A prominent feature of the fourteenth century (period by which time the Bhakti movement had covered the entire country), is the presence of Islam and Islamic culture: its forced conversions and the numerous raids enacted under the rule of the Mongol, Afghan and Turkish invaders; which culminated into the Mughals (beginning with Babur in 1506 A.D.) establishing a stable Mughal empire by the earlier half of the sixteenth century. Until then the Indian subcontinent (especially Punjab, Sindh and upper Gujarat), was rent with political instability, cultural insecurity, and the terror of plunder and poverty. The advent and rule of Islamic invaders in their first century in India saw the Delhi Sultanate changing hands among the Mongols, Afghans and Turks who kept ousting and snatching power from each other; from time to time treating Indian land like a prized booty, to be conquered and possessed.

The pillaging and looting of Buddhist monasteries and Hindu places of worship was the direct expression of Muslim antagonism towards any religion other than Islam. Buddhism being an institutionalized and ‘proselytizing’ religion attracted even more undesired attention:

...the attack on the monasteries resulted in an exodus of Buddhists from eastern India to south-east Asia. Islam found its largest following in previously Buddhist areas of India, the north-west and the east. From the fourteenth century onwards the Bhakti movement became a dynamic force in north Indian society and up to a point, filled the vacuum created by the retreating Buddhists, since it attracted the professional castes.

( Romila Thapar 264)

The inception of the Bhakti movement and the coming of Islam (and the Sufis) to India was curiously simultaneous in the north and north-west of India. But we cannot say that the Bhakti movement was caused by Islamic and Sufi influence; it was only further stimulated by their presence. The Sufis (who were in fact rebels against orthodox Islam),
and the Hindu saints (who were placed similarly vis-a-vis the Brahmin orthodoxy), were actually to become the meeting-points for Islam and Hinduism, and a rich sharing and exchange of spiritual values, thoughts, and modes of devotion followed.

The high-caste Kshatriyas and the Brahmin orthodoxy, on the other hand, recoiled more and more within themselves. They maintained a strict distance from the impure (Mleccha) invaders for whom they only had contempt and disgust (*1 see notes). Thus, threatened by foreign culture, the orthodoxy became more fanatic and self-conscious:

In the process of preserving their exclusiveness, the Brahmins concentrated upon their own internal resources and traditional literature.

This led to a revival of the study of older texts, with detailed commentaries and digests. When the new rulers asked to see the legal basis and interpretation of Hinduism, the brahmans provided the material basis on early texts, which dealt with a theoretically ideal state. There was little or no attempt to recognize, let alone come to terms with, a powerful group which did not fit into a caste hierarchy. (Thapar 304)

The impact of such dynastic changes was therefore felt most strongly in the highest circles where resentment was often pronounced, and resistance seethed at its most intense. The rest of the society had more or less accepted the new rulers. It was at the lower levels of caste and class, that the new culture of Islam was to enter the pattern of Indian civilisation and make its strongest impact.

History has stood witness to the fact that an invading culture always appeals to the lowest (and obviously the most gullible), section of the society. In the south India of the fourth-fifth centuries, it was the lower castes – primarily the merchant classes – that had converted to Buddhism or Jainism. Similarly a few centuries later, when some enlightened Brahmin-saints of Tamil Nadu visualised the threat to Hinduism, and initiated a modified, more liberal and emotionally appealing form of religion through the cult of Shaiva or Vaishnava Bhakti, their followers were mainly from the Shudra and artisan classes. Their opponents of course, were the Brahmin orthodoxy. Later we know, the Bhakti movement spread all across the country and produced great saints and poets – some were high caste Brahmins and many were from the lower, even the most unprivileged of classes.
The Sufis, who were rebel-saint-poets from within the Islamic infrastructure were identically placed, vis-a-vis the Islamic orthodoxy, its Ulemans and the Mullahs. The Sants and the Sufis in other words were representing the marginalised classes – the periphery; while the Brahmin orthodoxy and the Islamic fanatics were the priest-heads of the central ruling class. The slow but steady march of the periphery into the centre (represented by the vernacular and Sanskrit language; the lower castes and the Brahmins respectively), their Derndian "displacement of the centre", is what makes the Bhakti movement such an interesting and volatile area of study, historically, architecturally, linguistically, theologically, sociologically, and as the first milestone in modern Indian literature in regional languages:

The fusion of Islamic culture with existing Indian culture achieved its most positive expression in the activities of the artisan classes of the towns and amongst the cultivators as is evident from the socio-religious ideas of the time, and also in primarily artisan activities such as building monuments, the fusion being evident in the architecture of the period. The pattern of living in both these classes came to be interrelated to a far greater degree than amongst the nobility. Domestic ceremonies and rituals such as those connected with birth, marriage, and death became mingled. The converted Muslims were also heirs to longstanding rituals practised by the Hindus. New ceremonies which had come with Islam, and which were regarded as auspicious, crept into Hindu ritual.

(Thapar 300)

Such was the thread and weave of the society from which emerged a number of Hindu poet-saints and Muslim Sufis. Many of them strove to rise above the Hindu-Muslim differences, and commanded both Hindu and Muslim following. The two saint poets who had been mainly responsible for the spread of Bhakti in the northern belt were, a tailor and a Brahmin, i.e. Namdev from Pandharpur, and Ramananda the learned Vaishnava of Benaras. After the death of his friend Sant Jnandev, Namdev had journeyed up north till Punjab (where he spent twenty years) spreading the message of God through his abhangas and Bhakti, and asking people to shed the slough of ritual and superstition. Ramananda originally educated under the more conservative school of Vaishnava Brahminism, was also someone who relaxed the rigidities of the system, introduced egalitarian reforms and readily accepted disciples from lower castes and communities,
Thus dismissing the sanctity of casteism. He also introduced the cult of Rama-Sita Bhakti. His disciples in turn spread his vision of love and equality and some of them (like Kabir, Ravidas, and Dhanna), even went down in history as great poet-saints of the era. Among the Sufi orders, those which found greater acceptance were as follows: the Qadri, the Suhrawardi, the Naqshbandi, and the Chisti. The Chisti Silsila proved to be the most brilliant in terms of (a) the great Sufi-poets it produced, (b) the large areas it spread into, and (c) the large following it gathered. Baba Sheikh Farid, who belonged to the Chisti Silsila is known as a harbinger of Hindu-Muslim unity along the likes of Nanak and Kabir.

Going back to history, Sufism was born in the ninth century Arabia and during its travel and sojourn through Iran and India, it underwent slight perceptual shifts. For instance it stressed upon the emotional content of devotion, as against the dry-as-dust self-denial of the Arabs:

The Arabs laid stress on asceticism and torturing the body, while the later Sufis in Iran and India under the influence of Greek philosophy, Platonic ideology, Christian faith, Vedantist thinking, Buddhist lore, etc. believed in leading an emotionally rich life. They drank and danced and advocated that physical love can sublimate itself into spiritual love. They had faith in God; they loved the Prophet but they maintained that the Murshed or Guru could also lead to Divine Reality. (Sekhon and Duggal 64)

Between the end of the twelfth century and the end of the fifteenth century, three great Sufi orders had migrated from Iraq and Persia into northern India. They were, the Chistis, the Suhrawardis and the Firdausis. The Sufis had followed the Muslim conquerors to India, more with a view to propagating Islam. They established several centres at Lahore, Pakpattan, Kasur, Multan, and Uch in Punjab. However, only those survived, who absorbed and mingled with the culture of the land, and propagated a more liberal Sufi philosophy. Their approach to God was that a lover-wife who pines for a reunion with her beloved husband, suffers, repents, undergoes asceticism, finally gains enlightenment and merges with God. Some Sufis justified the incorporation of music, not sanctified by orthodox Islam, on the ground that:

...a Sufi is a lover of God, and as such he stands in a different relation to God from others who are merely 'abd' or slaves. The Indian Sufis laid
stress on repeating the name (japu), concentration (dhyan), and meditation (habs-i-dhyan)...like the Iranian Sufis who sang the praises of Yusuf Zulaikha, Laila Majnun and Shirin Farhad, the Sufis in the (17th, 18th century) Punjab idealised the romances of Heer Ranjah, Sohni Mahiwal and Sassi Punnun. (Sekhon and Duggal 65)

For the purpose of the thesis, we shall only trace briefly the career of the most popular Sufi order – the Chisti Silsilah – through the three great Sufis it produced. Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti of Ajmer, Baba Sheikh Fand of Ajodhan, and Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi. The saint who introduced the Chisti order in India was Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, who established his Khanqah at Ajmer during the period of the Ghorian conquest of India in the closing years of the twelfth century. He had a long line of spiritual successors who continued his mission in India. Baba Shaikh Farid (1173-1265 A.D.), who came after him and was the most remarkable of the next generation of popular Sufis of the Chisti Silsilah, was the disciple of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Kaki.

Baba Sheikh Farid was born and brought up at Khotwal, a small village near Ajodhan in West Punjab. On growing up, he shifted to Multan for further studies; where he also came across his spiritual mentor, Hazrat Qutb-ud-Din Bakhtiar Kaki. Hazrat Kaki took Farid along with him to Delhi where they met Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti – the greatest contemporary name among Muslim men of God. History records, that Sheikh Farid underwent severe penance and asceticism under Khwaja Qutb-ud-Din’s stewardship. He hung himself upside down in a well for forty days. He neither ate nor drank but remained attuned to the Almighty. The following lines by Farid refer to this experience, “Says Farid, / My bread is made of wood, / And hunger is my sauce; / Those who eat rich food, / will suffer severe agonies”. A great poet of his times, Farid wrote his verse in musical measures so that it could be sung. He also wrote a large number of couplets which became very popular with Punjabi-speaking people. A sample:

Says Farid

I have seen the eyes that hued the world.
A trace of kohl they would not bear.
And birds, today, have made their nests in them.

Says Farid,
Why do you roam the jungles with thorns pricking your feet?
Your lord swells in your heart.
And you wander about in search of Him.

Says Farid,
I thought I was alone who suffered.
I went on top of the house,
And found every house on fire.

(Tr. K.S. Duggal 19)

It was fortunate for the world that Guru Nanak met Sheikh Ibrahim, a follower of Baba Farid in the sixteenth century, and recorded Baba Fand’s poetry which was later preserved in the Guru Granth Sahib of the Sikhs. Quoted below are a few more specimens of Farid’s verse that I have picked up from Sekhon and Duggal’s History Of Punjabi Literature. In all of them is reflected the longing to unite with the Lord. They have been translated by S.S. Sekhon, and the emphasis is mine:

(a) The lanes are muddy and far is the house
of the One I love so much.
   If I walk to Him I wet my rug, and
   remaining behind, I fail in my love! (21)

(b) Sorrow is the bedstead,
   Pain the fibre with which it is woven,
   And separation is the quilt
   See this is the life we lead, O Lord. (21)

(c) On the bank of a pool in the moor
   The swan has come to alight
   But he does not dip his beak to drink,
   He is eager to fly away (23)

(d) Says Farid, you must fathom the ocean which contains what you want.
   Why do you soil your hand searching the petty ponds,
   Says Farid, the Creator is in the creation
and the creation in the Creator

Whom shall we blame when He is everywhere.

(23-24)

The third great Sufi poet of the Chisti Silsilah was Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi. He was Sheikh Farid's most prominent follower as well. At the age of ninety, when Baba Fand was about to breathe his last, he sent for Sheikh Nizamuddin, and only after taking leave of him, he passed away. One of the greatest Sufis of his times, and a mighty spiritual force, Nizamuddin Auliya like his predecessors, stressed upon the element of love as a means of the realisation of God. The love of God, to him implied, the love of humanity. His deep attachment to the idea of universal love is manifest from the following utterance. "O Muslims! I swear by God, that He holds dear those who love Him for the sake of human beings, and also those who love human beings for the sake of God. This is the only way to love and adore God" (Tr. Malsha & Gavasker 551). His vision of the world is marked by a highly evolved sense of secularity and kindness. For instance, the Hazrat was particularly pleased at the spiritual progress made by some butchers of Delhi. According to him, "Every particle of the universe shows the way to God, but no way to Him is shorter than the one through the human heart." (J S Grewal 103)

Once one has (hypothetically speaking) met the Sufis, and read their poetry, one can see clearly for oneself the extent of Sufi influence upon our more egalitarian poets like Namdev, Ramananda, Kabir, and Nanak. A few samples of their verse, which illustrate the point, follow:

(a) Namdev's verse:

The snake casts off its slough but not its poison
Thou art like the heron
that fixes its attention on fish in water...

...wherever I go there the lord is contained
Amidst supreme bliss, He ever sports.
I bring flowers and weave a garland to worship Him.
But the humming bumble bee has first sucked, the fragrance
How, O Brother, can I worship God?

I fetch milk and cook it to make a pudding,
with milk, rice and sugar to feed the Lord
But the calf has first defiled the milk
How should I adore the Pervading God with it?

Here is the Lord,
there is the lord.
Without the Lord there is no world ever.
Thou O Lord, supplicates Namdev, art fully contained
in all the places and inter-spaces.
(Tr. Manmohan Singh Vol 3 1602-1603) [All emphasis mine]

(b) Kabir:

The musician plays a peerless instrument
with eight sky-mouts thundering
Only you, are played, only you
thunder, your hand alone
runs up and down.
In one sound thirty-six ragas, speaking
an endless word.
The mouths a shaft
the ear a sounding gourd –
the Satguru made the instrument.
( Tr. Hess and Singh 63 )

Think pandit, figure it out:
male or female?
In a Brahmin’s house she’s Mrs. Brahmin,
in a yogi's she's a disciple.
Reading the Koran she's a Turkish lady.
In Kaliyug she lives alone
She doesn't choose a husband,
doesn't get married,
but has sons
Not a single black-haired fellow escapes her,
but she's a permanent virgin
She stays with her mother,
doesn't join her in-laws,
won't sleep with her husband.
Kabir says, he lives from age to age
who drops his family, caste and race.
(Tr. Hess and Singh 56-57) [Emphasis mine]

(c) Nanak's verse:

Discipline is the workshop;
patience, the goldsmith;
the anvil, one's thinking;
wisdom, the hammer;
Fear, the bellows,
austerity, the fire;
and feeling, the vessel
where the deathless liquid is poured.

In such a true mint
is forged the Word,
and those on whom He looks
do their rightful deeds.
Nanak says:
the One who sees,
sees.
He observes.
In Chet agreeable is the spring
and beautiful the bumble bee
The forests are flowering
in front of my door.
May my Love return home

................
the beauteous cuckoo sings
on the mango tree. How can I bear
the pain of my mind?
The black bee is flitting on the blossoming bough.
How can I survive, O mother?
I am dying.....

(Tr. Manmohan Singh 1447)

(d) Ramananda:

Wherever I go, I find water and stones there.
Thou O Lord, art equally contained in everything.
The Vedas and Puranas all I have seen and searched.
I may go there only if, the Lord be absent here.
My True Guru, a sacrifice am I unto thee.
Who has cut away all my doubts and perplexities.
Ramanand’s Master is the All pervading Lord.
The Guru’s word destroys millions of misdeeds.
(Tr. Manmohan Singh 3941) [All emphasis mine.]

There is in the poems above an openness about God, who is visualized as a free
flowing spirit that is present everywhere, in a rock, a mountain, in the buzzing bumble
bee, or the calf that suckles its mother. It is seen as both the creator and the created. In
the garb of a Brahmin or a Muslim the core is that same one God. He does not need a
temple to be worshipped, for this entire universe is a glorious monument – an evidence – of the great moving spirit. Nature is all the time performing worship to that one God who is everywhere (outside and within). The above poems and Bhakti poetry at large, is all the time saying so. And by casting aside all the shackles (whether physical, psychological or social) imposed upon the concept of the divine, the Bhakti and Sufi saints set God free from the prison of ritual and religion. By doing so they also made him more approachable. The heightened lines in the poems above fairly consolidate the point.

Ramananda (1300 to 1411 A.D.) occupies a unique place in the history of religion in medieval India. Although brought up in the traditional school of Vaishnavism founded by Ramanuja, he gave it an altogether new face by his reforms. He founded a new school of Vaishnavism based on the egalitarian gospel of love and devotion. Although a Brahmin himself, Ramananda abolished the consideration of caste which had been a feature of Vaishnavism. He did not distinguish between his high and low caste disciples and often used to dine with them. Many of his pupils hailed from the so-called degraded classes. Among his first twelve disciples were Asananda, Surasurananda, Sukhananda, Paramananda, Mahananda, Pipa (a Rajput ruling chief), Kabir (a weaver), Bhavananda, Sena (a barber), Dhanna (a jat peasant), Sri Ananda, and Ravidas (a cobbler). Like his southern predecessors, Ramananda initiated the use of the vernacular in the North of India. The third, not necessarily the most successful of beginnings by Ramananda was the cult of Rama and Sita, instead of Krishna and Radha. Other aspects which were part of the larger mystic wave of the period, like the movement towards the inner self as opposed to external ritual superficial ranting in God’s name, were an intrinsic part of Ramanand’s teachings. The following verse included in the *Granth Sahib* echoes the spirit of saints like Nammalvar of eighth century Tamilnadu, and the Lingayat saint Basavanna from twelfth century Karnataka *(2)* among others:

O witer should I go.
There is bliss in my very home.

My mind has stilled.
It has become,
a cripple.
One day in my mind, welled up a desire
I ground sandal-wood and took
distilled aloe-wood and many perfumes

To the Lords temple I hurned for worship
But that temple, the Guru revealed
was within.

(Tr. Myself Granth Sahib 3941)

It is safe to say that Ramananda borrowed ideas*(3) from the various religious schools
that flourished before him, vitalized them with the love and devotion of his heart, and
founded a new path of spiritual realization He cleansed and refurbished the school of
Vaishnava Bhakti with his enlightened and humanistic approach; and was mainly
instrumental in ushering in the new epoch of medieval mysticism in India. It was this path
which Kabir and others followed later and decorated with their lives, their faith and rich
poetry.*(4)

The most famous disciple of Ramananda was, Kabir. Details about his paternity and
eyear life are shrouded in mystery. One legend ascribes him to a Brahmin unwed or
widowed mother who abandoned him to escape social taboo. What is known for definite
is that he was brought up by a Muslim weaver named Niru and his wife Nima. Whether
Kabir's Muslim parents were his foster parents or real parents, will always remain a
mystery. So also the date of Kabir's birth, about which there are two opinions. The most
accepted dates of his birth and death are (1440-1518 A.D.), those which take Kabir to be
a contemporary of Sikandar Lodi who ruled from 1489 to 1517 A.D. This fits in with (a)
the traditional belief that Kabir died in 1518 A.D., (b) that Nanak met him about 1496
A.D, (c) and that Sheikh Taqqi was the religious guide or rival of Kabir. These details
would not correspond with the other tradition which places his birth and death between
1338 and 1448 A.D., and confirm that he was a disciple of Ramananda. According to
legend, Kabir tricked his way into discipleship. He lay down one early morning, on the
steps of the bathing ghat where Ramananda used to take his daily bath. In the predawn
darkness Ramananda, tripped upon him accidentally, and exclaimed Ram, Ram.
Kabir took that as the mantra, and Ramananda when apprised of the whole fact, accepted him as his disciple. Yet, whether the two men ever met or not is a matter for speculation. Kabir’s poetry however, is full of exhortations to recite the name of Ram to devote oneself to Ram over and above everything else. Kabir’s Ram (as a reading of his dohas reveals), is not the Ram of Ayodhya in Ramayana. Rather he uses the term as a synonym for God as the following verse will illustrate:

You simple minded people!
as water enters water, so Kabir
will meet with dust
‘That Maithili pandit said
you’d die near Maghar.
What a terrible place to be dead!
If you want Ram to take you away,
die somewhere else instead.
Besides, they say
whoever dies at Maghar
comes back a donkey.

So much for your faith in Ram.
What’s Kashi? Maghar? Barren ground,
when Ram rules in your heart. If you give up the ghost in Kashi
is there some debt
on the Lord’s part?
(Tr. Hess & Singh 75-76) [Emphasis mine]

In yet another poem in the Bijak, Kabir debunks ritual and the blind devotion of established opinion. “Is there any guru in the world / wise enough to understand the upside-down Veda?” A thoroughbred iconoclast, Kabir’s poems project a tumbled world which has lost its natural order:

Cow ate lion, deer ate cheetah,
Crow pounced on falcon, quail conquered hawk,
mouse ate cat, the dog jackal.
He who knows the primal teaching
Kabir shouts:
both together one!

Kabir made no distinction between Hinduism and Islam – they being mere mental and cultural outfits. He called himself the child of both and strove all his life to reconcile the differences between the two. Ironically, soon after his passing away, his Hindu and Muslim followers fought over how to dispose of his body. The Hindus wished to cremate, the Muslims, to bury it. But when the sheet covering the dead body was removed, nothing but a heap of flowers was found. The Hindus took half of them and burnt them in Banaras, while the Muslims buried the other half in Maghar.

Kabir did not codify his doctrine in the form of a book. He was fond of oral teachings in the form of small poems, which were later collected in the Bijak in the sixteenth century. Another book in which many of his poems find place is the Adi Granth of the Sikhs, which has mystical and religious verse by Nanak and the nine Sikh Gurus and also the verse of their contemporary (mostly sixteenth century) Saints, Sufis and Bards.

Another advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity, who also happened to be a disciple of Ramananda like Kabir, was Ravidas, a cobbler – the great saint of north India, whose profession required him to work daily with the hides of dead animals. “O well born of Banaras, I too am born well known: / My labour is with leather. But my heart can boast the Lord.” Ravidas was a poet and a singer and the hymns he sang had such a ring of truth that eventually the Brahmins who came to hear them in fact became his disciples and would bow before him “in a total inversion of protocol.” He was however not unaware of his social status and this perception made him empathize with every cobbler and scavenger of the world. And he rallied against anyone who treated another person with disgust and disrespect. In the following verse, composed in raga Basant, Ravidas rebukes the human preoccupation with vainglorious pursuits:

You know nothing, ignorant Man.
Appraising yourself
you glow with pride
Such a bride is unwelcome.
Over her neck caws the crow of death

O you vainglorious fool
like the mushroom of Bhadon
you are even more short-lived.

Like the deer who knows not
that the fragrance of the musk
lies coiled within

So does the Lord live within
Understand this secret
and you shall never
fear death

(Tr. Myself Granth Sahib 3944)

The above verse is one of the many verses by Ravidas included in the Adi Granth (or the Granth Sahib, as the Sikhs call it). As Hawley and Juergensniyer observe in Songs of the Saints of India:

It is commonly accepted that Nanak and Ravidas were contemporaries who met at a place in Benaras that is fittingly called, Guru Bagh – the Guru’s Garden – but the estimation of who learned more from whom depends upon whether one is primarily a follower of Nanak or of Ravidas.

... Ravidas’s Bhakti, then, is an answer to caste Hinduism, but not explicitly a call for its reform. Even though he speaks of a kingdom ‘where none are third or second – all are one’, and where the residents ‘do this or that, they walk where they wish’, still he admits that it is his ‘distant home’ and he issues no direct call for realizing it here on earth.(17)

Truly enough, lofty and beautifully spiritual is the vision of this great saint poet. To read the following lines alone is like tonic. “Brother, says Ravidas, the world’s a game, a magic show,/ and I’m in love with the gamester,/ the magician who makes it go”

Another great saint of medieval India, though differing in some respects from the views of Ramananda, Kabir, Ravidas and Nanak, was Sri Krishna Chaitanya from West
Bengal (1486-1533 A.D.). He was a school teacher running his own Sanskrit tol (i.e. school). His original name was Vishvambhara. He had migrated from Sylhet (East Bengal) and settled in Navadvipa in West Bengal. At the age of twenty two, when Vishvambhara visited Ganga to offer oblations to his deceased father, he met a recluse named Ishwarpuri, who gave him the Krishna mantra. This changed the whole tenor of his life. He became a devotee intoxicated upon Lord Krishna. Wrapped in mystic and emotional experience he would repeat the name of Krishna, sing, laugh, weep, rave and often fall into a trance. Soon a band of disciples – including the famous Advaita and Nityananda – had gathered around him. And.

A new type of emotional and devotional singing, called kirtana, often consisting of merely recitation of the names of Han and Krishna, and sung in chorus to the accompaniment of loud instrumental music, became the regular feature of religious life. Huge processions of kirtana parties paraded the streets of Navadvipa, with Vishvambhara and his prominent followers at the head, singing and dancing wildly in a mood of ecstasy. ("The Delhi Sultanate“ 566)

Such public display of excessive emotional orgy was ultimately prohibited by the then Muslim governor. After some passive resistance, the practice of religious processions diminished. Vishvambhara took to Sanyasa in January, 1510 A.D., and came to be known as Sri Krishna Chaitanya. At the request of his mother he desisted from settling in Vrindavan — the land of Lord Krishna’s childhood — and took up permanent residence nearer home, at Puri.

Hereafter began his extensive pilgrimages to the South, the West, and lastly the North of India upto Vrindavan. The new cult of Vaishnavism propounded by Chaitanya had become highly popular among the masses. It came to be known as the Vrindavan school of Bhakti, since it was at the insistence of Chaitanya that Vrindavan (a forgotten holy site), was converted into a religious centre. In the last phase of his life, Chaitanya remained at Puri and spent his time preaching amidst frequent religious trances and divine ecstasies. He was saturated with the Radha-Krishna cult and evidently, influenced by the passionate romantic poems of Jayadev, and the melodious songs of Chandidasa – both of whom celebrate the love of Radha and Krishna. Perhaps, no other religious saint stretched the analogy of lover and the beloved (God), to such emotional lengths as Chaitanya did. But his love had nothing physical in it. Chaitanya put it on a high
spiritual plane, and guarded against its degeneration into sensuality. He forbade his followers any kind of social intercourse with women. He did not give much weight to knowledge, but stressed upon sincere zeal and devotion and a passionate love for Hari as the only means of salvation. He was however, not a pure egalitarian where caste is concerned. His attitude towards rituals and idol worship was not as straight-forward either. And unlike most Bhakti saints who continued to be householders till the end, Chaitanya took to Sanyasism, later in life, and staunchly forbade any sort of dealings with the women folk. That he worshipped both Radha-Krishna as inseparable, is significant though. While the Ramananda school of Bhakti had found popular following in north India, the Vrindavana school of Sri Chaitanya made a profound mark upon the Bhakti cult of Gujarat. It greatly influenced Mirabai (1498-1546 A.D.), and Narasimha Mehta (1500-1580 A.D.), the two greatest exponents of Bhakti in sixteenth century Gujarat.

Mira was born around 1498 A.D., as the only daughter of Ratan Singh, a Rajput noble of the house of Rathore. She lost her mother at a very early age, and was sent to her grandfather Rau Dudaji's palace in Merta, for better upbringing and care. Here, the little Mira grew up and merged naturally into Krishna Bhakti, for it was a family tradition. She also acquired knowledge of the Vedas, the Puranas and the Upanishads, an education in Sanskrit and the arts of music and dancing. In 1516 A.D. Mira was married to Prince Bhoja Raj, son and heir apparent of the Sisodiya family. Fortunately for Mira, the Sisodiyas were Vaishnava and Krishna bhaktas. Her father-in-law Rana Sanga's mother — Jhalli Rani — was a noted devotee, and a disciple of Sant Ravidas (also spelt as Raidas, a low caste Chamar i.e. a cobbler). According to some historic accounts Ravidas was Mirabai's spiritual preceptor. It was Jhalli Rani who initiated Mira into the practice of receiving Sadhus of the Sant school, as visitors, to enjoy their satsang. Mira continued the practice even after Jhalli Rani passed away. This attracted the displeasure of some members of the family.

Mira's troubles began after the death of Rana Sanga in the battle of Khanua, against the Mughal emperor Babur in 1527 A.D. A period of isolation followed. Eventually, she was driven to make a final and complete rejection of the values of the society in which she was brought up. She set off on her travels once again. She visited Vrindavan and later settled into worship at Dwarka, where she also breathed her last in 1546 A.D. According
to mythical accounts, she merged body and soul, into the idol of Lord Knshna in the
temple, where she had been meditating one morning. A song of Mira says:

The spnng feast of colour,
with sprinkling and laughter,
tastes like the dust.

Empty the bed, the attic, the fields
My walk swings empty because
what weighed my heart is lost.

I fear to seek and fear
to think. Counting and counting
each day, the lines on my
fingers are scraped.

The drums are playing, the
jhanjh, the flute, the one-
stringed lute. The light rain

of spnng has begun
but the dark one is from home

Says Meera, I wait.

life after life
I stand by the road

and look for a home

with my lord,

lifter
Mira must have lived in the midst of a great devotional renaissance. Among her immediate forerunners could have been, Sant Ravidas, Kabir, Vidyapati, Chandidas and Narasimha Mehta, while her contemporaries (one assumes going by the dates), must have included Surdas, Nanak, and the early poets of the schools of Vallabhacharya (of Gujarat), and Sri Chaitanya (of West Bengal). The compositions of Mira were primarily meant for singing. As A J Alston comments, "Tulsidas, surpassing even Surdas as the greatest devotional poet in Hindi, was probably born towards the later end of Meera's life-span... Clearly she was not Surdas's equal technically as a poet. [However,] In spirit they seem to stand close. Surdas painted scenes and incidents from the life of Krishna as a child and youth. Mira expressed a more personal association with the Lord" (20).

Here is a sample of their styles, the first poem being of Surdas, and the second Mira's:

(1)
If you drink the milk of the black cow, Gopal, you'll see your black braid grow.
Little son, listen, among all the little boys you'll be the finest, most splendid one.
Look at the other lads in Braj and see its milk that brought them their strength.
So drink: the fire daily burn in the bellies of you foes - Kans and Kesi and the Crane.'
He takes a little bit, and tugs his hair a little bit to see if his mother's telling lies.
Sur says, Yasoda looks at his face and laughs when he tries to coax his curls beyond his ear
(Tr. J S Hawley 105)

(2)
I'm colored with the color of dusk, oh Rana, colored with the color of my lord
Drumming out the rhythm on the drums, I danced,
dancing in the presence of the saints,  
coloured with the colour of my lord

They thought me mad for the Maddening One,  
raw for my dear dark love,  
coloured with the colour of my lord.

The Rana sent me a poison cup  
I didn't look, I drank it up,  
coloured with the colour of my lord.

The clever mountain lifter is the lord of Mira.  
Life after life he's true –  
coloured with the colour of my Lord.

(Tr Chaturvedi Songs of the Saints of India 134)

Narasimha Mehta, (1414 – 1480 A.D) whom tradition regards as a forerunner of Mirabai, came from a high caste Nagar Brahmin family*(5). Orphaned at an early age, he grew up under the care of his elder brother. His associations with itinerant sadhus and pilgrims began from his childhood days. The desire for contact with the divine (whom he perceived in the image of Krishna), gathered momentum with passing years, until at a very young age, an experience at Dwarka, completely transformed Narasimha and made him a “poet of genius, a philosopher with a vision and a saint endowed with the overflowing love for God”. “O Hari, in the whole universe, / you are the one reality, / varied and infinite, / you are the wind / you are the water, / you are the earth, mountain, / and the tree blossomed up to the sky “ (Tr. Uma S. Deshpande Medieval Bhakti Movements in India 107). A married man with three children, the graph of Narasimha’s domestic life (and domestic woes), echoes some facts from Tukaram’s personal life. Of course, unlike the latter Narasimha Mehta was born of a high caste. He was a saint to the core. He used to frequent the hamlets of the pariahs, (for whom he had coined the term ‘harijān’, meaning God’s own people; later the term harijan was extensively used and popularised by Mahatma Gandhi). He would often sing along with them, bhajans, all night. In this, he was in the company of saints like Mirabai and Sri Chaitanya. As Deshpande comments:
his direct perception of the supercosmic divine dance, the total mingling of his personality into the divine form of the Lord Krishna and the experience of the divine grace in his life got him converged from a devotee to a philosopher, and from a philosopher to a mystic (112).

Besides these two great Vaishnava poets in Gujarat, there existed (i) Pipa, the ruler of a small principality who renounced worldly life, became the disciple of Ramananda and settled near Dwarka. He lived around 1430-1435 A.D. His verse finds a place of honour in the Adi Granth. So also the verse of Dadu. (ii) Dadu (1544-1603 A.D.), was the most celebrated disciple of Kabir. Born in Ahmedabad, he later settled in Narana, Rajasthan. Dadu like Kabir, worked towards religious syncretism, laying great stress upon Hindu-Muslim unity. With the help of his followers he compiled a book of religious literature which had a collection of devotional writings of various sects and several devotional hymns including those by Sufis like Kazi Kadam, Sheikh Farid, Kazi Mohammad, Sheikh Bahawad and many others. According to existing evidence, Manjula Bhattacharya says in "Medieval Bhakti Movements in Gujarat".

It was perhaps the first anthology in the religious literature of the world in which the views of a great variety of religious sects had been collected. The second of this kind is probably the Granth Sahib which was compiled in A.D. 1604, one year after Dadu's death. (Medieval Bhakti Movements in India 103)

Among the Hindu Bhakti poets that existed in the sixteenth century Gujarat-Rajasthan, were Bhan Saheb of Kathiawar (also a follower of Kabir), Namadev the cotton carder from Marwar; Lalbag who inspired the Alakhnamis sect in the Bikaner region, Laldasa of the Meo tribe of Rajasthan and founder of the Laldasi sect which was influenced by both Kabir and Dadu.

Another parallel stream of popular Bhakti in Gujarat was propagated by the sect of Vallabhacharya (1473-1531 A.D.). It had its largest following from among the rich trading and cultivator classes. The poet-saint Tulsidas belonged to the same sect. The Vallabha sect was very popular and spread widely in west India. But it could not sustain its vigour owing to the fact that leadership of the Vallabhacharya sect became the property of the descendents of the family of Vallabhacharya. This tendency of keeping the spiritual leadership within the family tree was strictly avoided by the poet-saint (and eventually...
the first Sikh Guru), Nanak and his successor nine saints who, acquired the position solely on the basis of their spiritual greatness. This was one major reason that the Sikh torch of faith grew strong and blazed deep enough to eventually become the only political strong-arm in the North that could defend the cause of the Hindus in the face of Mughal oppression which climaxed during the rule of Aurangzeb.

The tradition that Dadu Dayal, the saint from Dwarka, had begun by compiling a book of religious literature (of both Bhakti and Sufi traditions), was carried further in medieval Gujarat, by the poet-saint Prannath who contributed considerably towards cementing the Hindus and Muslims, spiritually. The teachings of Sant Prannath were collected by his followers in the Tartamya Sagar Granth with immense reverence and devotion — exactly as they would treat the spiritual master in person. The Sikhs therefore were not the first of their kind, nor were they alone in the practice of worshipping and consulting a scripture, a Granth in the physical absence of their preceptor.

Nanak (1469-1539 A.D.), the first Guru of the Sikhs, originally began as a Nirguna bhakta, in the footsteps of Kabir, and the two are perceived as the most famous bhaktas the lord ever produced. He was born in the town of Rai Bhoi di Talwandi, forty miles southwest of Lahore, in the Pakistan of today. His father was a bedi khatri, that is, a member of the merchant caste. He kept the town land-records for the regional ruler, Daulat Khan Lodi *(6). As a child Nanak was sent to study at a local Madarsa (i.e. a school). Right from the start, his unusual spells of silence were a cause for worry to his parents, who always kept trying to draw him out, to make him more gregarious and ‘normal’ like the other boys. In the same attempt they even got him married, early. Perhaps, the only person who really understood him was his sister – Bebe Nanki. The siblings shared a deep bond of affection. Nanak continued to resist taking up any of the occupations his family proposed for him and continued to keep to himself, wandering off with the Nath Yogis and Sufis in between, and meditating most of the time.

History recounts that Nanak’s moment of blinding insight came one day as he bathed in the river Vein near the town of Sultanpur. His response was characteristic: he immediately left the job he had finally accepted, as a clerk in the court of the prince who ruled the area, and set out to wander as any Hindu ascetic or Muslim faqir would; encountering and conversing off and on with other holy men like Surdas, the Sufi Sheikh
Fand, and perhaps also, Kabir, among others. Nanak's attitude towards his own unusual powers was that of indifference. The thrust being, not on the exhibition of one's powers (which only builds up ego and pride), but on totally surrendering to the divine within whom the devotee must merge finally, like all mystics.

Nanak's poetry reflects a deep love for nature and the cosmos, which are perceived as an extension of the divine order:

A plate-like sky,
the sun and moon
its prayer lamps,
the milkyway, of pearls.
Incense is the sandal-tree
Its fragrance the breeze fans, constantly
And the lush green wealth of forests
makes flower-offerings at God's feet

How beautiful is your prayer service!

Your soul, the soul of all life-form,
Your flame flickers, bright
in all that lives

The Guru's guidance is the match-stick
Thus lit alone
the Arti completes

(Tr. Myself)

Kabir and Nanak both lived in northern India and belonged to the generation that saw the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the next. They were there, when the wave of Bhakti, begun far back in the eighth century, climaxed. As Shama Futehally mentions in her Introduction to the book In The Dark Of The Heart, "Their mystical wisdom and pathos seeped deep into the Indian psyche. 'The river and the wave are one', he sang. 'Where is the difference?' To this day, Kabir's name is synonymous with Hindu-Muslim unity. His vision of unity was rooted in the genuine religious belief of the
bhakta. The same ground was shared by Kabir's younger contemporary Nanak. He went even further than Kabir in challenging the barriers of religious difference, declaring, "There is no Hindu or Muslim. So whose path shall I follow? I shall follow God's path."

The quest of Nanak led later to the formation of a third religion, the Sikh religion. What makes them both so interesting is, the culturally rich and potentially stimulating times in which they lived. In the next chapter we shall attempt to explore the thread and weave of the same.

While discussing in some detail, poets like Baba Farid, Ramananda, Kabir, Chaitanya, Ravidas, Nanak, Narasimha Mehta, Dadu Dayal and Mirabai, this chapter has attempted a cultural and political survey of North India during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It has also explored the areas of exchange between Sufi and Bhakti mysticism -- a concern we will deal with in greater detail later. The next two chapters will explore the context of the fourteenth-fifteenth century North India, in which Kabir and Nanak lived. Simultaneously, it will also examine the nature of the poetry these two poets composed, and the Sant ethos which became concretised through it.

Collectively, the first three chapters sum up the broader context of the Bhakti movement, which appears as a single continuous phenomenon -- an alternative to living -- that continued to derive momentum (during its spread through the centuries,) from its involvement with the changing needs of time. We can say that the Bhakti genre was a spiritually uplifting and enriched cultural response/resistance to the new mask of oppression. Although the Bhakti movement popularised itself with the marginalised segments of society, it was initiated (both in the South and North of India), by enlightened Brahmins like Nammalvar and Ramanand, who saw it also as a means of inducing a degree of catholicity and humanism in the otherwise frigid structure of Hinduism.
Notes

(1) As Alberuni, the Mughal traveller to India in A.D. 1030, recounts, "...the Hindus believe that there is no country but theirs, no religion like theirs, no science like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited, and stolid. They are by nature niggardly in communicating that which they know, and they take the greatest possible care to withhold it from men of another caste among their own people, still much more, of course, from any foreigner. If they travelled and mixed with other nations, they would soon change their mind, for their ancestors were not as narrow-minded as the present generation is." (22-23) "The Brahmans teach the Veda to the Kshatriyas. The latter learn it but are not allowed to teach it, not even to a Brahman. The Vaishya and Shudra are not allowed to hear it, much less to pronounce and recite it. If such a thing can be proved against one of them, the Brahmans drag him before the magistrate and he is punished by having his tongue cut off." (125)

(2) The rich
will make temples for Shiva.
What shall I,
a poor man,
do?
My legs are pillars,
The body the shrine,
the head a cupola
of gold.
Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,
things standing shall fall,
but the moving ever shall stay.
( Basavanna Tr. A.K. Ramanujan 19 )

(3) Before him in the twelfth century Ramanuja had tried to relax the orthodoxy and element of snobbery attached to Vaishnavism

(4) Sample poems of some of Ramananda's disciple, from the Granth Sahib:
When there was egoism within
thou were not. Now that thou art there,
egroism is naught
As huge waves raised by the winds
in the great ocean
are only water in water
What shall I say, O Lord,
about this delusion?
What we deem a thing to be,
in reality is not
(Ravidas)

I offer adoration and prayer,
with incense lamps and clarified butter
I am,
a sacrifice unto the Lord Lakshmi
Hail to thee Lord, hail!
Thine is eternal bliss
Sovereign Lord, Emperor
The Lord's meditation, Rama Nand
my Guru knows
He describes Him as Omniverse
the Embodiment, of Supreme joy
The world's Master of fascinating form
has fermed me across the temble world ocean
(Sena)

There is no coming
no going
(Pipa)

Your devotional service I perform
O Lord, arranger of our affairs
Pulses flour ghee footwear, good,
and corn of seven sorts I beg of thee
The milch cow and buffalo and also
a good Turkistani mare
Thy slave Dhanna O Lord,
 begs Thee to procure them
(Dhanna)

(5) According to modern history, Narasimha Mehta lived between 1500 to 1580 A.D.,
which makes him a contemporary of Mira

(6) Punjab was under the Lodis during Nanak's lifetime (i.e. 1469 to 1539 A.D.). At
the time of his birth, Bahlol Lodi (1451-1489 A.D.), was in power. He was succeeded
by his son Sikandar Lodi in 1489 A.D. and in 1517 A.D. Sikandar's son, Ibrahim Lodi
took over. He ruled from 1517 to 1526 A.D.

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