CHAPTER 2

Representations of Women in Family and Society

The changing gender relations and participation of women in different social and economic activities during the period, as we noticed in the previous chapter, do not indicate a clear position of women in the family and society. Inspite of their role in the economy and household structure, it is generally visualized that the class identity, family honour and kinship system always structured women in such a way that they were placed under patriarchal protection and in subordination to man. The women were treated as receptacle of the state of world around them. The medieval attitude has also been, in the similar fashion, conditioned by their various relationships with men.\(^1\) As a wife, a mother, a sister and a daughter, woman was subjected to certain controls, restrictions and prohibitions. Therefore, women's position in the society was always viewed in comparison with that of the men of their social group and time. Medieval Indian historical and literary texts of bhakti period being no exception put women under patriarchal domination and entrusted

\(^{1}\) *Ordinances of Manu,* Tr by Hopkins, Lecture V, 148-99, it informs us that a woman should live in her childhood under the will of her father, as wife under her husband, and as mother, after the death of her husband, under his sons. See also, Doranne Jacobson and Susan Wadley, *Women in India: Two Perspective:* it contains two papers authored by each writer. Both the papers stress that the dominant norms for Hindu woman emphasize her behaviour in relation to man. A.S. Atlekar 'The Position of women in Hindu Civilization' in Kumkum Roy (ed.), *Women in Early Indian Societies,* is the foremost model for subsequent writers that situated women in context of family as subordinate members.
them certain duties towards households, husbands, other family members, guests and servants. The concepts of chastity and fidelity were very rigid. These attributes as essential elements of women's question have been challenged in the recent researches.

These studies suggest that the interest in women's question in India during the nineteenth and the twentieth century was derived from the colonial encounter. The social reformers and subsequent sociologists taking notices of access to education, notions of seclusion, monogamy, 

2. The chapter 'Position of women as reflected in Hindi Bhakti poetry' in Social Life and Concepts Medieval Hindi Bhakti Poetry by Savitri Chandra Shobha highlights differing attitude of bhakti sains towards women. Still, women in their poetry has been viewed in their relation to men. Parita Mukta in her book Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mira Bai, also shows how Mira Bai was alleged as non-conformist by her contemporary society. For specific portrayal of Mira Bai as woman, see chapter two, Opposing Loyalties: Mira's Bhakti and Rajput Dharma. See also, Kumkum Sangari, 'Mira Bai and the spiritual economy of bhakti', Economic and Political Weekly, July 7 & July 14, 1990. See also, Julia Leslie (ed. & Tr.) Trayambakayajvam's Stridharmapaddhati: The Perfect Wife, a Sanskrit, text written in form of ordiances during the eighteenth century which reasserts the conservative notions about womanhood. J.S. Grewal, 'A gender perspective on Guru Nanak' in Kiran Pawar (ed.), Women in India History: Social, Economic and Cultural Perspective. He believes that even though Guru Nanak and other saint poets contested caste, sectarian differences and rituals etc. they did not challenge the patriarchal value structures. See p. 141-61.

3. See Kumkum Sangari and Uma Chakravarti, 'Desperate Women: Transitory contexts, persisting structures' in Kumkum Sangari and Uma Chakravarti (ed.), From Myths to Markets: Essays on Gender, and also V. Geetha 'Gender and the logic of Brahmanism : Periyar and the politics of the female body' in Sangari and Chakravarti (eds.) From Myths to Markets. See also, Introduction to Women in Early Indian Societies by the editor Kumkum Roy and Uma Chakravarti. 'Beyond the Atlekan Paradigm: Towards a new understanding of gender relations in early India history' in Kumkum Roy (ed.) Women in Early Indian Societies. See also, Julie Stephens, 'Feminist fiction: a critique of the category 'Non western women' in feminist writings on India', Ranjit Guha (ed.), Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History, p. 92-125.
widow remarriage and sati suggest a 'a golden age' in ancient Indian history when women were kept in high esteem and their status declined in the following centuries. This deteriorated condition of women was seen as an index of civilization and colonial historians narrated the civilizing mission of the British as releasing the women from barbarious culture and society.4

Our poetry shows women holding various positions, analysis of which we understand may help us evaluate them. We find in the beginning, the Reeti poets also followed the conventions and accepted the superiority of males over females. While the poetry stresses that women tended to be 'observant daughters', 'affectionate sisters' and 'faithful wives' and 'reasonable mothers', it also pleads in a way that they should not be treated just as objects. They not only dealt with man-woman relationship on equal planes but also suggested a change in the norms which traditionally governed the behaviour of man and woman. The poets viewed woman's biological features, which at one level determined her weak and lower position by themselves a source of her strength. The incorporation of Nakh-Shikh descriptions in their poetry enabled them in depicting all the masculine, feminine and mythological attributes of sexuality. These descriptions further signified detestful reaction against the elite form of expression. The detailed and uninhibited descriptions of female beauty, besides signifying the unusual warmth

4. Geraldine Forbes, Women in Modern Indian, The New Cambridge History of India, p. 2; Kumkum Roy in her introduction to Women in Early Indian Societies also writes that 'women question', was created during the nineteenth century in India by the colonialists in order to naturalize and ratiionalize the colonial enterprise, p.2; see also Lata Mani, 'Contentious traditions; the debate on Sati in colonial India', Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (ed.), Recasting women, p. 90.
and sexuality which were generally repressed, represented the contrast between the high and elite life style and its expression on one hand and subaltern culture, popular language and media on the other. We shall also examine the sources to view woman in her various relationships with husband, family and society and see the ways in which she was oppressed, repressed or suppressed and also explore the possibilities when she could take charge of her own destiny.

**Pativrata**

To begin within the poetry, the support for age-old ideology of ideal womanhood or *pativrata* is total. A wife’s prime duty was complete devotion to her husband:

निज पति ही साँ प्रीत अति तन मन वचन बनाई।

(She loves her husband through her body, heart and speech.)

To a woman, her husband was like her god. This idea of the wife’s entire submission to husband placed women in the exclusive traditional

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5. P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastras*, Vol. II, part 2., p. 566-68. Kane deals at great length the notion of pativrata or a virtuous wife. Conjugal fidelity, good conduct, service and welfare of husband’s family and many other qualities as we shall discuss, were desired for being a pativrata. Trayabtakayajvam in *The Perfect Wife* also defines the qualifications of a perfect or pativrata woman, p. 280-83. Kumkum Roy in Introduction to *Women in Early Indian Societies* refers to Stridharama or duties of ideal wife as total devotion and subordination to her husband (Pativrata). p. 10.


7. Kriparam Granthavali, V. 66 and 67. V. 66 reads as follows:

पति को परमेयर गने सबे हित पारि बान।

P.V. Kane, in the light of the citations from *Manu Smriti, Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* writes that a wife should serve her husband as if he were a god. See his book, *History of Dharma-sastras*, Vol. II, part 2, p. 562-63.
role. Amongst various famine attributes that determined the extent of her idealhood were modesty, virtuousness, intelligence, the best to her consort among the co-wives and perfection in carrying household works. Simplicity and forgiveness were other qualities required of a woman.* She was to be sweet in speech to prove herself a source of joy for the husband. She must obey and love her husband even if he was disabled, crippled or ill-disposed:

मूरक लंपट बुद्ध और निल रोगनि मंडित [...]

उर अंतर प्रीति बढाए अंगि परिव्रत सजे |

The verse directs a woman not to renounce her *patibrata dharma* even if her husband was a fool, licentious, old, chronic patient, dwarf, deaf, rogue, liar, thief, ugly, disabled, blind, sinful, mean or furious.

* For different qualities of woman, see, *Somnath Granthavali*, p. 63 *Kriparam Granthavali*, p. 66-7 and *Padmakar Granthavali*, *Jagatvinod*, v. 18. Rosemarie Tong in her book *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (p. 98-100) also treats such virtues as historically feminine whereas values of control, possessiveness and status were masculine. We will discuss later how Reeti poets reintegrated the feminine and masculine values by assigning her power of beauty.

8. *Somnath-Granthavali*, v-232. This sounds a mere Reeti version of Tulsidas's idea suggesting that the woman who treats her husband with disrespect, even though he is disabled, dull, indigent and, wrathful, shall face the divine fury and suffer from various torments in the hell. The verse 4/5-6 in *Aranyakanda* in *Ramcharitmanas* reads as follows:

बुद्ध रोग बस जड़ धनहीन अंका बबर फौरी अति दीना।
ऐसे पति का किय अमाना। नारि पाव जमपुर दुख नाना।

P.V. Kane also quotes different ordinance from scriptures and law books to suggest the similar notions. See, *History of Dharma-sastras*, Vol. II, part-2, p. 562, *The Ordinances of Man*, Tr. by Hopkins, IX. 76-9 also directs a woman to be punished severely in such cases when woman does not follow these directives.
The decent conduct of a woman was reflected in her routine life. She got up from the bed before her husband and elders, took food condiments after they had eaten. She went to her bed last of all. Padmakar writes as follows:

खान पान पीछू करति सोबति पिछले छोर ।
प्रान पियारे ते प्रथम जागत भावति भोर ।

The verse depicts that a woman in her matrimonial house had to render her services with humility and discipline. The attitude of servility was the desired trait of a wife. According to Padmakar, a woman had to serve all the members of the family of her husband:

मैं नाहि मायकी मेरी भद्र यह सासुरी है सबकी साहिबी करो ।
(It is not my maternal home but in-laws house, here I have to serve all.)

The woman who failed in arranging these tasks assigned to her or the one who disagreed with her husband and disputed, was of doubtful loyalty, and was wicked:

राति करै मनहारि विसारि परे कुल गारिं, कुनारि कहावै ।
(Woman who forgets elegance and quarrels brings a bad name for her kula and she is called a bad woman.)

There were different kinds of women, according to the Reeti poets, depending on their character which in turn were evaluated in terms of

10. Padmakar-Granthavali, Jagat Vinod, V. 140 K.M. Ashraf also writes in context of Indian woman in medieval times that she was strictly confined to home and to domestic care. They were also excluded from every position and power even in their domestic domain. See, Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan, p. 166-67.
their attitudes towards their husbands and the latter's families. An ideal woman was never to waver from her destined and assigned position of loyalty; she should never venture to find faults with her husband. She had to serve with devotion and diligence even if her husband was cruel and unkind to her. It is only such woman who could be called ideal and deserved high place among the women in society:

पति अनहित हूँ करै ती तिय जू करै हित भूति।

तो उर आनो उत्तमा सकल सुखनि सी पूरि।

(A woman, who does good for her husband even if the husband is hostile to her, is the best one and she gets all the comforts of life.)

A perfect wife was to stick steadfast to servitude towards her husband even if she knew that he had extra-marital relations with other woman. If she resisted against this, she would threaten the cohesion of the family. By bearing with this she was to avert conflicts and tensions in the family and was thus expected to maintain family's prestige and integrity. It is, perhaps, for this reason the society considered such a wife to be the best and perhaps the most venerated. In this hierarchy of status for woman, next place was assigned to the woman who acquired in whatever her husband wished her to do. The attitude of complete submission placed such women in the category of middle ranged (madhyama) women:

(A woman who does good or bad according to the husband’s conduct, is called *madhyama* by the wise people.)

A very low place was accorded to a woman indifferent to her sincere and loving husband and refused to serve him, and was believed to be the lowliest among women. The self-centred, self-willed, independent and unchaste woman has been described by Somnath as follows:

(A woman who does not think of the well-being of her husband even if the husband loves her too much, is called *adhama* by the council of poets.)

Conjugal fidelity being a major manifestation of *pativrata*, it determined the position of a woman in the society. A woman who was involved with many people was held in contempt. The poets call her *kulata* or bad woman. Such a woman was damned and faced indignity in the society. She brought bad name to the society and polluted the social environment. And obviously the place for a woman who cohabits with many was hell in the life thereafter:

(A woman, who gave carnal pleasure to many people, goes to hell.)


It is interesting to note that the polygamous society which allowed men to express their insatiable sex appetite, sleeping even with a prostitute, regulated the life of its female members so religiously. It must, however, be noted that the Reeti poets set rules of decent living even for men. In principle, love and sex relations were permitted only after marriage. Adultery in all cases was considered immoral, perverse and abhorrent. The husband, too, was to love only his wife and not to even think of any other women.\textsuperscript{17}

He was allowed to have many wives but negligence in his duties and responsibilities towards his wife or wives was taken as deceitful conduct and his insincerity was looked upon with contempt.\textsuperscript{18} Nonetheless, extra-marital relations were in many cases, not kept secret even from the wives and the family:

\begin{quote}
छला परोसिनी हाथ तै छलु करि लिया पिकानी।\textsuperscript{19}
पिपहि दिखायी लिखि बिलखिया, रिस-सूचक मुसकानी।
\end{quote}

(She recognised the ring in her neighbour's hand; showed it to her husband displeasingly and gave envious smile.)

\textsuperscript{17} Somnath Granthavali, p. 113 and also Padmaker Granthavali, Jagat Vinod, p. 143. The Ordinances of Manu lay strict conditions for male adultery. A secret conversation with the wife of other man also treated as adulterous and is subjected to punishment. The extent of punishment again is decided by the caste hierarchy. See, Hopkins (Tr. & Ed.), The Ordinances of Manu, Lecture viii, 352-86. He had to protect his wife and extend his support to her.

\textsuperscript{18} Kane also highlights general rules for an ideal husband—he should be devoted to his wife, should not commit adultery and should not abandon a wife who was obedient, diligent, the mother of a son and agreeable in speech. See History of Dharm sastras, Vol. II, Pt. 2, p. 568-69. See also for such relations, W. Hopkins (Tr. & Ed.), The Ordinances of Manu, III, 55-62. Apart from general rules, it also directs a husband to attempt to please his wife.

\textsuperscript{19} Bihari Ratnakar, V. 379.
In the poetry of Mati Ram, Rasleen and Kriparam, we come across instances of male adultery; the husbands have been depicted joining the family having spent the nights outside. However, the conflict over such matters never assumed a critical form causing separation between the wife and husband. There were women who were offended by the conduct of their husbands and by seeing the marks of unfaithfulness on their person, felt outraged. In such cases, the conflict was concluded by upbraiding the man with bitter words of biting sarcasm.

There was thus a wide gap between the preached principle and the actual practice. The details in our poetry are perhaps hardly different from the ones available elsewhere even presumably, from the other period but what seems to be a striking feature of the Reeti poetry is that herein are available also the portrayals of female adultery in a manner which suggests a kind of expression of protest over the generally accepted and rampant male licentiousness. Loving a paramour was certainly a departure from the tradition and the woman had to face disgrace. The voiceless woman feared condemnation not only by the members of her family but was also regarded detestable by her neighbours:

"देवर की ज़रसीनी कलेवर कंपत है, न सास उतु अंसिन उससास लै सकति हीं।
बाहिर के घर के परोस नर नारिन के नैनन में कांटे सी सदा ही असकति हीं।"
(Due to brother-in-law's fear my body trembles; the mother-in-law is already fault-finding so I can not even breathe; I always click in the eyes of the people inside and outside the family.)

21. Bhikharidas Granthavali, Ras Saransh, V.94. For similar expression, see also, Tosh, Sudhanidhi, V. 160
Reprehension of these matters was not possible either due to the loss of family's honour in the society or due to the fear of dissolution of the family's integrity. Hence an attempt was always made to keep these affairs secret and not to disclose them in the society. Ironically, the woman, with all her deprivations, was to shoulder the burden of keeping the social norms in order.

But the society's attitude towards women was certainly discriminatory. The words chastity, loyalty, fidelity, adultery and family honour all carried different meanings in different contexts with reference to men and women. They signified power relation in favour of the male members of the society. The Reeti poets' otherwise "vulgar" and uninhibited depiction of female adultery thus also acquire a new meaning. The one sided devotion which to some extent was a form of slavery, was not appreciated. Even as we accept woman in this position, there is, at least, a voice of protest against the socially legitimized patterns of cruelty. Women who violated the norms in sheer disgust though faced criticism, we do not find a single reference when a woman offender was shown by our poets having been punished or treated harshly, for her moral lapse. Never was she told to leave her in-laws house on charges of infidelity and unchastity. Moreover, the punishment to be inflicted for such offences in ancient literature included seclusion of the women in the house and abandonment by their husbands. The references of any sort of punishment are, however, missing in our sources. It could be presumed that our poets tried to represent and react to cases of such offences sensitively with a covert message for appreciation of not only the events of offence but also of their reasons and contexts.

The prolonged separation from husbands was supposed reason
for extra-marital relations. Bhikharidas versified the conflict of emotions that arose between idealhood and passion:

निज पिय—निज वियोग हू लक्षति न यह उर आनि | | 22

dूजे सों मन रमलु है होति पतिब्रत हानि।

(My heart does not even look at my husband’s picture in separation; it gets entangled with paramour so *patibrata* is being lost.)

Somnath also suggested unbearable passion of a wife in the absence of her husband that might have diverted the wife and her indulgence in this context was reasonable:

करिए दुरि के उपचार कछु तब आप के साथु रिसाई तही | | 23

नाथ कहे सु इकांत में जाई सरोज के पात लगाये सरीरहि।

(If she resorts to some measure secretly, the mother-in-law gets angry; she goes in a lonely place and pampers her body with lotus leaf.)

Rasleen suggested yet another cause; a young girl married to an old man maintained extra-marital relations with her husband’s brother.

वृद्ध कामिनी काम ने सुनहु धाम में पाई। नेवर झमकावत फिरे देवर के दिग नाई | | 24

(The lady of old man sought pleasure of *Kama*; glittering the anklets she goes near her brother-in-law.)

The citations provide enough reason to understand why the society had to bear the instance of so conceived immorality.

The feminists during modern period argue that it was the patriarchal system that oppressed women, a system characterized by power, dominance, hierarchy and competition. Through the institution

of patriarchy male controls the public and private life and reinforces woman's subordination. 25

Meera Bai, Radha and other gopis in the literature are also such representations that suggest a kind of protest over the status assigned to women by the patriarchal familial and social institutions. Their passion for Krishna was, in a measure, their repudiation of the claims of their husbands, their family honour and total disregard of the social order. Though defiance of patriarchal norms is apparent in our sources, we do not treat patriarchy as sole determinant of gender biases in context of medieval Indian women.

As we have already discussed that in the extended joint family system with father as the head exercised absolute authority over the members of the family and many factors were responsible for obedience and submission of the youngers. We would like to emphasize that it was not the females alone but all other male members as well who were

25. For this discussion, see Kate Millet, Sexual Politics, p. 43-46; Rosemarie Tong, Feminist Thought, p. 95-96. Elizabeth Grosz, 'Philosophy' in Sneja Gunew (ed.), Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct, considers that the philosophy since its inception defined woman as secondary, subsequent, dependent and irrational etc. She finds in this philosophical set up, patriarchy as a regulated system which position men in superior and women in subordinate position. Philosophy's patriarchal orientation in itself was responsible for male supremacy (P. 147-74) Kumkum Sangari analyses critically patriarchy as source of gender differentiation in her article 'Consent and Agency: Aspect of feminist historiography in women in Indian history' in Kiran Pawar (ed.), Women in Indian History, P. 11-30. Neera Desai and Mathreyi Krishnaraj in Women and Society in India, also propose the similar arguments. See also, Pankaj K. Singh and Jaidev 'Decentering a patriarchy myth : Bhisham Sahni's Madhavi' in Sangari and Chakravarti (eds.) From Myths to Markets, p. 3-17. They treat patriarchy in the feminist discourses as myth which was constructed for legitimizing power relations, attitudes and ways of seeing and show how the stories in literature offer a criticism and transgression of this myth.
placed in subordination. Further, mother, a female also exercised significant control over other members of the family. It implies that the patriarchy as an institution inculcated amongst different members an attitude for accepting social inequalities which were wider than the relations between men and women. The economic dependence could also not be seen as the root underlying the feminine roles\(^{26}\) as we discussed her participation in productive sectors without any sexual division of labour during our period concerned. The Brahmanical tradition that had significantly influenced the caste and women was no longer operating due to social stratification for different reasons. The reason for the ‘otherness’ of woman were, therefore, to be traced not in patriarchy or economic subordination but in the complex social and cultural patterns.\(^{27}\)

**Nakh-Shikh Descriptions**

Even as woman’s biology is seen, in the feminist discourses, as a source of subordination, the inclusion of female body in discussions had generally been avoided.\(^{28}\)

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26. Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought*, p. 22-31, The views of John Stuart Mill, Wollstonecraft and Friedam have been summarized to release woman from her exclusive role of wife and mother by providing her equal opportunities in occupation and education.

27. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, though she accepts biological and psychological differences as causes of the otherness of woman, suggests the need to go beyond biological and psychological explanations. See, p. 24, 41 and 55.

Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price have recently concluded in the light of feminist discourses that 'women just are their bodies in a way that man are not, biologically destined to inferior status in all spheres that privilege rationality........ So powerful are such ideas, that many feminists themselves have been reluctant to engage with the female body.' These conclusions are further defined in terms of more recent researches largely concentrating around body. We however, find in the writings of Bryan S. Turner, an emphasis on sociology of body in Marxist or capitalistic ideologies. He finds that body is a study concerning with disciplining the body for maintaining social order. Body as locus of desire needs a balancing of rational and passionate conceptions of body which, in turn, demands religious sanctions for controlling the impulses and interpretation of sexuality.

Anne Hunt Overzee in his remarkable work *The Body Divine*, revealed that Ramanuja, saw the divine body as powerful form of communication where it is used by the spiritual teachers to communicate

29. Janet Price and margrit Shildrick (eds.), *Feminist Theory and The Body*, p. 1-14; Ludmilla Jordanova, 'Natural Facts: A Historical Perspective on Science and Sexuality' in Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (eds.) *Feminist Theory and The Body*, p. 157-69, she writes that women bodies as sexual desire became the focus for a physiological literature which expressed a refined aesthetic of women's natural beauty and found in their bodies an expression of their social condition, Christine Battersly also in her article 'Her Body/Her Boundaries' in Price and Shildrick (eds.) *Feminist Theory and The Body*, p. 341-58, finds female body as source of repression (p. 341-58).

their visions of the worlds for spiritual enlightenment.\textsuperscript{31} The experience of divine body through meditational devotion in possible only through realization of self. In divine body Ramanuja saw, believes Overzee, the perception of unity and expression of self consciousness. This structure of divine body was seen as analogous to structure of human body. It is in this view of body as subject in our sources, we find a celebration of feminine virtues given to them by their biology. The body of the women and their beauty for which they deserved to be shunned in \textit{bhakti} poetry now came to be viewed positively. The poets described woman's body as endowment of many religious and mythological attitudes. The \textit{Nakh-Shikh} descriptions by a number of poets were addressed to divine females like Radha in some cases and to ordinary woman in general.\textsuperscript{32} The scholars have discussed these description as a literary genre, Indian or Persian, in origin and have evaluated it in terms of licentiousness.\textsuperscript{33} The poets

\textsuperscript{31.} Anne Hunt Overgee, \textit{The Body Divine}, p. 87-88. Such descriptions of the body of the Lord as cited in the book from \textit{Mahabharata} may also be available in \textit{Sursagara} where Surdas described the Lord as radiant infinite affluent exuberant, affine, energetic and so on. For Lord Krishna’s physiological portrayal, see, \textit{Sursagar}, v. 626-44. The description of Radha’s body as the consort of divine also constituted a part of \textit{Susagar}, See, V. 1055.

\textsuperscript{32.} Sajjan Ram Keni (ed.), \textit{Shikh-Nakh} of Balbhadra; \textit{Nakh-Shikh of Chandra-Shekhar}, \textit{Nakh-Shikh Varnan} by Keshavadasa in \textit{Kavi-Priya} and \textit{Nrip Shambhukrit-Nakh-Shikh} which we have included in our analysis describe the body of Radha. The poetry of Bhikhardas in \textit{Sriringar-nirnay} under the title \textit{Nakh-Shikh} and that of Rasleen pertain to their heroines.Dev who largely addressed his verses to Radha in \textit{Sukh Sagar Tarang} attributed \textit{Nakh-Shikh} descriptions to ordinary \textit{nayika}. See, \textit{Dev Granthavali} p. 82.

themselves distinguished the poetic expressions on the theme when devoted to the divine figure Radha and ordinary heroine. Keshavdasa in his Kavi-Priya remarked the distinction as follows:

नख ते सिख लौं बरनिये देवी दीपति देखि।
सिख ते नख लौं मानुसी केसवदास बिसेखि।

(Describe the radiance of the goddess from nails to head and admire the woman from head to nail.)

Some poets, Chandra Shekhar, for example, concluded that the description of Radha's beauty was intended for fascinating Lord Krishna:

यह नख शिख बरनन कियो श्री राधा को रूप।

मनमोहन को मनहरन निज मति के अनुरूप।

(This Nakh-Shikh described the beauty of Shri Radha; this description as my understanding would capture the heart of Man Mohan.)

He further added that whosoever read the text and grasped the content would be blessed by the Lord.

We, however, do not find such distinctions in the poetry of Bhikharidas and Rasleen. They describe the body of their nayikas in the same fashion as that of Radha by other poets. The language of the poetry also does not suggest any difference. The address to the nayika as 'Shri Radhey' or Shri Radhika could only acknowledge the divinity of Radha.36

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36. John Straton Hawley, *Surdas: Poet, Singer and Saints*, Hawley shows that the cult of Radha Vallabha worshipped Radha as Goddess and call her Shri Radhey; see p. 67. See also, R.S. McGregor, 'The Development of North Indian Devotionalism' in S.N. Srivastava (ed.), *Surdasa*, p. 34-35. He places Radha in Sakta tradition where Krishna's divinity depends on Radha as much as on himself. This divine aspect of Radha is hardly visible in Nakh-Shikh descriptions, as the metaphors used both for Radha and Nayika are largely similar.
In all the *Nakh-Shikh* descriptions, we find the references to nails, foot, heels, calf, thighs, buttocks, waist, line of hair, arms, fingers, breasts, neck, lips, cheeks, nose, eyes, forehead, ear, face and braided hair; the ornaments and accessories also constitute the part of narrations. The metaphors and similes representing the various attributes of power were borrowed from mythology. On the whole, the body of Radha and also that of the *nayika* symbolizes the authority which it commands. It needs recapitulation of the legend of Radha in the thesis elsewhere, where we found her physical beauty and also that of Krishna representing divine as well as carnal aspects of emotions. The sensuous body of Radha in the *Nakh-Shikh* descriptions though represented and aroused carnal desires, was not subjected to any social or religious constraints as were suggested by Turner and other sociologists. We also find a relation of those biological aspects of woman which were seen as source of weakness/pollution. The poets rather explored every part of the body as powerful enough to supercede the masculinity that could have placed her in a subordinate position. It also provided greater opportunities for

37. Bhikharidas in V. 35 in *Shringar-nimaya* writes about the buttocks of ordinary *nayika* as follows:

तिनहु गोविंदे तै सुदरसन चक्र एके कीन्हि बस मुखनं चतुर्द्वस बनाइखः
काहे न जगत जीतो को मन राखे, मैन-दुर्लभ है नितम्भ चक्र पाइखः

The verse argues that Lord Krishna conquered the fourteen states with one disc known as Sudarshan; she possesses the hardly possessable Cupid in her buttock discs and she may rightly desire to conquer the world.

38. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Sexual Metaphors and Animal Symbols in Indian Mythology*, p. 17-59. She explores how sexual fluids are distinguished as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, active or receptive in the Indian literature. See also, Julia Leslie (ed.), *The Perfect Wife*, p. 283-90. Trayambakayajvam, a traditional law giver also believed that menstruating women were polluted and she must perform ritual bath for purification.
expression of female sexuality that challenged the beliefs of male dominated culture. This transformation was not incidental and a shift in the balance of power between males and females had gradually been taking place.\(^{39}\)

Moreover, Radha, as consort of Lord Krishna was viewed as a goddess, and thus an embodiment of \textit{sakti}.\(^{40}\) In \textit{Sahjiya} tantricism, she was again seen as \textit{ahladini sakti} which presented her as symbol of the ultimate and creative power. Radha as a deity and also as a living symbol represented the conflict between the \textit{yogini} and a social woman.\(^{41}\) The significance of Radha as body lay in liberation of sexual practices and of woman from being regarded as sexual object instead of person of value. The ordinary \textit{nayika} of Bhikharidas was also assigned the same power.

\(^{39}\) Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, \textit{Women, Androgynes and Mythical Beasts}, p. 62-80 and see also David Kinsley, \textit{The Goodesses: Vision of Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religion Tradition}, as a detailed study of different goddesses in the Hindu pantheon in terms of their individual and independent powers. The roles of different goddesses with a coherent mythology, theology and cult of her own have been depicted as acquiring greater powers during course of time.

\(^{40}\) C. Vaudeville, \textit{Myths, Saints and Legends in Medieval India}, See, Chapter 'Krishna-Gopala, Radha and the great Goddess'; See also Coburn, 'Consort of None Sakti of All: The vision of Devi—Mahatmya,' in Hawley and Wulff (eds.), \textit{The Divine Consort}, p. 153-65. Coburn writes that the ultimate Reality in the universe, in Devi-Mahatmya came to be understood as feminine and it was through her grace that Lord Vishnu could slay demons. She was not in a subordinate position as consort of God, but she was always the power of all the gods.

\(^{41}\) Wendell Charles Beane, \textit{Myths, Cults and Symbols in Sakti Hinduism}, p. 265-68. The author in the book has depicted the ascendance of the Goddess in different manifestations in different historical phases. The female in Tantricism both as divine and human was a dominant character both as an object or subject of devotion. See also, Frederique Apffel Marglin, 'Types of sexual unions and their implicit meanings' in Hawley and Wulff (eds.), \textit{The Divine Consort}, p. 298-15.
The braided hair of *nayika* had the potential of salvating the ascetics for it could bound their hearts, writes *Bhikharidas*:

हव मोलदेवी पातलिया को खिसनक बीच,\(^{42}\)

साधु-मन बाँधे यह कौन धौ बड़ाई है।

Balbhadra, Chandra Shekhar and Nripa Shambhu also used religious and mythological symbols such as the ‘Sumeru mountain’, ‘the cupolas of temple’ ‘as dark as the poison in the neck of Siva’ for the breast of the *nayika*. This could, in a measure, be interpreted as special powers of religion and courts in India that allowed free expression of erotic liason between god and man.\(^{43}\)

Even when the poets like Bhikharidas described the private parts of female body, not of Radha but that of an ordinary *nayika*, sublimity was still the hallmark; they were viewed as source of strength and bliss. The message then appears to us that these descriptions were as holy or sacred as those attributed to Radha unless the belief is otherwise wherein these are viewed simply as an index of bodily pleasure. But, the extension of *Nakh-Shikh* descriptions to *nayika* implied a kind of departure from the tradition and also the transgression of the boundaries. It, then, represented a protest against the elite form of expression.

\(^{42}\) Bhikharidas, *Ras Saransh*, V. 59.

\(^{43}\) Jack Goody, *Representations and Contradictions*, p. 206-12; He writes that the uninhibited expression of sex in India were patronized in the courts of rulers and Islamic rule encouraged its expansion. The emphasis on female body and sexuality could also be seen in Indian paintings and temple sculptures. The *Reeti* poets, though patronized by different courts generally came from ordinary background. The poetry in contrast to elite language was composed in Braja, a local dialect, and we can therefore presume that the popular masses also had the access to it.
Further, the descriptions may also be understood as the recognition of the identity of woman as individual self and her interrelation with other people. Featherstone believes that 'with appearance being taken as a reflex of the self the penalties of bodily neglect are a lowering of one's acceptability as a person, as well as an indication of laziness, low self-esteem and even moral failure. He further writes that the consumer culture made the body secularized and it ceased to be a vessel of sin. The prevailing notions about appearance in any society during any period may be different. Our poets by describing the dress, ornaments, and cosmetics presented different images of body that distinguished them amongst others and established their identity. They not only acted as media and a source for identifying woman as 'self' but their narrations indicated 'consumer culture imagery' and 'advertising' designed to stimulate needs and desires.

The attempts to look beautiful and distinguished should not confuse us as portrayal of woman as a commodity. It was not the physical beauty alone that created desire but irrationality or emotionality even the gestures, speech and laughter also constituted significantly to the construction of her identity in Nakh-Shikh poetry. The concept of body in Nakh-Shikh thus included reason and rationality. Balbhadra describes

44. Mike Featherstone, 'The body in consumer culture' in Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner (eds.), The Body p. 170-96. He writes in context of twentieth century Europe but his study may be treated as thematic. It is significant that the Nakh-Shikh descriptions also highlighted similar ideas.

45. Ibid, p. 186.

46. Bryan Turner shows that French Social historians began to discuss the body as seat of desire, irrationality, emotionality and sexual passion as a protest against capitalist rationality and bureaucratic regulations. See, Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner (eds.), The Body, p. 17.
the laughter of his nayika as the product of the penance of great ascetics and compares it with the divine light and mirage of Lord Brihaspati:

किंगों दुःखावजन की तपस्या को तेज यह, किंगों रसना के अग्र कीर्त को भास है।

सुरन की जीत सुरगुरू की मरीचका जु......

There was, in this way, no contrast between the apparent and real beauty. It also did not envisage any conflict between reason and desire because different organs of the females contained meaningful messages. The ears of the nayika were beautiful not simply because they were well-shaped but also because they were the gateways of learning:

ज्ञान के निधान गृहुं गुण के गहनहारे राम के रसिक रागिनी के रस धाम है।

श्रुतिन के सार गधिबे को..........

(They are the receivers of knowledge, they imbibe qualities and comprehend the aesthetics of devotional raga and raginis; they inhale the essence of shrutis.)

To conclude, the poets thus appeared to be far ahead of their age, for they explored many ideological dimensions of body, society and literature. To quote Mothershill's words that 'to believe oneself is a cause of pleasure, to be beautiful in a cause of pleasure for others. To find something beautiful is pleasure, to produce something beautiful is pleasure'.

47. Balbhadra, Nakh-Shikh, V. 50.
48. Chandra Shekhar, Nakh-Shikh, p. 9-10. Bhikharidas depicted only physical beauty of the ears of his nayika but Chandra Shekhar emphasized the qualitative aspect of her ears.
49. Mary Mothershill, Beauty Restored, p. 271. She maintains throughout in her book that the concept of beauty was not abstract or merely a matter of aesthetics. She rather found it as genuine judgment which could be demonstrated. The notions of beauty, though constantly changing, accommodates, the conflicts between aesthetics and ethics and also between beauty and sublime. It was in this perspective the Nakh-Shikh poetry acquired meaning.
One may then suppose that the society which our poets had confronted allowed the expression of otherwise repressed sexuality in total. It was, however, not the case as the poets, perhaps, accepted the conventional belief that sex is a powerful instinct and there should exist some powerful means of regulating and directing this instinct. The marriage and family were such institutions, as we have seen earlier, that imposed authoritarian regulations on sexuality. But as all powerful instinct, it demanded, fulfillment against the claims of morals, beliefs and social restrictions and references to pre-marital and extra-marital relations appear as true representations of the intimate needs and desires of both men and women. Many poets, and Bhikharidas was one amongst those to be quoted here, indicated different places and different occasions when adolescent girls and boys used to meet secretly:

सूने सदन, सखी सदन, बन बाटिका समेत ... बहुन संजोग सकेत।

(Lonely house, friends’ house, forests and gardens etc. were the meeting points.)

Agricultural farms were another such sought after resorts for the young and the harvested fields thus caused agony and blossomed crops secured pleasure. With no strict seclusion, the youngesters played ‘hide and seek’ game and also satiated their carnal desires:

50. Bhikharidas Granthavali, Ras-Saransh, V. 228.
51. Mati Ram Granthavali, Rasraj, V. 19, 67 and 327; Bhikharidas, in Ras Saransh, V. 96 writes as follows:

को मति देईं किसान को नेरे जिय की जानि।
खरी ऊँख रस पाइई, परी ऊँख—रस हानि।
(Like yesterday, I had gone to play 'hide and seek' game; we hid together in a building where he touched his body with that of mine.)

It comes out then that most of the girls and boys had sex before they were married in spite of regulations and social inhibitions. Similarly, there are instances from almost every poet of the depiction's of extramarital sex. These references also did not differentiate between 'masculine' or 'feminine' sexuality.

**Ganika and Barbadhu**

The only institution which suggested the oppression of women was prostitution. In the so depicted polygamous families where men were allowed to acquire co-wives, sexual purity and her fidelity were apparently regulated. The men visiting the prostitutes was probably regarded as dissipating their strength and wealth rather than their moral decline. The prostitute was, on the contrary believed to be a fallen lady who seduced every man in the village:

> सौतिः भई तब नारिन की, सिगरे नर मोहि, हियो मनो बैठी।

(She became the rival of all women as she chanced all men and set in their hearts.)

52. Ibid, V. 327.
53. Compare the reference of Sujan in the court of the Mughal Emperor and that of Subhan in the court of Panna, as the best amongst other courtesans and their description as an element of the grandeur of the courts of various kings in the poetry of different poets (e.g. p. 44 in *Raj Vilas*) that included a number of elegant prostitutes.
54. Dev Granthavali, *Sukh Sagar Tarang*, p. 95
It was a universally admitted institution during our period. It appears as if there were certain 'licensed' places where a number of prostitutes resided and operated their business. The similes used to express emotion in the following verse of Thakur refer to such markets were carnal pleasures were exchanged for money:

Präme bäjär ke antr sō pār nān dālāl āṅkāvane āi.\(^{55}\)

The terms *bazar* and *dalal* clearly indicate that prostitution was well organized within particular surroundings, being run with the help of brokers or intermediaries. There are many other verses which depict that people visited these places where prostitutes were readily available. A prostitute in the poetry was known either as *ganika* or as *barbadhu* in the society. We have no evidence to suggest the distinction as our poets conveniently substituted one for the other. The literal meaning of *ganika* is courtesan whereas *barbadhu* means the ordinary prostitute. But to Mati Ram, whosoever exchanged carnal pleasure for money was a *ganika*:

धन दै जाके संग में रमै पुरुष सब कोई.\(^{56}\)

ब्रन्धन को मत देखि के गनिका जानहु सोई।

(The literary texts view *ganika* as the one with whom any one can cohabit on payment of money.)

*Barbadhu* has simultaneous been defined as:

प्रेम न काहूँ सो तनिक, धन ही सौं अति प्रति.\(^{57}\)

तन मन बचन मिललजता बार बघू की रीत।

(She does not love any one except wealth; she is shameless by her body, heart and speech.)

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55. *Thakur-Thasak*, v. 20
57. *Somnath Granthavali*, Part 5, p. 80
Ganika and Barbadhu thus entertained frolic relations as commercial activity. The profession was run on organisational basis where some carried their business independently while others were kept in subordination. They were accordingly hierachized. The superior amongst all could choose their customers whereas others were bound to work at the instance of their elders or their mothers. These references also enable us to believe the profession as hereditary in some cases. The disgrace and notoriety of the profession probably did not permit the entry of the daughters of the prostitutes into the so conceived social groups preaching high morals and they were thus bound to adopt the profession.

Liquor selling was also attached to the profession. People desiring to consume liquor also visited the prostitutes. The consumption of liquor also might have added to disregard for the profession. They were, in no circumstances, to be trusted:

कोटि कपट करें धन हरे लाज सहित कुलकर्म |
याकी संगति जो करे तजे धर्म को वर्म |

(Through thousands of deceptive skills, she robs you of your money, honour and tradition; one who associates with her renounces the dharma.)

We are not in a position to determine when and why the prostitution in India arose as a recognizable profession. Badaoni, the orthodox

58. Rasleen Granthavali, Ras-Prabodh, V. 313 and 315.
59. Kriparam Granthavali, V. 191 and see also Rasleen, Ras Prabodh, V. 314.
60. In writings on prostitution in India during the ancient period, we find presumptions and suppositions of the scholars and no concrete cause is determined. See, Sukumari Bhattacharji, 'Prostitution in Ancient India' in Kumkum Roy (ed.), Women in Early Indian Societies, p. 196-228.
courtier in the Mughal Empire under Akbar, however, found seduction by the elites as the main cause of prostitution.\textsuperscript{61} Here we find the women's sexuality being utilized as a commodity for male's pleasure. The demarcation between male and female sexuality backed by norms moral/immoral might have lowered the self esteem of those women who were unable to fulfill male dominated standards of social behaviour and when felt secluded might have resorted to this institution for sustenance. Moreover, as the profession was for meeting the requirements of men, we find them having an upper hand in these hetero-sexual relations. Still, the sexual inequalities in prostitution as a sign of women oppression in prostitution were compensated by their portrayal as dealers in sexual liaisons.\textsuperscript{62} Vrind justified prostitution for economic reasons:

\begin{quote}
जासों निबंधे जीविका करिए सो अन्यायत \textsuperscript{63}

वैस्या पाले सील ती कैसे पूरे आस।
\end{quote}

(Follow a practice which earns livelihood; if a prostitute maintains chastity, how will she fulfill her needs.)

It is also implied that seduction by males was not always the reason but in the absence of alternative means of earning, some women might have resorted to prostitution. We may surmise that the institution of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Badaoni, \textit{Mutakhabu-t-Tawarikh}, Tr. Lowe, Vol. II, p. 391. He writes 'The prostitutes of the imperial dominions, who had gathered together in the capital in such swarms as to defy counting or numbering. These he made to live outside the city called Shaitanpura....... A number of well known prostitutes he called privately before him and enquired who had seduced them, they named several important amirs including Birbal.'
\item The references of our poets in this context get adequate support from the modern feminists see, Simone de Beauvoir, \textit{The Second Sex}, p. 630 and see also Rosemaire Tong, \textit{Feminist Thought}, p. 208-09.
\item Vrind Satsai, V. 70.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
prostitutes was not solely because of male domination and female subordination.

Though we have little information to discuss widowhood or sati custom, the poets were not totally devoid of the conditions of the widows. Denial of sexuality to widows, for Rasleen, was the greatest suffering:

आपे मरी निज रूप छवि देखत दरपन माँह | 64
रोई नाह को काम के हाथ गहाई बाहूँ |

(Seing the reflection of her beauty in the mirror, she wept for her husband when cupid carried away her senses.)

The poet further raised a meaningful question against widowhood as atonement through personal austerity, piety and penance. 65 She had to renounce all those ways of life which created desire in her body or she became the object of desire. Rasleen was reasonable enough to realize that renunciation would not help the widow in regulating her sexuality:

काह भयो नथ लो तजे सब सिंगार जो बाम | 66
तुव तन तजहि न नेकहु मन हरिबे को काम |

(What happened even if the woman renounced all the ornaments and cosmetics; her body, still does not discard the function of attracting man.)

64. Rasleen Granthavali, Rasa-Prabodh, V. 232.
65. A.L. Basham, The Wonder That Was India, p. 186-88; P.N. Ojha, North Indian Social Life during Mughal Period, p. 143-45, the scholars inform that the widows lived without any respect or pleasure in the society and she could not listen to music or songs, she was not to eat hot things, cold water and oil. She had to sleep on floor..... see also, A.S. Atlekar, 'Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: Retrospect and Prospects' in Kumkum Roy (ed.), Women in Early Indian Societies, p. 62-66. Atlekar finds that 'the tonsure of widows came into vogue by about the eight century. Widow's were recommended a kind of ascetic resolve and life'.
There were certainly inequalities between males and females but, in the voices of the male poets, the medieval Indian woman belonging to ordinary strata, found greater opportunities of self-expression and equal status and even superiority over males in many cases.

**Rituals**

Another sphere noticed in the poetry which represented a relatively high status of woman was performance of rituals and festivals. In earlier traditions, there existed a ritual hierarchy in which Brahmans were placed in a superior most position in the society and males in the family were authorized to perform domestic rituals. Women were assigned a socio-ontological status only after marriage and she could participate in the Vedic rituals only after marriage. The ritual construction in this manner might have undergone a process substitution and it was till our period that the Vedic rites were reduced to celebrations to mark a special occasion or to seek blessings by propitiating gods. Maurice Bloch defined ritual as 'culturally standardized, repetitive activity, primarily symbolic in character aimed at influencing human affairs and involving supernatural relation'. Hanchett also accepts ritual as 'conventionalized set of performances which are believed to help protect purify or enrich the participants and their group'. Our references also substantiate these

67. Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion*, p. 154-56: He writes that man was gradually acknowledged as complete by woman performing with him in rituals. This was feminization of rituals being implemented through connection of woman with rituals.


69. Suzanne Hanchett, *Coloured Rice: Symbol And Structure in Hindu Family Festival*, p. 34.
definitions as the purposes and motives of the ritual performances also involved some desire and supernatural element. The term *tyohar* or festival was frequently used by the poets and we may understand festival as repetition of ritual in regular cycles. These rituals and cycles in the poetry were, by and large, centered around women during our period though involvement of men was not an exception. We do not find in these rituals a textual tradition and thus believe that these might have been transmitted through oral and regional traditions. The acts of celebrations were described in few cases at length whereas some were simply referred to.

*Gangaur* was one such festival which woman celebrated with great enthusiasm. Goddess Girija was worshipped by the women in Udaipur on this occasion.

(On the day of Gangaur, they venerated Goddess Girija in every corner of Udaipur.)

Tosh also refers to this festival and suggests that women visited some place to worship a sacred tree. Teej was another festival of regular observance in the month of *Shravan* when women used to dress up exuberantly and enjoyed the swings with their counterparts:

*70. John Dowson, *Hindu Mythology and Religion*. He describes Girija as an epithet of Parvati, p. 112.
(On the occasion of Teej in Savan, they put on clear and fragrant clothes, peacocks sing and clouds thunder, they tie their knots and swing in the cradle.)

Worship of Gauri, the consort of Lord Siva, was a ritual performed for fulfilment of wishes, the mother-in-law or elderly lady directing the younger ones in observances:

है यह भाँवती आजु को नेमु अकेलिये पूजियो गौरी की मूरति।

(The mother-in-law told her to worship the image of Gauri for fulfilment her wish on the particular day).

It is significant that the young woman who were generally humiliated by the mother-in-law in our poetry were being initiated into the ritualistic tradition. In another stance, she guided the daughter-in-law to offer water to moon and break her fast.\(^{74}\)

*Akshaya Tritiya* or commonly referred as *Akhti* in our poetry received much attention. Thakur and Bakshi Hansraj described in detail the festivities.\(^{75}\) The women in large number, inviting their kinfolks used to visit a particular place for worship, e.g. Nandgaon in *Saneh-Sagar*. The ladies of Barsana village along with Radha also used to gather in Nandgaon under a banyan tree. They carried beautiful puppets in beautiful baskets; the beauty and the quality of the puppet of each was a matter of distinction. After worshiping the puppets under the banyan

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75. *Saneh-Sagar*, Section 6 and Thakur-Thasak. V. 102-06. The course of action in the ritual celebration is similar in both the texts.
tree, they would ask the males, who had gathered to watch the celebrations to reveal their love affairs and affection for a girl. With their intended refusal to tell the names of their beloveds, they were beaten with flower-sticks:

बेर्गि नाम लीजौ प्यारी की नातार सही बुद्रिया?

In the month of Shravan itself, on the new moon day, the ladies again worshipped the banyan tree. This ritual was performed with a wish to get a nice husband or for the welfare of their husbands:

वरहि पूजि बनितन मिलि के कान्न कुँवर वर मोगो?

(The ladies jointly worshipped the banyan tree and wished Kanha as their husband.)

The offerings in the worship included flowers, rice, saffron and green grass.

The ritual behaviour of women in these celebrations demanded physiological and emotional unity. The dress code, ingredients of offerings, actions and behaviour in each ritual tended to be identical. These rituals might have created a reality of their own with an implicit meaning being communicated in the ways they were observed. They also...

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76. *Sanah-Sagar*, Section 6, V. 70-73 and see also *Thakur Thasak*, V. 105.
77. Sankar Sen Gupta writes that purpose of tree worship was to win fertility in women, animals and land. In Bengal, it denotes the symbols of Goddess Laxmi and God Kuber. It has also been regarded as a wish tree for female worship it for getting good husband, or husbands' love and affection. Various unmodified indigenous procedures for various rituals attached to *Vata-Vriksha* suggest popular element. For this discussion, see, Sankar Sen Gupta, *Sacred Trees Across Cultures and Nations*, p. 15-41; see also, K.N. Sahay, *Tree Cult in Tribal Culture* in Sankar Das Gupta (ed.) *Tree Symbol Worship in India*. He believes that trees are worshipped because they have spirit p. 59.
78. *Sanah-Sagar*, Section 7, v. 17
developed a sense of identity as women, in the process of celebration, gained respect, independence and power to take decision. Further, solidarity of the kingroup and clan was also thus reinforced being maintained. Presumably, the strengthening of kinship bonds amongst different groups was also an outcome of the common ritual practices.\textsuperscript{79}

The rituals did not demonstrate any belief in theological or religious doctrines, they cut across the conventional distinctions created by social or religious norms. The social categories also disappeared in such ceremonies.

Moreover, symbols used in these rituals represented different meanings in different societies. The rice, tree and flowers were traditional items of oblations but the puppets in \textit{Akhati} festival could be meaningful to those who celebrated it. K. Gnanambal associates \textit{Akshaya Tritiya} to the commencement of agricultural season.\textsuperscript{80} Our poets suggest the celebration of erotic desire as the primary motive underlying this ritual and it is from somewhere in these expressions that the symbolic meaning of the puppets could be derived.

We are, however, not much concerned about the symbols and their meanings. Our main interest is to show the role which women played in public ceremonies. Women also acted as agencies for transmitting these


\textsuperscript{80} K. Gnanambal, \textit{Festivals of India}, p. 7. The author believes that the festival is celebrated in a hope of obtaining a good harvest.
rituals over generations.\textsuperscript{81} In many cases, by worshiping some folk deities of their own families or villages they also generated conditions through which the \textit{kuldevta} or popular gods were incorporated into the pantheon of great gods.\textsuperscript{82} Our poetry does not suggest the origin and names of these village gods and their functions are also not mentioned with clarity. Still, we get the idea that village god was to be propitiated for the fulfillment of one's needs:

\begin{verse}
नित्य गाउँ के नेह के देवता ध्याय मनाइ मलिय विधि पांऊँ परी \textsuperscript{83}
तिनसों पुतुल या बिनती बिनवो निरसं क है भावती अंक भरी।
\end{verse}

(I Propitiate the village god who is affectionate to the village and fall at his feet customarily; Request him in a humble manner that my beloved should come and embrace me without any fear.)

The joyful occasions like marriage were not concluded without paying homage to the local goddess. \textit{Saneh-Sagar} in which we find

\textsuperscript{81} See Kunal Chakrabarti, 'Introduction: Modes of Communication in a literate civilization', \textit{Studies in History}, Vol. 10, No. 2 July-Dec. 94 and R. Champaklakshmi, 'Patikam Patuvar: Ritual Singing as a means of communication in early medieval south India', in the same issue of the journal. These writers show that the oral communication was more effective channel through which ideas were transmitted to the next generation. \textit{Vrata} and ritual singing provided ideological basis for the ways of life of literate and illiterate communities.

\textsuperscript{82} Hermann Kulke, \textit{King and Cults} p. 145, Gavin Flood, \textit{An Introduction to Hinduism}, p. 198, David Kinsley, \textit{Hindu Goddesses}. 197-205; These authors confirm that each village in India believes in the presence of a powerful deity, generally a female, with no exact form or image are worshipped with great intensity than the greater gods. They are more concerned with the existence, protection and with the welfare of the villagers. They are attributed regional character. These local deities in slow transformation may acquire the status of a greater god. C. Vaudeville, Kulke and A Barth have attempted to highlight, as we will see elsewhere in the thesis, the processes through which popular deities and cults of \textit{Radha} and Krishna were accommodated in the Brahmanical traditions.

\textsuperscript{83} Bodha, \textit{Ishqnama}, Section 2, V. 24.
Krishna as the Ultimate Reality, in his love-marriage with Radha was also directed to worship the *kula-devi* or goddess of the clan:

कहती पंच सखी हिल मिल कँ कुल देवी अब पूजो।

(All the five friends suggested to worship the *Kula-devi.*

In this way, we notice that the blessings of the local gods or goddesses were secured through the mediation of woman. These women might be conceived as the experts, like Brahmanas in earlier periods, who knew the ritual observation and the ways in which these folk deities could be propitiated.

Apart from their exclusive role in above mentioned rituals, they also shared responsibilities in many other rituals like pilgrimages and pan-Indian festivals like *Diwali* or *Dussehra* when the crowds in public places on such occasions included significant number of female participants.

Besides portraying the conditions that prevailed, our poetry thus also contested in a measure the views that the position of women had generally deteriorated during the medieval period. Subordinate to men though they were, the women also played significant roles in some spheres of life, at least. A kind of protest in also discernable in their action and behaviour, even as it remained feeble.

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84. *Saneh Sagar*, Section 4, V. 39. See also, *Dev Granthavali, Sukh Sagar Tarang*, v. 702.