Chapter VII

GUJARATI POETRY PRIOR TO 1852

Modern Gujarati language, as it is spoken and as used in its literature to-day is derived from Sanskrit through the intermediate stages of Saurseni Prakrit and Gaurjar Apabhramsa. The following brief review of the (A) Old Gujarati Poetry till the end of fourteenth century, and (B) Mediaeval Gujarati Poetry from the fifteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, is intended as a background to modern Gujarati poetry since 1852 when it entered upon its new era of development as a result of the impact of the West and the influence of English on it.

(A) Old Gujarati Poetry

(a) Before Ulugh Khan's invasion of Gujarat and his occupation of its cultural capital Anahilvad Patan in 1299, Gujarat was generally prosperous and its people happily followed their commercial and cultural pursuits in peace and security of person, but the Mahomedan invader unleashed a reign of terror, destruction and forcible conversions, as a result of which, poets, priests and pandits, among others, left their ancestral homes for their lives, creating a void in the cultural and literary life of Gujarat. One redeeming feature of this catastrophic development was the continued presence of the Jain sadhus, who protected by their religious organisations, generally refrained from migrating from the country and thus pursued their literary activities in almost unbroken continuity. Old Gujarati literature of this period was, therefore, mainly their contribution.

Old Gujarati has some prose and a considerable body of poetic literature, which is mostly narrative in form. It is generally religious in character, though secular themes are not totally absent. The poetic form most commonly in vogue was the 'Rasa', which in its origin, like the Western lyric, was a form in which music, dance and words came together. But by about the eleventh century, the Rasa came to be used in the sense of a sustained narrative in verse, whether its theme was heroic, erotic or religious. This form was earnestly cultivated for about three centuries - and even longer in some measure - by the Old Gujarati poets, chief among whom were the Jain sadhus, whose principal object in writing them was to instruct the people in religion and morals in conformity with the tenets of their faith. The choice of Old Gujarati language as their medium of expression was actuated by a desire to reach the masses who spoke that language. The 'Rasas' were very much in literary vogue from the time of Hemachandra in the twelfth century to Narsinh Mehta in the fifteenth century and continued to be in some vogue even later till about the eighteenth century, if not still further. Though there are about three to four hundred Rasas, dated from 1344 to 1800, throwing light on the history of Gujarat, political, literary and social, most notable amongst them, however, fall in the three centuries between the twelfth and the fifteenth.

Since the 'Rasa' was the most characteristic and prolific form of poetry of this period, this period is sometimes described as the Age of the Rasas. Seeing the great popularity of these Rasas, the Jain sadhus used this form also for occasions of religious festivities and composed Rasas meant to be actually performed in the Jain temples on those occasions. For this reason, these Rasas were brief compositions, meant rather to be sung than recited and their language more suited to the rhythm of the dance-like physical movement for which they were specially

written. The Rasas grew in scope and variety. In course of time they not only ceased to be merely religious tracts in verse, but also gradually dropped their dance and song elements and came to be narrative-cum-descriptive poems, where the secular element was freely mixed with legends and stories from religion. They, however, retained their missionary and didactic character all through, with the result that almost all the Rasas composed in this age by the Jain sadhus had for their principal object the propaganda of their faith even when the theme was secular. The golden age of Rasas was over by the end of the fifteenth century and though they continued to be written till the eighteenth century, they were gradually losing their ground because of their increasing artificiality of expression, monotony of themes and poverty of poetic contents.

(b) Another analogous form cultivated in Old Gujarati poetry was the 'Phagu', so called because it concerned itself with the description of sentiments associated with the season of Spring. The joys and beauty of the Spring along with pangs of separated lovers find a prominent place in these compositions, but when handled by the Jain sadhus, they heavily lean towards didacticism, where the insatiability and futility of worldly joys and sorrows are emphasised, and renunciation and attainment of spiritual salvation through Jainism are held forth as solutions. Probably the best among the Phagus is one called 'Vasantvilas', a short poem of 84 stanzas, which for years was inaccessible and which gives no indication as to its author or to its date of composition. The poem portrays the coming of the Spring and the pangs of women in love, separated from their lovers, in a style which has an extraordinary charm and even perfection without a trace of didacticism or sectarian zeal, which gives an impression that it was probably composed by an author, who was not a Jain.

(c) A third variety of poetic form in considerable vogue in Old Gujarati
was the 'Baramasi' which took the twelve months (Baramasa) of the year for its background, as against the 'Phagu' which concerned itself with the description of sentiments associated with the Spring alone. While Phagu was generally melancholic in tone, this variety, besides covering the uneasy erotic emotions of restless heroines separated from their lovers with the advent of Spring, goes beyond it and generally depicts the lovers' reunion accompanied by the feelings of joy which attend on them. 'Neminath Chatuspadika' composed in 1140 by a Jain sadhu named Vinaychandra, is probably the first and perhaps the best among the 'Baramasi' poems extant. Its story, like all avowedly religious stories of the kind, is heavily loaded with the intent to propagate the philosophy and precepts of life as enunciated by Jainism. Young Neminath - the hero of the poem - on the eve of his wedding with Rajul leaves home on seeing the animals gathered for killing to provide the marriage feast and becomes a monk. Young Rajul pines and languishes for a whole year, at the end of which she meets Neminath again, who prevailed upon her to renounce the worldly life and become a nun.

Old Gujarati poetry was mainly religious in character and didactic in intent, but the secular element was also gradually asserting itself. Though dominated by Jain writers, who used it for their missionary purposes, Old Gujarati poetry had also a number of non-Jain writers, whose contribution in giving it a secular complexion is historically significant. Old Gujarati poetry was limited in scope and variety. The most representative form was the Rasa, which had its literary and its popular variety, latter of which was associated with temple festivities. The other forms were the Phagu and the Barmasi, which may be taken as early attempts to depict the varying moods and changing phases of Nature as a background in Old Gujarati poetry. In point of literary merit, the attainments of Old

Gujarati poetry in its contents, expression and representation are, by and large, of a transitional nature. Yet, there were a few works, notably 'Vasantvilas' and 'Prabodhchintamani' which rose above the average and were instinct with artistic charm judged by any standards.

Old Gujarati language, which acquired its distinct individuality after its evolution from Gaurjar Apabhramsa by about the eleventh century and poetry in that language which dates back to the twelfth century, enjoyed a lease of about three centuries and then took another step forward by about the beginning of the fifteenth century when Narsinh Mehta and Mirabai, among others, heralded the birth of another new era in the history of Gujarati poetry.

(B) Medieval Gujarati Poetry

(1) The Poetry of the Fifteenth Century.

(a) The political environment of Gujarat for about a century and a half, from 1412 when it came under the Mahomedan Sultans, to 1572, when it was annexed by Akbar, was one charged with deep unrest and a sense of insecurity and instability. Petty princes and potentates rebelled against the central authority at Delhi and appropriated local power unto themselves. In absence of any centralised system of administration and uniformity of policy, the country seemed to have gone to pieces, resulting in a state of affairs, which can only be described as chaotic. The minds of men were more concerned with the problem of self-preservation than with the pursuit of literature. However, there was a perennial avenue of escape from the nerve-wrecking social and political tensions and that was devotion to religion and God. Whether, psychologically, this was an escape or a compensation is immaterial, but the fact is that this sublimation was achieved in a large measure also in the new Gujarati poetry, which came into existence during the fifteenth
century. If devotion to God and religion was to satisfy the emotional needs of
the people and not merely the philosophical or theological activities of speculative
minds, it had to take a concrete and an almost humanized form, where gods and
goddesses could come down and bring their heaven to earth. This happened and the
cult of 'Bhakti' or devotion to personal god came into vogue. Narsimh Mehta and
Mira, two outstanding exponents of the new devotional poetry in Gujarat, deal with
Krishna and Radha in most intimate terms. Mira considered herself as wedded to
Lord Krishna, while Narsimh Mehta found to his great relief and delight many of
his domestic problems solved by the same God. So intense was this identification
and so real the fancy that Narsimh Mehta, for instance, described the dance of
Lord Krishna with the gopis or shepherd girls in heaven, of which he claimed to be
an eye-witness.

To a people dissatisfied with the realities of material existence, religion
offered a solace and a compensation which were readily seized. This religion
naturally was not to be an abstruse affair, but something that could gratify the
emotional needs as well as the spiritual aspirations of a psychologically frustrated
people. Religion had been the perennial pursuit of men and a source of inspiration
to the poets in the past. Devotion to religion was, therefore, not something new:
what was new was the context in which it was applied and the form it took in relation
to the age. The path of knowledge, propagated earlier by philosophers like
Shankaracharya, was of little avail to the masses whose average level of literacy and
intellectual attainments was not very high. On the other hand, the cult of the
worship of a personal god, which came into vogue in this century, evoked a ready
popular response and found an immediate expression in poetry of the time. The
fundamental principle of this worship was love. God who was believed to be
inaccessible through erudite learning or elaborate rituals was easily to be won.
over by the love of the devotee. This devotion whose chief characteristic was love - 'Premalakshna Bhakti' - has no synonym in English to convey its full connotation, for, 'Bhakti' is not mere devotion to God, but denotes worship, prayer, dedication, surrender and identification all at once. The lyrical expression of this 'Bhakti', in its widest sense, is the distinguishing trait of the new poetry of this century. It was in one sense an advance inasmuch as it was growing more lyrical and subjective in approach and tone, and, in another, it was a continuation of a tradition inasmuch as it still leaned heavily on religion for its sustenance and inspiration.

(b) The pioneer of this devotional poetry was Narsinh Mehta. There was indeed a considerable body of poetry, religious in character produced mainly by the Jain sadhu-poets before Narsinh Mehta, but it had more of religion than of poetry in it. Narsinh Mehta's compositions have the distinction of being poetry first and other things next. Moreover, Narsinh Mehta's poetry, more often than not, comes from his own life and experiences and sometimes he is even the subject of his own poetry. He sets out neither to preach nor to instruct, but only to communicate himself.

The most remarkable feature of the new Gujarati poetry of the fifteenth century was the emergence of a new poetic form as the 'Pada' or the song. The 'Pada' or the song may be taken as the characteristic product of the Gujarati poetry of the fifteenth century and a special offering of Narsinh Mehta, who simultaneously has the distinction of being among the first to introduce the subjective element in Gujarati poetry. Earlier Gujarati poetry was more or less impersonal in character, but the very conception of 'Bhakti' - faith in a personal god - which lay at the root of the inspiration of the fifteenth century Gujarati poetry, made it necessary that poetry which was based on it could not be otherwise than personal.
Hence, the personal note in the poetry of this period was the logical outcome of the sentiment of Bhakti, which it sought to enshrine.

Bearing in mind the highly controversial aspect of the authorship and language of the works of Narsimh Mehta, his works may be classified broadly into two categories: (1) Bhakti or devotional poems, and (2) Erotic or love poems. There is, however, no inherent antithesis between the two types, since devotion itself was based on love and love was to take the form of devotion, the two meeting together in God, who was the object of both devotion and love. Moreover, the erotic sentiments depicted in the so-called love-poems are not related to human beings, but to the divine pair of Radha and Krishna. The sensualism of the erotic compositions of Narsimh Mehta has been the subject of much comment, especially because it sometimes transgresses the bounds of decorum and revels in descriptions of the physical and carnal aspects of love between Radha and Krishna. Since realism in literature had not advanced to that stage or even heard of in those far-off days, any attempt to defend Narsimh Mehta on that ground is futile. Equally futile perhaps is also the attempt to consider those poems as not the work of Narsimh Mehta, for this would amount to adopting an arbitrary standard that all that is good belongs to him and all that is questionable in taste not to him.

Another way of looking at those poems, however, is to ignore their literal representation and regard them as symbolic exercises in establishing the spiritual oneness of two entities, achieving spiritual consummation through the instrumentality of their physical selves. In his 'Shrungamala', Narsimh Mehta has portrayed through the Gopis all the feminine arts, which excite the carnal passions of men. But Krishna's description of himself later in the poem as a 'Brahmachari' - one leading the life of a celibate - puts a different complexion on his frolicks with the Gopis, who then stand as spiritual symbols of the souls in female bodies yearning to be one with God, who is Love. In the cult of Bhakti, all human beings were Gopis, wooing
Krishna as their lover and lord. The Gopis thus acquire an allegorical significance and all that they say and do rise above their literal representation. The fact, however, remains that some of Narsimh Mehta’s erotic compositions are highly sensual and indecorous and no amount of philosophic white-washing can alter the fact that they are so.

The case is different with his Bhakti or devotional poems. They leave the earth and the earthly alone and sometimes touch the very heights of heaven in the sweep of their imagination, in the breadth of their cosmic vision and in the earnestness of their expression. Most of what Narsimh Mehta says is in tune with the traditional philosophy of Hindu religion. In one of his well-known poems, the poet calls upon man to think of God, to cease running after illusion, to think of his origin, to ask himself who he is and to whom attached, to reflect how thoughtlessly he calls everything his. The poet adds that a man’s body is not his and even if he is bent on keeping it for ever, it will not abide with him. Thinking of wealth day and night, he loses sight of one near to him. Now, sentiments like these are nothing new to Indian philosophy, but Narsimh Mehta writes with such deep conviction and emotion that what he says looks almost like his own discovery. There are numerous other poems expounding this philosophy of detachment from the material world and of devotion to God. Some of them are put more imaginatively, and some more pregnantly, but all of them maintain a certain high level. His popularity with the masses, however, rests on his morning-songs called ‘Prabhatiyas’, which are meant to be sung by way of prayer at dawn. After a lapse of more than four centuries, it is not uncommon to hear his morning songs chanted by devout men and women in Gujarat even to-day.

1. 'Samaras Shree Hari'
2. 'Nirakane Gaganman'.
3. 'Jyanlagi Atmatatva Chinyun Nahi'.
Narsimh Mehta is pre-eminently a singer and whether the theme is erotic or devotional or philosophic, his inspiration is lyrical. Hence, he is at his best in his short padas and even his longer compositions are more or less like several padas strung together, which probably gain or lose nothing by their context. It is true that in his poems like 'Sudamacharita', he has attempted a continuous narrative, which anticipates the variety of poetic form called the 'Akhyana' or the long narrative poem, which later came into vogue in Gujarat. Yet, in the final analysis, it is not as a narrative but as a lyrical poet that Narsimh Mehta owes his pre-eminence in Gujarati poetry.

Narsimh Mehta has been drawn considerably on his personal life, many incidents and experiences of which are utilized as material for his compositions. His long autobiographical poem, 'Shamalshah-no-Vivah', besides describing the incidents leading to his son Shamal's wedding to the daughter of a proud rich official through divine aid, mentions several details of his own early privations and humiliations, which drove him to the solace of 'Bhakti' and reaffirmed his faith in Lord Krishna. Barring the miracles mentioned, which need not be taken too literally, the autobiographical character of Narsimh Mehta's writings was more or less a new trend and its gain, in terms of literature, was the increased emphasis on subjectivity which came to be given in Gujarati poetry of the period and still in more increasing measure later in modern Gujarati poetry. Some of Narsimh Mehta's padas, such as 'Vasantnan Pado' and 'Hindolnan Pado' - the songs of the Spring and songs of the Swing Festival - seem to continue the earlier 'Phagu' tradition, but the approach is distinctly personal and hence they are a marked advance on the earlier poetry of that variety. The other padas celebrate the songs the birth and childhood of Krishna, who exacted a toll of curds from the cowherdesses, played pranks with them, and curbed the river-cobra. All these
legends and myths, originally described in the Bhagvat Puran, found poetic utterance and became the subject of devotional poetry when Narsimh Mehta, among others, began to voice the new impulses of Bhakti in Gujarat.

During the fifteenth century, with the powerful outburst of the impulse of Bhakti, the Jain sadhus lost their predominance in the literary field and Gujarati poetry changed hands. Though, by and large, the new Gujarati poetry retained its religious character and though its contents were increasingly drawn from the Hindu Puranas, legends, myths and philosophy, there was clearly no intention on the part of the Hindu poets to use poetry as a vehicle or as a means of propagating the tenets of their religion, since they were using poetry more or less as a medium of self-expression. Moreover, the very nature of Bhakti was essentially personal and hence, though poetry continued to be religious in character, it ceased to be propagandist in conception. The poets had no mission beyond expressing the ecstasy of their own devotion to God whom they worshipped.

To sum up, Gujarati poetry, in Narsimh Mehta's hands, acquired its marked subjective note and evolved its lyrical form in the pada, which he forged into a powerful instrument for the expression of intensely personal emotions. His influence on Gujarati poets of the succeeding generation was indeed so great that even his personal life became the subject of their poems.

(c). A great work, 'Kanhadadeprabandha' by poet Padmanabh, believed to be composed in 1456, and brought to light by Dr. Buhler in 1875-76 from the recesses of Jain temple, has come down in its original without linguistic alterations and interpolations, which was the common fate of almost all old Gujarati poetry. This composition, which is a heroic poem in four parts, strikes a distinctly secular note in Gujarati poetry of this century. It is based on the exploits of King Kanhadade of Jhalor, who challenged the Mahomedan mite under Alla-ud-din Khilji and laid down
his life in the valiant defence of his own dominion. The poem has all the qualities of heroic poetry and the traditional ‘Rasa’, which was in vogue in old Gujarati poetry during the earlier periods. Its material is derived from history and it throws considerable light on the life of that period. But perhaps its most remarkable feature is its characterization. The tragic love between Kanhadade’s son and Alla-ud-Din’s daughter depicted in the poem adds a romantic note to it. For all its specialities, the poem continues the older tradition of the ‘Rasa’ in the age when Gujarati poetry had begun to express its new impulse of Bhakti in the padas.

(d) The new impulse of Bhakti voiced in Gujarati poetry by Narsimh Mehta found another brilliant exponent in Mira. A most romantic figure and a most passionate devotee of Krishna, Mira is claimed by Gujarat and Rajasthan with equal fervour. But her poetry has outstripped provincial boundaries and she belongs now to the whole of India. She chose the pada as the vehicle of her devotional poetry and in her hands, the pada acquired a grace, dignity and literary status, which helped to make it the most characteristic form of Gujarati poetry for a long time till it found, ironically, both its climax and denouement in poet Dayaram who died in 1852. If Narsimh Mehta was her predecessor, as it seems very likely, though in the chronological aspect of old Gujarati poetry it is not possible to be dogmatic— he should be regarded as the pioneer of the devotional pada. With Mira the pada achieved a near perfection. The excellence of her lyricism, the depth of her emotions, the sublimity of her devotion and simplicity of her expression are rarely equalled in their ensemble and perhaps never surpassed.

Her padas, enshrining as they do her love for Krishna whom she looked upon not only as a deity but also as her lord, are sometimes taken as erotic compositions, which need only slight nominal changes to fit them for the expressional needs of human lovers. Since the very conception of Bhakti or
devotion was essentially personal love for a personal god, Mira's padas could not do otherwise than delineate love from a personal angle. All personal poetry worth the name, is personal and universal at the same time, and her padas, considering their source of inspiration, have never been looked upon, in Gujarati at least, as mere erotic poems.

It is the peculiarity of these devotional poems that devotion takes the form of love and love of devotion. Narsimh Mehta had done this before Mira, but while Narsimh Mehta sometimes slipped into indecorum while handling this type of poetry, Mira was saved by her feminine delicacy and reserve, which directed her emotions to run within the bounds of decency and decorum. Mira looked upon herself as dedicated to Krishna in wedlock and her numerous padas refer to that deity as her bridegroom or husband. The sentiment of love, which is depicted in those padas, though human in representation, is Platonic and pure, free from any trace of carnal impulses. They celebrate in songs the yearning of a human soul to be one with God. Since Mira was not philosophically in love with an abstract god, but one who was for her a living personal divinity, the love she felt for him is not ordinary eroticism, but a sublimation of human passions, which then went under the name of Bhakti. Her Krishna is not the Krishna of the Mahabharata but of the Bhagvat Puran, an immensely romantic figure who sports with the gopis of Vrindavana, and is the embodiment of God who is Love. So complete is her identification with Krishna that separation from him is intolerable to her and union with him her highest bliss. Her padas express these alternate emotions in a style which is at once simple and sweet.

Though the constant theme of her poetry is her yearning for Krishna, she saves it from monotony by describing its different aspects, phases and moods, which range from the gay to the grave. In one of her padas, she speaks of being bound to Krishna with silken cord of love, in another she refers to him as her

1. 'Kache te tatane Harijiye bandhi'.
very breath and the world as of no account to her; she is enamoured of her face, but no one cares to understand her. The temple of her body is fast growing old, but her swan-like soul is ever-young. Mira's characteristic feminine touch and delicacy, her ardent and intense devotion to God, couched in a language that could come only from a woman who heaves her heart into her mouth, make her padas or songs a part of the rich heritage of Gujarati poetry and at the same time, distinguish her from Narsimh Mehta and others who worked in the same field. Narsimh Mehta's output was more prolific and varied than that of Mira, yet considered purely as poets, between them Mira is perhaps the more poetic. Both of them, however, laid Gujarati poetry under debt by giving it a new direction through their compositions, which are easily marked out from the earlier ones by their lyrical note and pronounced emphasis on the subjective element. In a word, Gujarati poetry, in their hands, passed from the impersonal to the personal in its evolution.

(2) The Poetry of the Sixteenth Century.

Gujarati poetry of this century suffers by contrast with the earlier one in that it failed to produce any poet of the magnitude of Narsimh or Mira. Though the fountain of poetry did not run dry, its stream in this century had grown apparently thin and weak. Perhaps, the contemporary social and political conditions were to some extent responsible for this. The Sultans of Gujarat, who had rebelled against the Central Mahomedan authority at Delhi, declaring themselves independent rulers of pockets they were administering, created a feeling of uncertainty among the people. Akbar annexed Gujarat in 1572, but

1. 'Govind Pran Amaro Re'.
2. 'Dard na jane mera koi re'.
3. 'Mukhadani Maya lagi re'.
4. 'Joonun re thayun re deval'.
the internal situation remained for a considerable time far from satisfactory.
In this unstable atmosphere charged with chaos, Gujarati poetry could not carry on the excellent work started in the fifteenth century, particularly by Narsimha Mehta and Mira. The work of poetry was consequently carried on by a number of relatively minor poets such as Vasto, Vachhraj, Tulsi, Ganpati, Mandan Bandharn, Nakar, Vishnudas, Shivdas, Madhusudan Vyas, perhaps the most outstanding amongst whom was Bhanan. Many of these poets came from the working class, whose education and cultural background were not of the highest. There is, therefore, a certain amount of crudity of expression and representation manifest in the poetry of this period.

(3) The Poetry of the Seventeenth Century.

(a) The political and social complexion of Gujarat had changed considerably during the seventeenth century. Akbar, who died in 1605, was followed by Jehangir and with him an era of pleasure and magnificence was inaugurated. Sir Thomas Roe, the English Ambassador, who had approached that great Mogul to obtain certain privileges for the newly-formed East India Company, was impressed with the splendour of the Mogul Court and the general prosperity of the country. Shahjahan came to the throne in 1627 and Aurangzeb was the governor of Gujarat between 1644 and 1646, before he proclaimed himself the Emperor even during the life-term of his father, whom he put behind the bars in the fort of Agra. This period also saw the rise of Maratha power under Shivaji, who sacked Surat in 1664. Aurangzeb died in 1707.

But all these historical events however momentous in themselves, seem to have had little effect on the inner life of the people of Gujarat or their poetry, which still generally continued to concern itself with the inner life and religion. The poetry of Akha and Premanand, the two great poets of this
century, takes little notice of any of the historical events of the time, either because they were not after all so momentous in the eyes of those poets, or because they were utterly indifferent to the world around them, neither of which is true. In the past, several foreign races at different times had come and temporarily settled down in Gujarat, bringing with them political and material changes of revolutionary nature, without substantially affecting the spiritual life of the people. The Mahomedans, in the early stages, tried to interfere with the spiritual integrity of the people, indulging in coercive proselytizing activities, demolishing the Hindu shrines, inflicting grievous wounds on the religious susceptibilities of the people, only to make them more self-conscious about the preservation of their religion and cultural traditions.

Political vicissitudes and material changes in the environments, however great, thus failed to make any deep impression on the Gujarati poetry of this period, not because, in India, life and literature are divorced or compartmentalised, but because its poetry, as the highest expression of its spiritual life, generally managed to soar above the mundane realities of material existence. Religion in India is not thought of as either an escape from or an antidote to worldly life and, therefore, to establish any causal relation between the religious character of much of the Gujarati poetry of this century and the realities of contemporary life will not do for the simple reason that religious fervour or philosophical speculations, reflected in Akha and Premamand, were not exclusive to this age alone. Gujarati poetry from the twelfth to the fourteenth century in the hands of Jain sadhus was predominantly religious in character. In the fifteenth century, Narahim and Mira expressed the impulse of Bhakti in their devotional poetry. In the sixteenth century, Gujarati poets wrote Akhyanas or narrative poems, based on stories derived from religious sources. In the seventeenth century, Akha was engaged in transforming the highest philosophical knowledge into poetic form, and
Premanand in reciting the Akhyayas, based on the stories from the Epics and the Puranas to the man in the street.

This does not, however, mean that Gujarati poetry, through the centuries, is merely repetitive or monotonous or that it has not grown at all. The facts are otherwise. Gujarati poetry, which from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, was generally of a narrative variety, and largely impersonal in character, acquired, during the fifteenth century, a distinctly lyrical and personal note with Narasimh and Mira, who sang out of the fullness of their heart. This personal note acquired an added emphasis in Akha's poetry of 'experience' or self-realization, ensured by his determination of not merely repeating what others had said. The old narrative tradition, which was continued by the poets of this century - Vallabh, Virji and Ratneshvar - reached its graceful perfection at the hands of Premanand, while the lyrical vein of the fifteenth century was continued in the 'padas' or devotional songs, composed during this period. Gujarati poetry grew also in its range with the addition of themes of secular interest, though secularism, in some measure, was nothing new to the Gujarati poetry even in the past. Perhaps, the most remarkable feature of the Gujarati poetry of this century was its humour, which took the form of satire, sarcasm and caustic comment in Akha and a mellower form of wit and banter in Premanand.

The poetic output of this century was voluminous and its equality, on the whole, was anything but poor. Of the two major poets of this century, Akha has an abiding place in the history of Gujarati literature and Premanand, who is described as a 'Mahakavi' is a great poet not only of his age, but probably of all times. Their poetic achievements put together give a great importance to this century as one of the brightest and one of the most productive in the history of Gujarati poetry.
Akha's claim to a place in the history of literature is tenable largely on the ground of his being a poet. Yet, Akha has been described as a 'Jnani' or one who knows. His line 'Do not mix up the 'jnani' with the poet' is construed to imply that Akha had not much respect for the poet and consequently he wished to be considered, not a poet, but as a 'jnani'. The philosophic contents of his poems may have also contributed to his tendency of looking upon Akha as a philosopher, rather than as a poet. The fact, however, is that though Akha is a philosopher, he does not cease to be a poet, for, in his case, poetry and philosophy do not pull in opposite directions, but meet together in a remarkable attempt to give philosophy a poetic expression and poetry a philosophy content.

Akha's philosophical works, which expound the philosophy of Vedantic monism, include 'Akhegeeta', 'Chittavicharsamvad', 'Panchikaran', 'Gurushishyasamvad' and his 'Anubhavbindu'. The fundamental principle of this philosophy is, in Shankar's words, that Brahma is true, the world is nothing. But a close scrutiny of Akha's whole output reveals that though Brahma was true to him, the world was not nothing to him, for he was constantly talking of this world and of the people who lived in it. This is more clearly revealed in his very popular 'Chhappas' or epigrammatic stanzas, numbering 756 in all, on the various aspects of life, written generally in a satirical or sarcastic vein. Akha's resolve to say nothing which was not warranted by his own experience enabled him to give his poetry an air of conviction, sincerity and reality, which constitutes a definite gain in that poetry, which generally dealt with truisms and platitudes derived from second-hand knowledge.

1. 'Jnanine Kaviman na ganish'.
2. 'Bhramasatyam Jaganmithya'.
Sanskrit was generally the language of such high philosophic observations in the past. Akha demonstrated, in some measure, the capacity of the Gujarati language to express high philosophical concepts. He was not specially enamoured of those who wrote in Sanskrit and believed that nothing would be lost by saying the same thing in non-Sanskrit language. His general tendency was to look upon language as only a weapon and he believed that the hero was one who won the field, whatever his weapons. This, it may be granted, is putting the language in its proper place as a means to an end and not an end in itself.

Akha's approach was constructive and destructive in parts. His philosophic poems reveal the former, while his 'chhappas' the latter. But in both cases, the aim is the same, namely to disburse true knowledge and to expose untruth. He is both a poet and a philosopher. Poetry and philosophy in the East have never been looked upon as incongruous. 'What imagination loved as poetry, reason might love as philosophy and in the end, these are two ways of saying the same thing'.

Inspite of Akha's philosophy of Brahma alone being true and the world as nothing, Akha is neither a world-weary poet, nor was his gospel a weary one. Though he talked of the other world, this world was always with him. His 'chhappas' expose the discrepancy between the precepts and practices of those who considered themselves religious or the custodians of the religious conscience of the people. He was equally critical of soulless rituals and of men who worshipped as many gods as there were stones. The picture of the world that emerges from these is a little cheerless and if their tone is a little bitter, this is perhaps inevitable in a satirist, who is moved to righteous indignation at the sight of sham and

1. 'Sanskrut bole te shun thayum, kain Frakrutsamthi nashi gayum?'
2. 'Bhashane shun vadage bhoo, ramman jite te shoor'.
4. 'Ek murakhane evi tev, pathar etala pooje dev.'
humbug masquerading as respectability or holiness. Akha is not a cynic or a misanthrope. He loved man too well to pamper him and overlook his follies and foibles. His satirical whips, which are likened by Prof. Thakore to the 'flaming tongues of fire',\footnote{Vide, B.K. Thakore: 'Lyric', p. 124.} were meant to awaken the conscience of his drowsy fellow-men and to bring home to them the difference between truth and untruth.

Akha's poetry marks a new development in Gujarati poetry. He made philosophy the subject of Gujarati poetry on a larger scale than before, and his satirical poetry in its bulk and quality was an achievement, for which there were few precedents.

(c) The greatest literary figure of the seventeenth century and one of the greatest names in Gujarati poetry of all times, Premanand, who lived between 1636 and 1734, is described as a 'Mahakavi', not in the sense of an epic but of a great poet. The services rendered by him to Gujarati language and poetry were indeed great. With him the language not only took its present name, but also, in some measure, its present form.

Premanand, was a 'Manabhātt' or a 'Gagariyabhātt', which means a Brahmin reciting Akhyanas, based on the epics and puranas to an audience assembled in the open air late in the evening. This was an institution in itself and many a bard eked out his living by entertaining and instructing a concourse of unsophisticated men and women in the towns and villages of Gujarat. These Akhyanas were recited musically to the beat of a copper-pot called 'gagar' or 'mana' played upon by the ring-studded hands of the reciter and hence the appellation of the Mana or Gagariyabhātt to one who did so. Premanand was one of these and probably the greatest and the most successful among them. Incidentally, these itinerant bards constituted a powerful agency for the dissemination of religious instruction and literature,
together with an amount of general knowledge to the masses in the days before modern education and the printing presses arrived in the country. Their contribution to the enlightenment of the masses was, therefore, not mean, for they not only recited the old religious tales but also freely introduced material of contemporary interest into them.

The literary output of Premanand was both rich and varied. He wrote Akhyanas, based on the stories from the 'Mahabharata', some from the Puranas, one from the 'Ramayana' and a few others based on the miraculous episodes from the life of poet Narsimh Mehta. Like Shakespeare, Premanand was a great borrower and made free use of the material at hand. But if he borrowed from his predecessors Bhalan, Vishnudas and Nakar, like Shakespeare again, he generally bettered what he borrowed. A detailed account of his works is not relevant here, but a few of these and their characteristics may be noted. 'Okaharan', 'Abhimanyu-akhyana', 'Sudamacharita' and 'Nalakbyana' are chief among his akhyanas, of which the last named is probably the best. They are neither translations nor adaptations of the original, but his own creations, bearing the stamp of his genius. There are picturesque descriptions, dramatic situations, racy dialogues, individualised characters, which raise his akhyanas much above the level of the ordinary ones. He is a master of moods, and glides on from one sentiment to another—erotic, heroic, tragic, comic—with equal facility and with the least effort. Their public appeal was overwhelming. The same is true of his akhyanas, especially his 'Mameru' based on the miraculous episodes from the life of Narsimh Mehta. The unsophisticated and devout audience to whom he chiefly addressed these akhyanas, listened to him in a mood of willing suspension of disbelief and never questioned how much of what they were told was fact or fiction. Premanand was an artist who touched nothing which he did not adorn. He breathed new life into the bones
of old stories and old characters leaped to life at his touch. He was a shrewd observer of life and his mastery over the resources of the language was amazing. It is for this that he is hailed as a 'Mahakavi' in Gujarati. Critics are, however, not wanting, who find fault with him, for instance, for his cavalier treatment of certain gods, and for his indifference to the great social and economic events of problems of his day.

Certain plays alleged to have been composed by him were some years ago presented to the public. Since there was no stage or dramatic activity known in his days and even earlier, they are now taken as the handiwork of some modern writer, who fathered them on Premanand, for reasons best known to him. It is, therefore, on his akhyanas that the reputation of Premanand rests. Here, he was not merely a story-teller or a public entertainer, but a creative artist, who gave to the traditional akhyana its highest, and its last, glory, a poetic dignity and a literary status it has never before or since enjoyed.


(a) After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the Mogul Empire began going to pieces. The rise of the Maratha power in Gujarat failed to bring any political security, as it looked upon Gujarat more like a treasury to loot than a country to administer. Consequently, there were frequent raids on the prosperous city of Surat. Famine, fear, scarcity and insecurity stalked the land. The English arrived on the scene and built a fort at Surat in 1759, the effect of their presence on the country was not, however, felt immediately. In this uncertain atmosphere, poetry and learning were the first casualties, though as usual religion and its pursuits enjoyed a charmed life, more or less unaffected by any political changes.

In poetry, however, the gains of the previous century were practically lost. The Akhyanas, padas, and folk-poetry continued to be written, but with the possible exception of Shamal, there was no poet of the stature of Akha or Premanand, who appeared in this century. Since most of the poets of this period came from the lower strata of society, which was largely uneducated, their poetry could claim their sincerity or earnestness as probably its only capital. One poetic form, peculiar to Gujarat, called the 'garba' or 'garbi', however, came to be very much in vogue and a number of poets were engaged in composing the 'garbas' or 'garbis' in praise of their favourite goddesses, whom they looked upon as Mother. There were also some who sang or wrote of gods Krishna, Vishnu and Shiv, but poetically their productions are generally poor in quality, though rich in their devotional fervour.

(b) Shamal, the outstanding poet of this period, differs from his predecessor Akha in keeping high philosophy at arm's length and from Premanand in leaving the Akhyanas to him, striking a different path of popular fiction for himself. Shamal was a story-teller, who chiefly addressed himself to the working-class through his versified tales. He started his early career with the Akhyanas, but met with no particular success, which probably led him to get off the beaten track and strike upon something that would catch the public ear at once and bring him recognition. He found the answer in fictitious verse-tales, where high romance and breath-taking adventures would keep his working-class audience spell-bound. The riddles he introduced in those tales, besides adding piquancy to the atmosphere which was already charged with suspense, provided intellectual pastime to the people, who could easily spend hours in solving them.

Shamal was not, of course, the first in Gujarat to write romantic fiction in verse. Before him, Jain and non-Jain writers had tried their hand successfully at this form in Old Gujarati. Shamal drew freely from them. Moreover, there
were Sanskrit works like the 'Kathasaritsagar' and 'Bruhatkathamanjari',
collections of tales, to say nothing of the rich heritage of folk-tales, from
which also Shamal borrowed freely. Shamal's canvas was truly big. He
resurrected old stories and his characterization was out of the ordinary. Of
his verse-tales, 'Padmavati', 'Nandbatrisi', 'Simhasan-batrishi' etc.,
probably the best is his 'Madamohana', which is a romantic story of love at
first sight, with innumerable paddings of tales within tales, reminding one of
similar performances in the 'Arabian Nights' and 'Decameron'. The story is
romantic to the degree of being fantastic, but not more fantastic than many
such stories in Elizabethan literature, including Shakespeare's comedies. A
princess named Mohana falls in love at first sight with a minister's son named
Madan with whom she gets secretly married. Like Shakespeare's Posthumous,
Shamal's hero is banished by the King. The heroine, again like Shakespeare's
romantic heroines, disguises as a man, follows her lover and the disguise yields
a rich crop of several princesses falling in love with the heroine, and the
story of Viola and Olivia is re-enacted on a much larger scale. Finally, the
lovers are reunited and pardoned by the reconciled King to ensure a perfectly
happy end to the story.

It was with stories like these that Shamal captured the hearts of his
audience. Women play a leading part in his stories. They fall in love at first
sight, defy parental authority and break social conventions. This was certainly
not common in Shamal's age and there is no need to see in Shamal a social rebel
or a reformer, as it is sometimes done. The fact is, Shamal was a romantic
story-teller, who heightened the appeal of his stories by idealizing and
romanticizing events and characters as much as he could. Shamal also wrote some
'chhappas' or epigrammatic stanzas, where the didactic and satirical vein is
prominent.
The Poetry of the First Half of the Nineteenth Century.

(a) The political scene in Gujarat had once again changed. In 1803, the East India Company acquired the possession of the leading city of Broach and their victory in the Battle of Kirkee in 1818 put the English on a firm footing in Gujarat, which heaved a sigh of relief, experiencing after a considerable time, a sense of security and political stability. The full effect of this great change was, however, felt only in the second half of this century, which also saw the birth of a new Gujarati poetry. Meanwhile, Gujarati poetry continued to move generally on its traditional lines, producing a bulk of writing which was still predominantly religious in character.

(b) The last great representative of what is called 'mediaeval' Gujarati poetry, Dayaram (1767-1852) found his poetic outlet in the lyrical compositions, celebrating the love of Radha, Krishna and the Gopis. Though he wrote some Akhyam and a long religio-philosophical poem called 'Rasikvallabh', his chief distinction lies in writing 'garbis' or songs, to which he gave such a grace and finality that, Gujarat, 'Garbi' or songs and Dayaram are almost synonymous terms. These garbis may be described as erotic compositions and their recurring theme is love in almost all its aspects, conditioned only by the fact that they sing not of human, but of the divine love of Radha and Krishna. However, at bottom, they are not always so. More often than not, under the facade of Radha and Krishna, Dayaram sings of love and devotion between the two sexes, which only a generous stretch of imagination can be construed as divine in inspiration and application. No amount of aufigistic interpretation can explain away the gross carnal descriptions and suggestions embodied in some of these garbis, which, in fact, depict the passions of voluptuous men and women in the name of Radha and Krishna. This was,
perhaps, inevitable in the context of the orthodox society, whose rigid sense of
propriety looked askance at any open expression or association of love or lovers.
That word - love - was too profane to be further profaned by being made the
subject of poetry. The human impulse of love, therefore, often found the divine
love of Radha and Krishna a convenient peg on which to hang personal emotions of
that type. This is probably the reason why so much of poetry which is outwardly
devotional in character is at bottom human, too human.

Dayaram in his garbis sang of the divine love of Radha and Krishna
against the romantic background of Vrindavana, which for all its divinity, is all
too human. This explains the universal appeal of these garbis, not only for the
religious-minded, but also for those who are not specially enamoured of that
poetry which makes religion its subject. Dayaram depicted different aspects of
this love between Radha and Krishna, such as jealousy, anger, misunderstanding,
reconciliation, reunion, under different moods of hope, despair, ecstatic joy,
sorrow and annoyance, sometimes in their monologues and sometimes in their dialogue.
Sometimes, there is continuity between these garbis when, for instance, Radha
disburdens herself in one and Krishna replies to her in another. The magic flute
of Krishna, which like the music of Orpheus, draws all things and beings to him,
features very prominently in these garbis. Many of Dayaram's garbis are on the
tip of the tongue of innumerable men and women of Gujarat even to-day, testifying
to the permanent appeal of those compositions for all ages. Often, Dayaram wins
half the battle with his captivating opening lines. Dayaram was the sweetest
warbler of his age and the musical value of most of his garbis is high and the
poetic value of many of them beyond doubt.
CONCLUSION

The achievements of Gujarati poetry in its old and medieval phases are not perhaps very spectacular, but its historical value in terms of its evolution through the centuries is great. The slender inconspicuous stream of Old Gujarati poetry, which established its separate identity after bifurcating from Prakrit and Apabhramsa in the twelfth century, yielding some harvest of the 'rasa', 'phagu' and 'baramasi' poems, chiefly at the hands of Jain sadhus, became a conspicuous river in the fifteenth century, when Narsimh Mehta and Mira sang devoutly and ecstatically of Krishna and created a new poetic tradition, which found its most musical expression in Dayaram. In between Narsimh and Dayaram, there were a number of poets headed by Akha, Premanand and Shamal, who wrote philosophic poetry, Akhyanas or narrative poetry, padas or lyrical poetry and romantic tales in verse. Religion played a very vital role in the lives of the people of these ages and hence their poetry was also deeply coloured, even dominated, by religion. But there was also some poetry of a secular nature, especially in Padmanabh, Bhalan and Shamal. Nor was all poetry impersonal. The subjective note, though faint, was never totally absent from Gujarati poetry from its beginning, since the very nature of poetry makes such a total exclusion impossible. This note, however, acquired its pronounced accent with Narsimh and Mira in the fifteenth century, when they began pouring out of the depths of their heart profuse strains of unpremeditated art. This again, in course of time, grew more and more pronounced till, for instance, the stage was reached in Akha who was resolved not to merely repeat what others had said and to write only what he had himself felt and experienced. His 'Anubhavbindu' based on his own experiences, belongs to that type of the poetry of experience in which Blake's 'Songs of Experience' and Wordsworth's 'Prelude' are prominent.
Though a large portion of old and mediaeval Gujarati poetry was narrative in form, as, for instance, in the several akhyanas produced in these times, the lyrical vein is not lacking. The padas of Narsimh, Mira, Premanand and Dayaram are nothing if not lyrical. The didactic element which predominated earlier Gujarati poetry, chiefly because of its pre-occupation with religion, gradually was moderated and subdued as Gujarati poetry evolved along the lines where its primary purpose was not to instruct, but also to please. The poets then sang not only of God but also of man, seeking to resolve the conflict by seeing God in man and man in God; and seeing truth in beauty and beauty in truth. That poets were not inclined to take things on their face value, but to probe through appearances to reality, is evident from the quantity of satirical poetry produced in the centuries under review. Akha, Dhira and Bhoja unhesitatingly lashed their whips on the backs of all dissemblers, double-dealers and hypocrites whatever their religious or social status.

The absence of epic and dramatic poetry in early Gujarati poetry constitutes its limitation. The Akhyanas of Premanand do not strictly fall into the category of epic poetry; and since neither the stage nor dramatic literature is known to have existed in those days, the absence of dramatic poetry stands self-explained. But in other respects, Gujarati poetry, in the course of about six centuries and a half, produced a considerable amount of narrative, lyrical, satirical poetry of both religious and secular character, in forms ranging from the old Rasas and Akhyanas to the new padas and garbis, in both subjective and objective vein. Its poetic quality is not uniformly high. On the whole, it rarely rises beyond the ordinary, but then suddenly one encounters poets like Narsimh, Mira, Akha, Premanand and Dayaram, who rise precipitiously above the surface and stand out like peaks of glory and light.
With the passing away of poet Dayaram in 1852, the old order in Gujarati poetry passed away and after a brief twilight in poets like Dalpatram, yielded its place to the new, when Narmad, the first among the modern Gujarati poets, began writing poetry, which bore the clear impress of the influence of English on it.

How this influence worked and grew; how under it, Gujarati poetry entered upon its new era; how it affected the form, contents, diction and the very spirit of Gujarati poetry, is dealt with in the pages which follow.