INTRODUCTION

It is more than two centuries since the English language established itself in pockets of urban India and became popular with the upwardly mobile segment of Indian society, who soon perceived it as the language of progress. Ever since then, a lot of literature (both original and translated,) has been produced in English. During this process of cultural/linguistic assimilation and transition, a fractured perception of the self and of one’s own literary heritage was bound to afflict poets who were less rooted and therefore swept away by the English literary tradition, which they seem to have gladly adopted as their surrogate mother. The poetry they wrote was lacking in varying degrees in Indian character and identity. It spelt a complete departure from the continuing forms and traditions of Indian poetry writing. As C D. Narasimhaiah writes

Our writers have perhaps done well by contemporary English standards but not created their own identity. Is it because they have not discovered their cultural identity?

Referring to the legacy of Indian mystic and devotional poetry, he says:

......One is not so naive as to want them to revive that kind of poetry, but they can't afford to forget that both folk and formal poetry in this country has been functional, a humanizing and spiritualizing force, never a mere instrument of pleasure that it now threatens to be. ...many of the younger poets can hardly be said to belong to the tradition, let alone continue it in a significant way. (The Swan And The Eagle: Essays On Indian English Literature 41)

In the recent few decades there has been a partial coming back, an attempt to forge the gap that exists between English poetry and the rest of the Indian experience. The process however has been very slow and erratic.

Scholarship is agreed upon the fact that there is little "spiritual continuity" in verse written in English in the nineteenth and twentieth century India. It also agrees that "by losing tradition we lose hold on the present" (C. D. Narasimhaiah, Anthology Of Commonwealth Poetry 3) This new reality of the last two centuries, contrasts rudely with (and even misleads the limited reader from,) the Indian tradition of poetry writing.
which from the **Upanishads** onwards, has tended to be highly mystical and charged. An attempt is made here to examine briefly, the career and concerns of Bhakti poetry from its inception in eighth century Tamilnadu to its upward course through the tenth century Karnataka, through Maharashtra in the thirteenth century and its spread thereafter to the entire North, West and East of India. By the sixteenth century, Bhakti had covered almost every corner of India. It was like a national movement, enriching and inspiring its people and cementing differences wherever it went. This thesis therefore is a practical exercise in examining (in English translation) the merit of Bhakti poets like Kabir and Nanak, whom we regard as the climax of India’s earliest movement of modern thought, moved as it was by deep spiritual insights, a genuine concern for socio-political issues and by an assertion of human rights.

There are many English translations of Kabir’s poetry varying in their literary merit. There is Rabindranath Tagore’s *One Hundred Songs Of Kabir*, G. N. Das’s *Mystic Songs Of Kabir*, and Knshna P. Bahadur’s *A New Look At Kabir*, with a substantially extensive (and at times simplistic,) introduction. The two texts that I have used extensively for quoting Kabir’s verse are (i) *The Bijak Of Kabir*, translated by Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh, and (ii) Nirmal Dass’s *Songs Of Kabir From The Adi Granth*. As William Walsh has mentioned in *Bhakti In Kabir*, Kabir wrote little or nothing by himself. Since the transcription of his verse was left to his disciples, it led to the creeping in of many distortions and variations at the time when it was actually transcribed. Included among the main sources of Kabir’s poetry are, the *Bijak* (the sacred book of the Kabir Panth in U.P. / Bihar), the *Kabir Granthavali* (compiled by the Dadu Dayal sect of Rajasthan), and the *Adi Granth* of the Sikhs, compiled by Arjun Dev in 1604 A.D. Punjab. The *Adi Granth* is regarded as the oldest and most authentic collection of Kabir’s verse since it is believed that these were collected by Nanak (Kabir’s spiritual descendant), during his travels across the North of India, and later compiled by Guru Arjun Dev in 1604 A.D.

While there are many English translations of Kabir’s verse to choose from, the scene with Nanak’s poetry in English translation, is not so fortunate. A large portion of Nanak’s verse exists only as religious scripture (along with that of other Sant poets,) in the *Adi Granth* – also known as the *Granth Sahib*. Secondly only those poems like the “Japji” and “Siddha Goshti”, which are central to Sikh ideology have received the translator’s attention. Among the standard translations of “Japji” are those by Sohan Singh (*The
Seeker's Path), and by Osho-Rajneesh, The True Name: Discourses Of Japji Saheb Of Guru Nanak Dev, in two volumes. In the last two decades attempts have been made by some Sikh scholars to translate the entire Adi Granth literature into contemporary Punjabi, Hindi and English languages. The thrust of such translations however is preeminently theological than literary. To rectify their inherent lack I have therefore, either translated Nanak's poems afresh, or have edited the stanzas that I quote from Dr Manmohan Singh's English translation of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

The thesis also makes a sociological survey of the Bhakti movement from its genesis in eighth century India until Nanak in the sixteenth century North India. It attempts to survey the evolution of the Bhakti movement and the role it played, as it steered its course through historic crisis, ideological pressures and cultural invasions. The Bhakti movement was the phenomenal attempt of the marginalized segment (i.e. regional languages and literature and the lower castes and classes,) at decentralizing the hierarchy imposed by the Brahmin fraternity. The saints who led the reform movement were mystics and poets of a high order. From its very inception the Bhakti ideology was guided by a humanizing cosmopolitanism, an emotional fervor and a thirst for the divine essence and experience.

The thesis is divided into six chapters which are followed by a Conclusion, an Appendix and a Select Bibliography. At the end of each chapter is given a summary of what that chapter has tried to achieve. The first three chapters take an overview of the Bhakti movement and the socio-political factors that propelled it, from its inception in the eighth century Tamilnadu with the Shaiva and Vaishnava Bhakti cults, to the eleventh-twelfth century Lingayats of Karnataka, the Warkari Panth of Maharashtra in the thirteenth century, Ramananda’s school which initiated Nirguna Bhakti in fourteenth century Central North India, and the Chaitanya school of Saguna Vaishnava Bhakti in Bengal and Onsaa, which had a parallel following in the Saguna poets of Gujarat.

The genesis of Bhakti in the South was the logical fallout of its interaction with the North. The interaction led to a consequent brahminizing of the southern states and to the emergence of a rigidly caste-ridden society with oppressive policies towards the lower caste Shudras and Mlechchhas. The presence of popular and fast spreading religions like Jainism and Buddhism, had provided an opportune escape to the oppressed
masses, whose exodus into the Jain or Buddhist fold sent alarm bells ringing among the Brahmin community. The need to humanize and relax the restraints had been realized by some Brahmins. The cult of Vaishnava Bhakti was born at a time when Jain and Buddhist faiths were on the decline. The temple gates were thrown open and the lower castes were encouraged to join in the worship ritual which favored emotional fervour and devotion to God. Its pioneer poets (the twelve Alvars) were high-caste Brahmins who lent their verse for the purpose of devotional singing. As A. K. Ramanujan comments, their songs are "the forbears of later traditions of Vaishnava poetry, reaching as far as Chaitanya in sixteenth century Bengal and Tagore in our times. Characteristic pan-Indian themes find some of their first and finest expressions in the poetry of the Alvars." (Hymns For The Drowning xiv/xv) The same holds true for the poetry of Shaiva Bhakti which was based on the dual principle of Shiva-Shakti (i.e. the male-female principle of energy).

According to R. Champakalakshmi in his essay titled "Religion And Social Change In Tamil Nadu", Shaiva Bhakti became more popular in the agrarian setup, subsuming under its fold the various Shakti cults (i.e. primitive local deities,) as continuing forms of worship. Thereafter in the eleventh and twelfth century Karnataka, the Shaiva movement – known as the Virashaiva or Lingayat movement – gathered splendid momentum. It provided a platform to some extremely fine poetry, and drew an immense amount of participation from the lower classes. The Lingayats were outrightly iconoclastic, questioning age-old conventions, deconstructing ritual practice, inducing social reform and propagating a return to common sense and essence. Among the prominent Lingayat poets were Basavanna, Dasimayya, Allama Prabhu, and Mahadeviyakka. Shavism in general, and Virashaivism even more so, was "a revolt from within." It was a revolt against both Hinduism and Jainism (the powerful competitor of Hinduism). As Ramanujan narrates in Speaking Of Shiva (translations of Virashaiva verse from Kannada,) the lives of Basavanna and Dasimayya were desperate struggles against both Brahminism and Jainism, and the verse they wrote, finds a parallel example in the poems of Kabir.

The rival movements of Shaivism and Vaishnavism, despite differences in myth and ritual, created and shared a special idiom, a stock of attitudes and themes and a common heritage alive to this day. A degree of liberality was induced in the social
structure, due to the more integrated and participatory nature of the two movements. Another milestone achieved by the Bhakti movement was the creation of an extensive literature in the vernacular languages. The Bhakti hymns had come to be chanted and sung in the temples. Thus a non-Sanskritic and a non-Brahminical religious literature which was also reformative in its import became central to Brahmin orthodoxy. On examining the thematic and stylistic continuities in the Bhakti movement from the seventh century onwards, Ramanujan comes to the conclusion that Bhakti as a phenomenon was closely linked with the development of regional vernacular languages and with that of the marginalized social segments. Exulting in its cosmopolitanism, he says:

like a lit fuse, the passion of Bhakti seems to spread from region to region, from century to century, quickening the religious impulse. Arising in particular regions, speaking the local spoken languages, it is yet inter-regional — both parochial and universal. Even modern urban Bhakti groups include in their hymnals, songs of several languages and ages.

(40)

It is therefore not surprising that from the *Upanishads* onwards, “a large number of similes and analogies” that have been “pressed into service”, thread through the Bhakti poetry and bind it in a continuous tradition of mystic verse writing. The Bhakti poets were largely vagabonds at heart: a native version of spirited intellectuals given to extensive travelling and debating.

From here onwards the movement swiftly spreads upwards. By the thirteenth century, Maharashtra sported an impressive galaxy of saint poets. The Bhakti movement in Maharashtra, under the aegis of Jnandev, took the form of the Vithoba cult (Vithoba meaning father Viththal — regarded as a form of Vishnu). Vithoba, the black-coloured deity of Pandharpur, was worshipped by the pilgrims of the Warkari Panth, with whom it was a regular practice to journey to Pandharpur and back at least twice every year. A Warkari was one who made a warī — a round trip or a pilgrimage. Jnandev an outcaste Brahmin, was a born spiritual genius who wrote prolifically. In a short life-span of twenty one years, filled with intense struggle, he had composed the *Amritanubhava* (a major philosophical treatise), a large number of abhangas, (i.e. religious poems), and an extensive poetic commentary on the *Bhagvad Gita* : the *Jnaneshwari*. All of his writings are held together by the central theme of Bhakti, signifying a genuine inner
evolution in the consciousness of being. As Prof. Fred Dallmayr observes in an unpublished essay on Jnandev, the Warkan movement was centered around, and guided by the life and works of Jnandev. It illustrated a just and humane approach to life and upheld the practice of castelessness, simplicity, religious egalitarianism, and a balancing of the spiritual quest with a householder's life.

There was Namdev — another pillar of the Warkari movement, who shared a deep friendship with Jnandev and later continued to bring to its fold an extraordinary number of mystic poets from all across Maharashtra. The poets hailed from a cross-section of society. There was a potter, a gardener, a barber, a banker, a beggar, and a Mahar among others. After a lull in the later half of the fifteenth century, the Warkari movement would resurge with Tukaram and Eknath in the seventeenth century. Meanwhile, it would not be incorrect to say that Namdev carried to North India the ethos of the Warkari Panth. He settled down in Ghuman, a village in the Batala tehsil of the Gurdaspur district of Punjab, and spread the new faith over a twenty year long stay. According to McLeod (in Guru Nanak And The Sikh Religion,) Namdev shares with Ramananda the onus of spreading a more evolved form of Bhakti in the North and Central India. He was also the first major poet of the school of Nirguna Bhakti. (Nirguna meaning, one without form and physical attributes. The school of Nirguna Bhakti perceives God as formless, while Saguna Bhakti attributes to God a physical form and believes in the theory of avataravad i.e. reincarnation).

The third chapter makes a sociological assessment of the fourteenth century North, East, and West of India, the inception of a spate of both Saguna and Nirguna Bhakti in the north, the settling down of Islam, and their consequent interaction at various levels. Scholarship on the influence of Sufism upon the Bhakti tradition is highly diverse in its conclusions, and thrives upon difference. Muhammad Hedayetullah in his Kabir: The Apostle Of Hindu-Muslim Unity is convinced that Bhakti mysticism was furthered by its contact with Islam. However his presumption that it was Sufism which initiated the Bhakti movement in the South (294), is quite ill-founded. The other extreme is W.H. McLeod, who reduces Sufi influence to an irrelevant amount of contribution. Tracing the obvious argument which establishes plenty of affinities between Nanak's thought and the Sufi concepts, McLeod dismisses the case of Sufi influence, saying:
The appearance is however misleading. Affinities certainly exist, but we cannot assume that they are necessarily the result of Sufi influence. Other factors suggest that Sufism was at most a marginal influence, encouraging certain developments but in no case providing the actual source of a significant element. (158)

I would rather subscribe to the balanced line of thought that Romila Thapar adopts when she suggests in *A History Of India*, Volume I, that Sufism did have a role to play in shaping the ethos of Bhakti in the fifteenth-sixteenth century North India, however subtle it may have been. This is true especially of Kabir and Nanak who were not trying to consciously bridge the gulf between Hindus and Muslims, but were in fact leading a new religious group in which God was not merely a re-modeled version of the concept of Rama or of Allah, but a new concept derived from the two existing religious forces.

The chapters four and five make a study of both Kabir and Nanak as mystic poets who carried further the concepts of worship, divinity, and raja yoga (yoga of the mind, involving meditation and a disciplined life-style), at the same time they wrote an extensive amount of verse dipped in reformist zeal and rigorous questioning. The poetry they wrote is priceless in its worth, decked as it is with the treasure of the mystic's inner wealth. An attempt is also made to assess the extent of external influence upon their work and to decode the semiotics of their highly figurative verse. While the chapter on Kabir unravels in some detail, the fabric of Hatha yoga and Sufism in Sant poetry; the thrust of the fifth chapter on Nanak is more futuristic. It is perhaps a first time attempt (in the scholarship of Nanak), to study Nanak individually as a poet, independent of the Sikh canon of *gurbani*. Nanak was the last of the major Sant poets in the tradition of Nirguna Bhakti. The thesis explores the implications of the Sant ethos as it translated into the new-found faith of the Sikh tradition. In the process of writing the chapter, I have also translated a number of Nanak's poems for the purpose of quoting; and have edited all the poems that have been quoted from Dr. Manmohan Singh's English translation of the *Adi Granth*.

History stands witness to the fact that when an invading culture makes its presence felt, it is the lower and middle classes – the vulnerable segments of society, which bear the brunt. The eighth century converts to Jainism and Buddhism in the South and North-East of India, the Hindus who converted to Islam in order to escape the burden of the jaziya
tax in the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries, and the mass conversions to Christianity in nineteenth century India, largely comprised of the lower segments of society who found in conversion, mostly an opportunity to upgrade their status. To an extent this was also true of the Bhakti movement (a revolt from within the Hindu structure), which advocated the cause of the marginalized, and initiated the humanizing of the social structure. While most of the Nirguna bhaktas were from modest backgrounds; the Saguna school of Vaishnava Bhakti sported some aberrations to the rule. Chaitanya of the Bengal Bhakti movement who was a Brahmin teacher, Mira the Rajput princess who left the security of the palace to become a mendicant, and Narasimha Mehta the high caste Nagar Brahmin who used to sit all night in kirtan with the untouchable folk, whom he had renamed as harijan—meaning, the people of Hari. Making a case for mystic poetry, Sisirkumar Ghose writes in his book *Mysticism: Views and Reviews*:

> The mystic belongs to the Family of Man and more than man, he has his comrades and is at home everywhere and nowhere. He alone has conquered alienation and looked into the heart of the human situation.....

The Bhakti movement bears all the features of a mystical movement: a movement led by a rich galaxy of mystic poets who were sensitive to the needs of the society, and took upon themselves the unenviable task of reforming society and improving its spiritual fabric.

The chapters on Kabir and Nanak also build bridges with the past and the future in an attempt to trace the continuities and departures in the Indian poetic tradition: which is the literary legacy of not only our regional literatures but also of literature written in English.

In the poetry of Aurobindo and Tagore we have an example of the continuing poetic tradition. In the work of both these writers we find the same mystic grace and beauty so characteristic of the poetry of the Upanishads and the Bhakti line of tradition. While Aurobindo’s poetry was a case of writing in English, Tagore was a bi-lingual who later translated his poetry from Bengali into English and went on to become the first Indian to win the Nobel prize for his *Gitanjali*.

In chapter six, the focus shifts from the Bhakti movement in medieval India, to the colonial period and its new Indian poetry in English. The motive behind the juxtaposition
of the two is, (a) to read twentieth century Indian English poetry through the ideological 
and aesthetic leanings of its natural poetic tradition (in the regional languages), (b) to 
examine the continuities and departures Indian English poetry makes from its poetic 
tradition, and (c) to assess the reasons behind its successes and failures

Chapter six explores the effects of English education upon the Indian psyche and its 
changed world-view. (More historical details of this process are traced in the Appendix). 
One of the consequences of colonization was, the fracture / distortions it initiated in 
the Indian's sense of history, and its age-old traditions of art and culture. The complexity 
of its effects is most apparent in the corpus of Indian poetry that came to be composed 
in English (in the nineteenth century), and went on to establish itself as a genre ndden 
with the crisis of identity and representation Indian English poetry over the last two 
centuries has traveled towards a sense of complacent self sufficiency . Its myopic 
obsession with urban/ metropolitan reality to the complete exclusion of the realities of 
rural India, denies to it the status of being an authentic literary representation. The crisis 
of identity in Indian English poetry has its genesis in the Indian's distorted sense of his/ 
her own literary history and poetic legacy. An in-depth knowledge of its own literary, 
aesthetic, and ideological inheritance on the other hand, would have erased the crack in 
its growth. This fact is well-demonstrated in the work of great poets like Rabindranath 
Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, who wrote in the line of the mystic tradition of Indian poetry. 
In Aurobindo's poetry we have a living proof of how the English language could be 
stretched and moulded to suitably express the spiritual aesthetic, and ideological 
demands of the Indian consciousness. In him we have the wealth of a poetic which is 
able to fuse the mentality of its nation with the spiritual, aesthetic and intellectual 
potential that tradition creates for it. In Tagore's poetry translated into English, we have a 
manifestation of the rhythms, sensibilities, and pantheistic leanings of the mystic poet 
as he painted the humdrum of living in rural Bengal along the banks of the Padma river. 
Both Tagore and Aurobindo, were able to produce great poetry of lasting worth. Their's 
was a poetry well-rooted in its literary past. At the same time it used with ease, insights 
gained from its knowledge of Western literature, and thus furthered the potential of 
Indian poetry-writing.

The Conclusion attempts to define in some detail, the tradition of Indian mystic poetry, 
and suggests that it shares a common mystic idiom right from the Upanishads to the
Bhagvadgita, through the entire Bhakti genre, and unto the poetry of Tagore and Aurobindo. The thesis also makes a case for translation of regional poetry into English, and for the need to experiment with Indian forms and metres in the Indian English poetic.

As Aijaz Ahmed comments in his essay, “Third Worldism And Literature”:

...what we need is not the foggy generality of a Third World Literature, but the enormously painstaking and detailed task of producing a usable coherent knowledge of an ‘Indian Literature’, in its civilizational depth and linguistic amplitude, which we do not at present adequately possess. There are some research areas where we can usefully deploy our respective bi-lingualities and critical skills to fill in the very many lacunae that currently exist in our knowledge of our own collective past... (208)

This thesis is one such attempt to fill that “lacunae” in our understanding of our “collective past”. Since both history and scholarship on the Bhakti movement have tended to study the bhaktas in isolation or in small groups so far, a major Bhakti poet like Nanak has been allowed to remain in the Sikh fold, and the merit of his verse lost upon Indian literary circles at large. Thus, while this thesis on the one hand 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 by and large, the entire Bhakti movement; to see it in totality as connected, organic and as the earliest modern ideological phenomenon. The Bhakti tradition, in other words, emerges as the bedrock of Indian mystic poetry.

The objectives of this thesis are as follows:

(1) It attempts to see Bhakti poetry, hand in hand with its socio-historical contexts, as a continuous poetic tradition. (This approach is sustained throughout the thesis)

(2) It explores the various factors that led to the genesis of the Bhakti movement, the issues it addressed, the social reforms it brought about, the popularity it enjoyed with the marginalized segments of society, and the role it played in assuaging the Hindu-Muslim differences. (This remains the main concern of chapters one, two and three)

(3) It makes a reading of major Bhakti poets like Kabir and Nanak, against the fabric of Bhakti and Sufi traditions; and attempts to see in their work, continuities with
their past and future Indian mystic poetry. (This is the prime concern of chapters four and five)

(4) The thesis indicates that great poetry is always rooted in a corresponding sense of history and spirituality. This fact becomes self evident in chapter six when Bhakti poetry (including that of Tagore and Aurobindo,) is juxtaposed with the Indian English verse of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

(5) By surveying the Bhakti tradition at large, the thesis also attempts to understand the features that characterized Bhakti poetry beginning from seventh century onwards until the fifteenth-sixteenth century. The Bhakti genre which is the prime concern of the first five chapters, provides an interesting backdrop to the concerns of the sixth chapter and steers the thesis to asking (I hope,) some thought-provoking questions.

(6) And lastly, in chapter six the thesis strives to analyze the effects of both the Islamic and the British rule upon the Indian culture and mindset. It also attempts to compare Indian poetry written in the Medieval period with verse written in English, during the colonial period. By undergoing this exercise, the study attempts to arrive at an honest understanding of Indian poetry writing in English, and to examine its continuities and departures from the tradition of Indian poetry.

Works Cited


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