Conclusion

It is very difficult to use creative literature as a conclusive evidence for an event in the past. Imagination is critical in a body of literature, and because of this the dividing line between 'the fact' and 'fiction' tends to get blurred. Still, we have used a large body of such literature for recapitulating the society and culture of a chronologically defined period. In our defence we can say that we are not the first. Many historians have used creative literature earlier. Indeed, for us there is support also in the new theories which mostly repudiate the positivistic approaches to history. History is construction of the past and therefore it represents at best a view of what happened yesterday. Our effort is, thus, to see what kind of representations are there in the body of literature we have utilized for our purpose. There is no claim of our coming up with anything like firm and indisputable evidence.

Further, the material that we have used is not totally imaginative. We have seen that a considerable part of it is a sort of versified history. We may also submit that in a very large measure instead of using literature as evidence we have rather tried to understand it in the broader historical context and for this purpose we have relied on the readings of the period which the other historians have made on the basis of the sources they have used. Ours is a historical analysis of the literature or a historian's approach to the literature.

Thus we have in our literature a sort of an aggregate view of the various dimensions of the society. The texts and narratives pertaining to families, women, rituals and religious institutions and social practices
reflected a transition and transformation of ideas, beliefs and behavioural patterns. But there was no uniform pattern of change and the diverse communities adjusted to the existing social conditions according to their needs. The social, religious, political and cultural dimensions of life produced varied patterns of protest and resistance to the existing norms and traditions. There was, however, no indication of a complete break from the past traditions, which still signified dynamism and as the ultimate source of validity.

The family as the smallest unit of the society was a variable of social normative standards. The *kula* as an aggregation of *kutumbas* represented a superior institution regulating the behaviour of the individuals keeping the social welfare as a priority issue. Each individual member of the group competed with others and attempted to establish an identity of his/her own. The quest for recognition demanded observance of certain rules imposed by the group which deprived its members of independence. The authority of the social groups was largely moral but tended to assume the force of law in many cases. The ideals of the *kutumbas* and *kulas* were expressed as *dharmas* which differed in different contexts. Maintaining harmony and coherence within a social group was a difficult task as individual aspirations generally resisted the prevailing values and transgressed the norms on many occasions. Coordination within the society could be secured only when the members of a family lived amicably under the guardianship of the patriarch.

The joint families headed by the father comprised of many members, all sharing the rights and responsibilities according to their respective position in the family. The strength of the family depended on the mutual efforts of all the members which might overlook the individual sentiments
and susceptibilities. The suppression of emotions or transgression of familiar values by the individuals significantly influenced the family honour. The violation of social norms and values was opposed both by the family and society. The kinship ties and the clan identity created caste like communities which again designed a different set of norms which covered larger group of people. The different castes and kingroups underwent a process of change not in a revolutionary manner but through the synthesis of the conflicting features of continuity and change. The society also accommodated the aberrations and moulded its attitude in terms of the changing circumstances.

The society was stratified with the numerous occupational castes. These caste groups were conscious of their identities and thus imposed restrictions on the behaviours of their members. The norms and regulations of the castes conformed to the Brahmanical varna system. Each of these castes adapted to the brahmanical ways of life and maintained distinctions to gain a place and position in the hierarchy.

The changing caste and gender relations also brought about a change in the society's attitude towards women, who came to be recognized as partners in the social enterprise. Notwithstanding their adherence to conventional notions of ideal womanhood, our poets appear to be advocating gender equalities in many ways. The stability of the family in a transitory phase might have demanded women's contribution in terms of their emotional, economic and domestic support. When they fulfilled the expectations which involved sacrifice of their individualities in a great measure, they no longer remained the passive recipients of the world around them. They rather influenced the social process considerably as our poets describing their bodies as (Nakh-Sikh) endowed them with various power attributes.
The Nakh-Sikh descriptions reduced the gap between the divine and human and also demonstrated the equality between men and women. The biological aspect of feminity that place women in an inferior and subordinate position even in the modern feminist discourses was emphasized as power symbol in our poetry. These descriptions might have represented the voices raising the self-esteem and individuality of women. Like their counterparts, they could also express the carnal desires which were otherwise suppressed due to the prevailing notions of shame (laj). The term laj or ‘shame’, did not mean simply strictures and constraints on general behaviour. It also indicated the diffidence on the part of women and excitant on the part of men which aroused sensuality. The expression of this instinct was inhibited but was still regulated through the institution of marriage, though alternate ways to defy these constraints were also delineated. The context of the acts of defiance, particularly by the women, were also noticed. Within this perspective, the prostitutions and widowhood were also treated rationally.

In the gender relations which our poetry represented in general women did not appear subordinate to men in all cases. They superseded the power and position of men in some cases, at least, in the celebration of festivals and observance of rituals, for instance. They dominated the ritualistic performances and became the agencies for preserving and transmitting the traditions. The male domination of Vedic rituals was substituted by oral and folk rituals largely performed by women. Women thus entered an important sphere of religious life.

The opening up of the world of religion for women introduced new dimensions to religious and mythological beliefs. The revival of Vaishnava faith in medieval India witnessed not only the glorification of Lord Krishna but also the exaltation of the legend of Radha. Krishna was portrayed in
all the possible manifestations of divinity in our sources that represented
the myths and stories attached to him since the dawn of human civilization.
Further, new episodes were added to his image which situated him in
medieval historical context. As for Radha, the unidentified lady of Bhagvat
Purana trailing through the poetry of Jaidev, Vidyapati, Rup Goswami and
Surdasa dominated the writings of almost all the Reeti poets. Radha then
represented not only an individual Goddess with its own cult and traditions
but also denoted a shifting balance of power, that assigned her not a
subordinate status but an independent identity possessing similar attributes
of power and authority which were earlier treated as the monopoly of the
Lord. The references of androgynes were not confined to males changing
their sex for various reasons alone. The female Radha could also assume
the forms of male deity. It was a departure from the tradition which had
always assigned the consorts of the divine an inferior position.

The depiction of Lord Krishna and Radha as living human beings
was facilitated by the existing literary conventions. The trend of writing
allegories in both Hindi and Sufi literature popularized Radha-Krishna as
love symbols. The passionate form of bhakti also encouraged the composition
of devotional love poetry featuring Radha and Krishna as the love symbols.
However, the divine component still remained with the reversed roles in
many poems, e.g. Radha becoming the object of devotion and the Lord her
devotee.

The poetry was still not devoid of devotion to the Lord. Viraha was
one of the dominant modes of bhakti during our period. The poets expressed
their devotion to Lord Krishna in both nirguna and saguna forms, but we
do not trace in Reeti poetry such distinctions of nirguna/saguna as to include
it in the sant tradition of medieval India. We rather find it arbitrary to draw
such boundaries even in the context of bhakti-kal saint poets, for the sants like Surdas and even Kabir accepted the divinity in saguna manifestation. The devotion was not a pursuit of any ideology or cult. The contemporary ideas of various cults, the ways of asceticism and mysticism, the systems of Indian philosophy and the literary conventions altogether produced a complex mode of devotion that could not be generalized and defined independently.

Secularization of Radha-Krishna as nayak-nayika of the Reeti poetry was not symptomatic of a moral decline. It was a process in which the inhibited themes were first applied to the divine figures and once accepted by the society, were utilized as popular genre. The transformation of Radha-Krishna as nayak-nayika and then as universalized literary genre by the poets of all categories was also a protest against the elite form of expression.

The legend of Krishna percolated down to every quarter of the society throughout the subcontinent. The overwhelming popularity of Lord Krishna provided outlets even for the communities outside the brahmanical fold. The image of the Lord was flexible enough and could be moulded according to many sets of beliefs. It was how the Ismailis, after settling down in the coastal Western India exploited the Krishnaite faith and founded an Indo-Islamic sect, Sat-parth, attracting a large number of their followers in the region. The same ideology was borrowed later in the seventeenth century by the Prannathis.

The cult of Prannath was a radical intellectual movement which was given a religious bent to draw the support of the masses. Originating in Jamnagar, it spread over vast geographical regions. The formation of the cult into an organized institution with rules and rituals in a short span of time showed the intellectual accomplishments of Prannath. A well-read
master assessed the situation and decided the course of action. His knowledge of varied religious traditions, both Indian and foreign, and his claims of divinity legitimized his unquestioned authority as the guru. The heterodox communities accepting his faith redefined their identity in terms of the lineage and cult of their guru. It is interesting that the guru could justify his claims of being an incarnation of the divinities of various traditions at the same time.

The cult was concerned with purifying the socio-cultural and political spheres of life. Prannath believed in consecrating the elites and preaching the faith from the above. The plea was not simply to acknowledge his faith but renouncing one’s own faith was also essential. It also implied a sort of conversion which brought him into serious troubles on many occasions. The guru was undeterred by the conflicts and even charged the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb of his false and rigid religious beliefs. He also attempted to convince the Emperor that his religion also drew on the same Islam which he adhered to.

As for interaction between religion and politics it found expression also in the territories of the regional rulers. The emerging regional kingdoms and weakening imperial control had strengthened the community consciousness. The acute antagonism between the communities was aggravated through hyperboles and a kind of sectarian factions. Some of the spiritual guides then assessed the differences and dissensions between various religions and also the mutual exclusiveness of various schools and sects within one religion and produced a syncretic ideology to accommodate the interests of all the groups. Prannath was one such religious leader who claimed that the dissemination of his ideology could save the entire humanity
from spiritual sufferings. The guru thus proposed an alternate system of beliefs to maintain harmony in the society.

The guru not only proposed a solution but also asserted the superiority of his faith and condemned the other faiths. It was not a part of the Indian tradition to challenge the beliefs of other contemporary cults. Validating the ideas of one's own cult by refuting those of the others was an Ismaili tradition. Prannath succeeded in attracting people from divergent faiths. But opposition and persecution by the orthodox Muslim and Hindu elites outweighed their achievements. Prannath then succeeded only when his cult got assimilated into the great brahmanical tradition.

The Brahmanical tradition as the 'great tradition' thus provided strength to the emerging 'little traditions'. In this process of accommodations and adjustments, the little traditions underwent some changes. But in spite of these changes, Indian scriptures and related literate traditions continued to influence the cultural life of various political and social groups. Though the historical traditions as received by the people during the period concerned were transformed during the process of transmission, they did not indicate a rupture from the past. This process of continuity and change extended much beyond the domain of religion to encompass several spheres of culture and is illustrated further from the ancient stories retold by our poets in different courts, imperial or regional.

The theme of Dushyanta-Shakuntala as recorded in Mahabharata and Abhigyan Shakuntalam was narrated afresh by Newaj. The subordinate theme of Mahabharata was dramatized as love theme by Kalidasa and in conformity to the eighteenth century literary conventions, Newaj extalled Shakuntala to the status of a nayika. The partial allegiance to the traditions and aberration to them was further revealed in Sujan Vials of Somnath
which narrated the story of Vikramaditya's throne in the court of Badan Singh. The ethical philosophy of Prabodh Chandrodaya Natak was reiterated by many scholars during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The political culture of the period produced diverse and varied patterns of relationship between the imperial centre and the localities. Right from its inception, the Mughal empire realized its claims by allying with various regional powers and by assigning them varied degrees of autonomy depending upon the nature of alliances and accommodations. He local centers of power saw the imperial centre as their arch rival, but they also competed with each other for supremacy. The Mughals during the heyday of their authority used this to their advantage to the full. The local regimes exploited religious sentiments and local kinship bonds for strengthening and legitimizing their positions. With the weakening of the central authority and loss of its financial resources the local rulers generally maximized their benefits by retaining larger share of the revenues. The imperial elites were then forced to negotiate with these local potentates keeping their own interests and fortunes in the forefront.

In the circumstances the regional states exploited religion in a great measure. The Brahmans and the poets acted as the agents for securing ideological support for their patrons. Still, the same rulers, whenever it was required, moved much ahead of their religious identities. Thus while they assisted some on account of their being of similar faith, they extended help to the other purely on the pretext of political exigency. The urge for an independent political position cut across the sectarian distinctions; a local Hindu ruler had greater affinity with the Muslim elite of his region, than say, the Muslim rulers of two different localities.

All this was justified in the name of rajdharma which was constantly
formulated and reshaped to meet the demands of their identity and politics. The treatise on statescraft incorporated both Indo-Persian norms and Indian notions of kingship. The rivalries amongst the political elites apart, the kingship demanded protection of all irrespective of their castes and creeds. Welfare and prosperity of the state could be attained only when it received support from the people. The kingdom of the ideal ruler was to be economically self-sufficient. The affluence of the region was to be reflected in large scale commercial and mercantile transactions, carried through the established and developed wholesale and retail markets.

The economic base of the state was to be strengthened by war and conquest; the resources of the conquered territories inflating the royal treasury. A significant portion of the state revenue was to be invested in religious charity which would, in turn, mobilize public opinion in king's favour. The extent of the territory and the grandeur of the courts also legitimized the king's authority. Grand palaces, luxurious life style, presence of trustworthy elites, musicians, scholars, poets, dancers and concubines and a lobby of attendants distinguished the king's position. The army of the king also denoted his strength.

The political and social developments induced social mobility at two levels. Inter professional mobility reducing the caste barriers, paving way for geographical mobility. Many rose high and gained superior identity by attaching genealogical myths. It was not simply the ruling elites but all those who joined the flock of their leader were acknowledged as holding high social position. The soldiers in the army of Bir Singh Deo and Chhatrasal, for instances, acquired the status of kshatriyas and Rajputs. They all were identified as Bundelas.
The regional developments, significant by themselves, were not totally independent of the imperial politics, though the central authority which once successfully coordinated and utilized the indigenous powers had become ineffective. The Empire was never completely overthrown; it continued to be a reference point for all exercise of power in the region. The *wazir*, as part of a faction, was defied, but the Emperor was looked upon as the ultimate source of legitimacy.