same courage to stand by the truth, as it spread through the country over the next seven centuries.

The Bhakti Movement was, in other words, a human-rights movement against the socio-political tendencies of the state. At its inception, it had rebelled against the caste-ridden system of the brahminised South. Later as it reached Maharashtra, it continued the war with Brahmin orthodoxy and fanaticism. Somewhere midway through, the eleventh century marked the arrival of Islam and the Sufis. The loot and plunder of North-Western states of India initiated by Mahmud of Ghazni in the eleventh century paved the way for successive raids by Arab and Turk invaders. The incursions
were marked by wild killing, loot and plunder. The richly laden temples with idols of gold, silver and precious gems used to be the prime targets.

In the oppressive darkness of the medieval ages, between the pillaging Arab and the caste dominated system, the Bhakti dialogue was a humanising force that gave power to the impovenshed seeker and simultaneously got empowered. Tantamount to its handshake with Sufism, the Bhakti cult evolved into the worship of God as *Nirguna* (without form or attributes). This branching out of the *Nirguna* school of poets paid rich dividends in terms of mystic poetry that was subtler, deeper, and radically free of all icon and ritual worship. This is not to say that *Saguna* Bhakti was in anyway inferior. It was largely Vaishnava in character and contributed extensively towards social reform. But the mystics who came in direct contact with the Muslim rulers and who came perhaps closest in the Hindu fusion with Sufism, were the *Nirguna* bhaktas – also called the Sants. The success of both Sant Kabir and Guru Nanak lies in the fact that by rising above the Hindu-Muslim distinctions they attempted to forge a humanistic creed, a non-religion. It is another matter that history saw the dissipation of the Kabir panthis into twelve schools; while the line of Nanak’s nominated disciples grew into a new religion called Sikhism. We must not overlook the fact that Sikhism was the child of the Sant tradition: its practical manifestation in changing circumstances, just as the courageous Marathas led by Shivaji were the harvest of the teachings of Sant Ramdas, and Tukaram of the Warkan tradition of Maharashtra. History knows both the Sikhs and the Marathas for their fearless warfare against the Mughals and for their strong character which was watered by the streams of Bhakti poetry and spirituality.

It would not be wrong to say that mysticism in India materialised to its optimum potential in the seventeenth century Sikhs and the Marathas, respectively led by Gobind Singhji and Shivaji. How would a mystic behave in the face of oppressive violence and injustice? Answer: A mystic would perform necessary action, which they did. They performed the
necessary action, in exactly the same spirit that Lord Krishna advocated in his concluding dialogue with Arjuna in the Bhagvad Gita.

Renunciation of prescribed action
is inappropriate
relinquished in delusion,
it becomes a way of dark inertia

When one passionately relinquishes difficult action from fear of bodily harm, he cannot win the fruit of relinquishment

But if one performs prescribed action because it must be done, relinquishing attachment and fruit, his relinquishment is a lucid art.

He does not disdain unskilled action nor cling to skilled action; in his lucidity the relinquisher is wise and his doubts are cut away
(Tr Barbara Stoler Miller 144)

History and scholarship on the Bhakti movement have tended to study the Bhaktas in isolation or in small groups, so far. As a consequence a major Bhakti poet like Nanak (founder of Sikhism) has been allowed to remain in the Sikh fold. the merit of his verse lost upon Indian literary circles at large. On the one hand, while this thesis has attempted to study Nanak independently as a poet, and establish him in the Nirguna Bhakti tradition of Namdev and Kabir, it has on the other hand, also tried to reconstruct the entire Bhakti Movement, and to examine (through the work of Kabir and Nanak) the features of Bhakti in its most evolved stages, to see it in totality as connected and organically growing, and as the earliest modern
ideological phenomenon. By undergoing this exercise the thesis has thus worked around the argument that the reign of poetry is located in both the subtle regions of spirituality and in its immediate ground reality. The Bhakti tradition can also be worded as a tradition of mystic poetry.

The journey has also raised a number of questions which give us some fresh insights into the poetic tradition of India, and the lacunae in Indian poetry in the English language. The questions raised are:

1) What was the role of Bhakti poetry and of poets like Kabir and Nanak in Indian history?

2) Was Bhakti merely an aesthetic expression arising from the poet’s emotional make up?

3) Why did the Bhakti movement fail to extend its impact beyond the Medieval period into the Indian Renaissance (i.e. the nineteenth and twentieth centuries)?

4) Why did the fabric of nineteenth century Indian culture (so well fertilised by the Bhakti tradition in its near past), crumble under the British education and culture?

5) Why did English literature create such a euphoria among the English educated youth of India, particularly the poets who took to writing in English?

6) The segment that counter-reacted to the spread of English education proposed a return to the roots — a revival of Sanskrit, the ancient wisdom of the Vedas and Orientalism was proposed. Why is there such scanty mention of the mystic tradition of India which wrote radical verse of reform and change? All these questions the thesis has tried to address in the preceding six chapters and the Appendix.

It is unfortunate that most literary histories make little reference to the rich tradition of vernacular poetry, charged with modern thought and mystic expression of the highest order. The privileged English educated Indian youth of the nineteenth century had obviously not read Kabir or Tukaram, Akho or Nanak, for it was swept off its feet by the English romantics like Keats, Shelley, Byron, Coleridge and Wordsworth. It would surely have
appreciated the fact that similar (and even finer) poetry had already existed in its country, in its own language. But an even more unfortunate and ironic aspect of the contemporary scene in Indian English poetry is that it continues to suffer from the same cultural amnesia that afflicted its preceding generation of poets. It pays, to its tradition of poetic genius, mere lip service. Many English departments in Indian universities prescribe for their undergraduate syllabus, the work of European poets in translation. But how many of us have studied the translated work of our own great poets like Nammalvar, Tukaram, Baba Fand, Nanak or Kabir? Or how many of us have studied Aurobindo's writing in English?

The rural, the folk, and the underprivileged classes are areas of experience largely untouched by Indian poetry written in English. The linguistic schism between the regional and the urban (initiated by the British who set up English education academies in urban pockets only – see Appendix), which led to an ideological distancing, has contributed further to the great gap between the Indian village and the city, that we see today. It has led to poetry losing its power through the division of expression, neglect of folk and native forms of poetry-writing which continue to exist beyond the curtain of urbanty, while the centre proliferates upon its colonised myth of advanced living, cutting itself from the main source of life. Its place has been taken by the popular film songs, music albums and gazals that are broadcast both on radio and television. However the quality of lyrical poetry in film music, which was quite pathetic in the 1980s and early 1990s, improved somewhat at the turn of the century. There has been a fresh wave of good figurative poetry in many a song, which is heartening. How long this will sustain and whether it will grow into a new dimension altogether, remains to be seen.

At the moment however, we lack a common tradition of poetry/ poets that can thread through the village and the city and back again. in an ongoing dialogue of exchange, nourishing and cementing the nation and its national spirit. It would thereby accomplish approximately the same that the Bhakti
verse-tradition did. it opened up the channels of genuine communication
And it could be set to music too. For that has been the tradition of Indian
poetry; it was either chanted or sung. Wild as this proposition may sound
to some, it might be the most workable of options for the future of Indian
poetry. Perhaps our poets—both those writing in the regional languages
and in English—could think of collaborating with the talented singers, lend
them their verse for singing so it lives not only in poetry books but flows
through popular music and fertilises at large the aesthetic and creative
sensibilities of the music-loving Indian

Thus, in brief, the poetry which is the spiritual nerve of a culture is absent
in our day-to-day life. It has shrunk in the cities to the printed page in
classroom syllabus, small poetry readings, and the drawing-room chatter.
In the villages and in some slum-areas on the edge of a city, poetry still
breathes through rich folk tradition and community singing—bhajan, kirtan
and folk songs—around the bonfire at night. These however receive poor
acknowledgement and media coverage from the mainstream metropolitan
culture and academic/publishing industry. The answer to a richer and more
meaningful Indian English poetry lies here, in an honest encountering of
our regional, national, and English realities—a balancing of our
macrocosmic and microcosmic selves.